Did you know we are celebrating our 35th birthday this year? We’re doing it in fine style on Friday 1 November, with a day of speaking out and an evening party to celebrate just that.

We grew out of the feminist and women’s trade union movements of the 1970s, so now Community Child Care Co-operative (NSW) has advocated for women, children and education and care services for more than three decades.

As a long day care Director in the 1980s, Community Child Care (NSW) was my lifetime to the issues—I could always rely on the great staff of CCCC to provide support, let me know what was going on and to give me the real story. I am proud to say that is still one of our signature strengths along with using our voice to advocate on behalf of children and services in New South Wales.

So what was it that got us ‘all fired up’ recently? The proposed model of funding for preschool and long day care is making us see red here at CCCC, so we joined our partners on the NSW Children’s Services Forum to bring attention to the issue with a campaign with the enduring slogan Early Education NSW: Time to Invest. Action in communities around the state and a rally at Parliament House gave a message to the NSW government that it is time to invest in NSW children—not just become equals with our state counterparts but to really set ourselves apart. How can we do this? By taking visionary steps and funding early childhood education and care of all types to give the children of NSW the start they deserve—one that will ensure a bright future for the state.

Lisa Bryant’s piece in this edition sheds light on a significant aspect of the future for funding for three-year-olds and reflects on what a loss of support would mean. Our advocacy stretches beyond funding and in this issue we talk up the importance of maths with Marina Papic’s amazing work on the PEAP project and science with the Little Scientists program, recently brought to Australia by Froebel Australia. Katey de Goia and Fay Hadley focus on connections with families and community in our Spotlight, and we also showcase the new Aboriginal Child and Family Centre, Winanga-Li, Gunnedah.

And finally, I dare you not to be inspired by the work of Karen Anderson with Balnarring preschool’s beach and bush program in Ingrid Maack’s article ‘A walk on the beach’. Karen says: ‘You start what is best for children and then talk up the importance of maths with Marina Papic’s amazing work on the PEAP project and science with the Little Scientists program, recently brought to Australia by Froebel Australia. Katey de Goia and Fay Hadley focus on connections with families and community in our Spotlight, and we also showcase the new Aboriginal Child and Family Centre, Winanga-Li, Gunnedah.'
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Student Rebecca Comans shares her journey to becoming a teacher.

BOOKWORM  30
We preview what’s new on the shelves.
Brightstart Preschool Bateau Bay on the central coast of NSW has won a SPROut (Sustainable Projects Outstanding) Practice Award for its bush kindy program, in which children explore Bateau Bay Mini Park.

'We were already committed to spending time in our “backyard”, in all weather conditions and had ventured out on many excursions. We felt that a bush kindy program was a natural extension and a complement to what was already happening within our centre,' said Brightstart manager Kristie Kelahar.

Staff completed the necessary policies and procedures to run the bush kindy as an ongoing program, consulted with the local council, the Department of Education and Communities and researched other centres running similar programs. They began the program in January 2013 with 20 children attending one three-hour session per week. By Easter they had extended the program, due to parent demand to three days per week.

'Children really are free to explore and play with virtually no boundaries. These boundaries are not just the walls and fences of a conventional childcare building, it also refers to the resources that are provided for the children. The natural environment is the ultimate open-ended resource.'

SPROUT AWARD WINNERS

Other SPROut Award winners announced at the ECEEN conference were KU Chatswood Community Preschool and St Marys Children’s Centre, as well as a new Lighthouse Award which this year went to New England Children’s Services for its Eco-Mentoring 2012 Network. For more, visit: www.eceen.org.au

GUESS WHO’S HAVING A BIRTHDAY?

Community Child Care Co-operative (NSW) is turning 35 and we’re having a conference and a party for our members.

Join the celebrations! Engage with stimulating experts speaking up and speaking out about early education and care, followed by a cocktail party to celebrate 35 years of action, advocacy and activism by Community Child Care (NSW).

When: Friday, 1 November 2013 10am–8pm
Where: Aerial UTS Function Centre, 235 Jones Street, Ultimo
Book at: www.cccnsw.org.au/events
How much: Tickets $100 day only, $50 party only, $130 both
INDIJ READERS
for little fullas and big fullas

Indij Readers produces books for fun, for literacy development, for empowerment—and for Australian children everywhere to explore Aboriginal culture.

They expose small children to wonderful words, familiar and unfamiliar, as well as Dreamtime stories and other stories passed down through the generations.

We at Rattler love the wild and joyful use of contemporary Aboriginal English and stunning illustrations in, for example, Fish Dreaming, Our Aunty Sharon and Our Dingo Ernie.

Indij Readers is a not-for-profit charity that works in partnership with Aboriginal communities, agencies and organisations. To view the catalogue and order readers for your service, see: www.indijreaders.com.au/books

KNOW AN EDUCATOR WHO ROCKS?

Nominate them for next year’s HESTA Early Childhood Education & Care Awards which soon open.

In 2014, there are two categories: ‘Advancing Practice’ and ‘Outstanding Educator’. Does this sound like someone you know or work with? Nominations open 1 October 2013 and close 31 May 2014. Make a start! Visit: www.earlychildhoodawards.com.au

GO WILD FOR SCIENCE!

Thanks to Educational Experience, one lucky Rattler reader could WIN this WILD! Science Eco System Starter Pack valued at $250.

This WILD set can be used for practical science exploration and learning. It includes three inter-connectable micro worlds: the Eco Dome, Worm Farm and Ant Jungle. To WIN simply send us an email and tell us in 100 words or less about your natural science program and how you encourage scientific and/or mathematical thinking. Send your entries to saraanderson@ccccnsw.org.au.


Big Kids get creative!

‘Every child is an artist’ or so the saying goes and no more so than in the pages of this beautiful publication Big Kids Magazine which features the work of children and artists side by side.

Created by Jo Pollitt and Lily Blue together with ten-year-old Luca, each edition of this quarterly magazine features delightful visual spreads that capture the imagination and are a true collaboration. The BigKids team regularly calls for submissions via its website and Facebook pages.

A WALK ON THE BEACH

(& AN ADVENTURE IN THE MUD!)
When Karen Anderson visited nature kindergartens in Denmark, educators asked her where her closest natural environment was. Her reply was the beach, where she took the children just once a year. Upon her return, she began taking children once a week. Ingrid Maack profiles Balnarring Preschool where a beach and bush program is making waves in the local community and beyond.

Karen Anderson* paddled in rock pools while holidaying at Balnarring Beach. Her family later moved to the seaside village on Victoria’s Mornington Peninsula, where she lived across the road from the local preschool.

Today, Karen is the educational leader at that very same community-managed preschool—where she has worked for three decades—and regularly takes children on rock pool rambles as part of its Kindergarten at the Beach program.

While at Frankston Teachers’ College (now Monash University), Karen did a science major and her passion was the local marine life. But, she says, it has taken her 30 years to come full circle and realise the full potential of the outdoor classroom that sits on her doorstep.

‘In my own teaching and reading I had begun to feel that life was too fast and childhood was being rushed. I was also aware of children’s environments being risk-free and therefore devoid of stimulation, challenges and adventure.

Then in 2011 my son raised funds to attend the World Scout Jamboree in Sweden. I decided to join him and do a study tour of Denmark. I contacted a woman from Inside-Out Nature (http://insideoutnature.com) who designed a tour for me.

‘It was similar to scouts… They lit fires, caught crayfish (made soup), cut up vegetables, went on a rope swing and played in the rain... it was pretty special!

‘On the first day of our visit there were many children present in the playground but no educators. When I asked: “where are the educators? In Victoria we have to have the children in our sights at all times”... the woman said “why are you asking... don’t you trust children in Australia?” I realised then that we probably don’t... and this really challenged me.

A four-week trial in November 2011 went better than expected and with the support of staff and a passionate parent committee, the beach and surrounding bush is now a permanent learning environment which children and educators explore every Friday—rain, hail or shine!

‘When I decided to educate in nature, I told myself “there are no barriers”. Many of the teachers were anxious and fearful with what-ifs but I told them I would make it work.’

Karen spoke to the Department, did necessary risk assessments and began by taking half-groups of children to gain parents’ trust. She says it is like arranging any other regular excursion, with written authorisations required.

‘I designed a form that the parents sign each week which outlines what we will be doing, how many adults will be present and gives us permission to seek medical assistance if required. The parents also provide their contact details for that particular day so I can be assured I will be able to contact them if need be.

She says that as far as the rules go, very little has actually changed with the introduction of the new National Regulations.

‘It is just a matter of ensuring policies are followed, such as having a mobile phone, first aid kit, qualified staff present and hygiene issues such as toileting, washing hands and rubbish disposal.’

Each week, parents drop and collect children at the beach, not the centre, and many parents are themselves rostered on to help. Indeed parents are just as enthusiastic as the children.

‘I can’t believe how supportive and excited people are of the concept—even on days when the clouds are rolling in.’

Surrounded by vineyards, horse studs, and the Mornington Peninsula National Park, Balnarring is a semi-rural town and popular holiday spot known for its natural beauty.

The beach itself presents endless learning opportunities with its sand dunes, rusty old pier, rockpools, nearby bush tracks and wetlands, she says.

There is no typical day in a beach...
environment. Every time we go, it is different—the children adapt. Unlike a climbing frame that is the same everyday, the beach constantly changes.

‘We have structured outings too. For example, we might walk along the beach to the Coolart Homestead, a nearby historic house and wetlands. It’s a great walk along the beach, over a wooden rickety bridge and through bushland.

‘A couple of weeks ago a dolphin jumped out of the water in front of the children... it was breathtaking. We also have racehorses regularly train along the beach, and last year we went fishing.

‘We share and experience lots of awe and wonder together.’

And the benefits of the beach setting are varied and many, she says.

‘When we are at the beach it is the ultimate uninterrupted time—I don’t have to answer the phone or door—and I can spend long periods of time playing and talking with the children. It is un hurried and spontaneous and when we walk along the beach, the conversations are priceless.’

Being in nature means the children develop new skills, and relate to one another in new and interesting ways. The relationships between the children, educators and families are stronger than ever, she says.

‘At the centre children often connect only with those children who share their interests and play preferences, whereas at the beach the connections change and they interact with children who they might not have even spoken to.’

‘When the parents collect children, they often stay and chat and we have had grandparents, siblings, dads and uncles participate in the program.’

Karen says children’s resilience has increased and they are more confident in their choices and abilities. Plus, she says, there are no fences or boundaries at the beach.

‘The freedom they get down in those big environments is so important.’

Beach day has only been cancelled twice. The first time was last winter during torrential rain, Karen explains.

‘I didn’t know how the children would cope being out in the wet for so long so we went on a rain walk out into the community instead. We got drenched from jumping in puddles but we were able to go back to a warm building to get changed.

The children always have extra clothes packed and we have wet weather coats and overalls for children and adults (from camping stores). Children bring their own gumboots.

‘When you let children play in the rain it is magic to watch. They have this amazing sense of freedom and all their senses are stimulated!’

The second time it was cancelled was for International Mud Day, which the centre celebrated for an entire week.

“We called it ‘Mud Week’. We threw mud, sat in mud, slid down the slide in mud, swam in mud, rolled in mud, wrestled in mud, and danced in the mud. We tipped buckets of mud down each other’s backs. The parents were muddier than the children!’

The beach days are also changing the culture of the centre environment, according to Karen, who says that the more the children go to the beach, the more they want to play outdoors.

‘We are spending less and less time inside and the children are using fewer traditional resources. The educators encourage them to notice what’s already in the centre environment.

‘For example, they talk about the clouds and what’s happening in the sky and look for changes in the weather and what nature has to teach us.’

Earlier this year, Karen realised the program had to become a whole centre philosophy if it were to succeed, so she asked the preschool community what learning in nature meant to them and together they added a new clause to the centre philosophy.

An Indigenous consultant who is introducing Aboriginal perspectives into the preschool’s pedagogy and practice assists Karen.

She has also formed a network of like-minded educators from across the Mornington Peninsula, who share their journeys of educating in nature. This group will also access the indigenous consultant with funds Karen has acquired.
'What I say to other educators is that you don’t necessarily have to leave your building to educate and connect to nature. You start with what you believe is best for children and then develop the practice. '

'A teacher at another service said to me, “but I don’t have a natural environment.” So I said, “don’t you have a great big oval next to you? Just take them on the oval and see what they do. Expose them to a big open space, and they will find the nature out there.”'

'It’s also important to remember that you cannot enforce this on your staff. If they are not passionate about being in the outdoors, it won’t work. They have to be on the same page as you. I am really lucky to have co-educators that have embraced the concept and are really keen to get down and dirty, so to speak!

‘They have come on this journey with me and roll up with a smile on their face every Friday —even if it’s cold, wet and windy!’

Karen Anderson says reflection is important and children are reminded how to stay safe before, during and after each Kindergarten at the Beach session. This helps them to ‘build confidence in their choices and abilities’ she says.

‘We are constantly adjusting, reflecting, talking and using our teaching skills to get children to assess situations themselves.’

‘It is about trusting the children in their decision-making. Similarly, it’s important to remember no child wants to get hurt.’

Interestingly, she says more accidents actually occur in the preschool’s centre environment than at the beach or in the bush.

Indeed children were involved in preparing the original risk assessment document, with Karen asking them ‘how will we be safe at the beach?’ ‘It was a really interesting exercise, as they came up with everything that I would have thought of,’ she says. ‘Part of working with children is having high expectations and never underestimating what they understand.’

This year Karen has changed the approach by writing a benefit to accompany each risk, as a way of teaching children about safety.

Even so, Karen and staff cannot afford to be complacent when on such outings. They must remain vigilant and remind the children each week of safety measures and any potential dangers.

Karen carries a whistle, which the children ‘respond really well to’ and she has taught them when to use the bush walker’s ‘cooee’ call. She also carries laminated cards to visually remind children of potential risks and dangers.

‘If we are doing a rock pool ramble, for example, I have pictures of dangerous creatures to remind them each week what they can and cannot touch.’

‘We remind them that rock pools are a creature’s home and to walk around them and not through them. And I remind children that at the beach we can’t always see what’s in the sand. I tell them if they find something sharp it’s an adult’s job to pick it up, and I carry a container for this which I show them each week.

She says staff all wear red hats and children know they have to be able to see a red hat wherever they go. Parents are also encouraged to dress the children in red or bright clothing each Friday.

Want to know more?
Listen to Karen Anderson talk on this topic at the ECEEN conference held recently in Sydney, at: www.ccccnsw.org.au/rattlerresources

* Karen Anderson was named Early Childhood Educator of the Year 2013 in the Australian Family Early Education and Care Awards.
Consultant and advocate Lisa Bryant uses the lost Tasmanian wilderness and the political anthem of the folk group Redgum as a metaphor for lost opportunities following the decision to remove State funding for three-year-olds in NSW community-based preschools.

The 1980s Redgum song Where Ya Gonna Run To contains the verse: ‘Terania Creek’s got a dozer track, And we’ll never ever get Lake Pedder back.’

The lyrics, chronicling the damming of the once mighty Lake Pedder in Tasmania, and the fight to save the rainforests of the NSW North Coast from logging, remind us that when something is gone, when the campaign to save something fails, or never gets off the ground, we can never get back what we have lost!

I often think of these lines when I consider the removal of operational subsidies from community-based services in the late 1990s. We’ll never ever get them back.

In New South Wales, we are poised once again on the brink of losing some things from the education and care landscape, that once gone, we will never get back. Children’s entitlement to early education in NSW

Nobody in this state should be surprised to learn that the NSW Government provides less funding support to the education and care of the state’s citizens than any other state or territory in Australia.

Most Rattler readers know the NSW Government announced and constructed a Review of NSW Government Funding for Early Childhood Education at the beginning of 2012, (The Brennan Review) and released the review report and its response to this report in early 2013.

The Department of Education is now making changes to service funding based on this review, to take effect from January next year.

One of the measures the Department has announced will have Lake Pedder-like implications for children’s entitlement to early childhood education in NSW: the proposed removal of funding support for three-year-olds in NSW community-based preschools.

Why is this happening?

One only has to go back to the terms of reference for the Funding Review, to see how we have arrived at this spot. The first term of reference was that the review needed to provide recommendations to ‘support all children in NSW having universal access to a quality early childhood education program in the 12 months prior to formal schooling by 2013’.

Given this term of reference, the reviewer (Professor Deborah Brennan) had no option but to work within what had already been decided—that the NSW Government’s investment in early education and care would be directed towards children in the year before
Professor Brennan did manage to get into the report a recommendation (Recommendation 14) that said:

‘That the funding model support access to preschools for children younger than the year prior to preschool age (that is, three years of age on 31 July of year of enrolment) where these children face significant educational disadvantage and where their enrolment would not displace an older child who has not had access to a preschool program.’

In their response to the report, the NSW Government shortened this recommendation to ‘preschool funding for disadvantaged three-year-olds’ and said the recommendation was ‘supported’.

‘Equity three-year-olds’

A forum was conducted in June by Community Child Care Co-operative (NSW) and other peak organisations to allow the Department of Education to consult with the sector about their proposed plans.

The forum added a new term to the early education and care lexicon—‘equity three-years-olds’. What are equity three-year-olds? Well, they are a bit like the ‘deserving poor’—the three-year-olds from low-income or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Equity three-year-olds will keep funded access to early childhood education through community-based preschools, but other three-year-olds (which the sector is now calling ‘non-equity three-year-olds’) will miss out. (DEC seems to be now moving to replace the term ‘equity’ with the term ‘disadvantaged’).

The NSW Government’s reasoning (or perhaps more accurately, DEC’s reasoning) is that 30 per cent of New South Wales government preschool funding does not focus on the ‘target cohort’ (children in their year before school) and that this cohort is growing. Why the focus on children in the year before school?

The reason for this focus is the Commonwealth’s Universal Access agreement with the State Government. This article does not have the space to explain the connection in detail, but it seems somewhat ironic that the very existence of an agreement designed to increase children’s access to a preschool education in NSW is being used by the NSW Government to reduce a group of NSW children’s access to a preschool program. In other words, the NSW Government is relinquishing the obligation to provide early education to any NSW children, except to those in their year before school.

And this is obviously a problem: 87.3 per cent of survey respondents said they think access to early childhood education is vital for children younger than the year before school.

Despite now sitting within the Department of Education, early childhood education policy in NSW...
appears unconnected to wider educational policy. At the same time the decision to remove funding for three-year-olds was made, the OECD’s Education at a Glance 2013 report was released.

The report reveals that only 13 per cent of Australian three-year-olds are engaged in early education. How does that compare to the OECD average? Well the average for the OECD is 67 per cent. And as bad as the Australian rate is, it is also reducing further. The rate fell by four percentage points between 2005 and 2011. The other OECD countries actually managed to increase their participation for three-year-olds by the same percentage rate in these years.

Where does this leave us in the enrolment of three-year olds compared to other three year olds around the world? We come 33rd out of the 36 countries. That’s right, third last!

Community-based, state funded education and care
The second Lake Pedder-like issue concerns the NSW Government’s move to a market-based supply of early education in NSW.

As part of the response to the Brennan Report, the NSW Government announced a $5 million capital funding program to increase supply of preschool places. Obviously $5 million will not build a lot of centres, but that is not the contentious issue here.

In the request for tender that was circulated, the State excluded community-based preschools in the city from applying for funds. Only rural ones could do so. Their reasoning is as follows:

‘As preschool supply issues in metropolitan areas are much more likely to be addressed by the early childhood education and care market (for example through commercial long day care centres offering preschool programs) this program will prioritise rural and regional areas with a demonstrated shortage of preschool places.’

The NSW Government gives $15.9 million to community-based long day care services. This amount, while small, has been frozen since 2007/08. The State is also considering removing this funding and using it instead to support services (including for-profit services) to employ early childhood teachers.

So there we have it. Three-year-olds in NSW will not have Government funded access to early education, despite the fact that Australia’s three-year-old participation rates are already way behind other countries.

And as for ensuring even four-year-olds get access? Well, with any luck, the commercial education and care market will pick up the slack. And commercial providers will receive funding to support them in meeting their regulatory requirements.

But what if the education and care sector in NSW can’t take concerted and effective action on these issues?

Well, I suppose we just need to look at what was once Lake Pedder to work that one out.

How can you be a voice for young children?

- Identifying important issues and policies for the care and education of young children.
- Help advocate for the wellbeing of young children.
- Network with your peers through your local ECA branch.
- Updates on Early Childhood news and happenings.
- Quality-assured publications and ECA conference discounts.

Please visit: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/membership
As part of a multi-government commitment to address Indigenous disadvantage, Aboriginal Child and Family Centres are being set up around Australia to offer a range of early childhood education services and support for Aboriginal children and their families. Camille Howard takes a look at the first service to open in New South Wales.

Winanga-Li Aboriginal Child and Family Centre. The ceremony is significant because Gunnedah, located in northwest NSW, was once an important stop on the possum-trading route.

Today, 11 per cent of the town’s population is Aboriginal. And it’s the understanding of these connections to community and country that make Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (ACFCs) so important within their communities.

Winanga-Li is one of 36 ACFCs being established around the country as part of the Australian Government’s commitment to closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage in health, housing, education and employment.

One roof, many services

In NSW, nine ACFCs will provide a range of early childhood education services under one roof—with different management partnerships in each location—to improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and provide support for their families.

Photography: Megel.com
The Winanga-Li team cut the cake at the centre’s official opening, where the services, including health and family support and early learning services, share beautiful landscaped grounds.
To understand why services like Winanga-Li are necessary, you need only look at the latest Report Card: The wellbeing of young Australians, released earlier this year.

Some key findings from the Report Card, produced by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), show the number of Indigenous children in out-of-home care is rising, significantly higher than for non-Indigenous children, with young Indigenous Australians also highly represented in the juvenile justice system. Indigenous youth unemployment is also disproportionately high, as is the percentage of children with physical health vulnerabilities.

Another disturbing statistic shows that although the majority of young Australians are participating in education, the rates are very low for Indigenous youth. And while figures for Aboriginal participation in early childhood education were not available (Australia as a whole ranks a shocking 30th out of 34 for early education participation), the report did note that there was ‘significant’ gap in the levels of early childhood developmental vulnerability (language and cognition) in Aboriginal children.

Figures like these led the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), to first sign a National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development in July 2009, committing $564.6 million over six years to closing the gap.

**Stronger children, stronger families**

Winanga-Li is the first ACFC to open in NSW, and was established through a partnership between Uniting Care Children’s Services (UCCS), its Jaanimili unit and Relationships Australia NSW.

Winanga-Li is a Kamilaroi word meaning ‘to hear, to listen, to know, to remember,’ and was chosen by the local community.

Because a significant percentage of Gunnedah’s population is Indigenous, community involvement is paramount for the success of the service, which will transition to full Aboriginal control by 1 July 2014.

‘Our Jaanimili unit plays an important role in addressing our commitment to recognising and celebrating Aboriginal culture in communities and in services that we provide,’ says Anna Johnston, the Practice Manager Early Childhood at UnitingCare Children’s Services.

Programs provided include family support services, early learning services, health services, playgroup and parenting programs. While priority is given to Aboriginal families, other families in need in the community will also have access to programs.

‘In Gunnedah,’ Ms Johnston says, ‘we work closely with the Local Reference Group to provide services for children and families encompassing our Aboriginal Service Delivery Principles of relationships and trust, partnership, communication and consultation, capacity building, access to adequate resources, and respect, integrity and acknowledgment.’

These principles are evidenced in the commitment to employ only Aboriginal staff in all positions at Winanga-Li.

‘Our partner, Relationships Australia NSW, has employed a centre manager, an administration officer and two Family Connectors who all work closely with the early learning educators,’ Ms Johnston explains. ‘They have developed partnerships with several community and health agencies in town.’

**Breaking down barriers**

To combat well-known barriers to Aboriginal families accessing formal children’s services—including access issues, distrust of children’s services, and family relationship barriers—Winanga-Li offers reasonable fees, bus transport...
for children, a sense of ownership of the whole centre, and focuses on making the centre more natural, welcoming and involving of parents and the local Aboriginal community, including educating and employing more aboriginal staff.

Although officially opening at the end of July this year, Winanga-Li has been delivering interim services from early 2012.

‘We have gone from an historic church hall with a trestle table for an office desk to a magnificent building, engaged and committed staff, educators and community, and a range of integrated services delivered from a beautiful purpose-built centre for the children and families of Gunnedah,’ Ms Johnston says.

‘Interim service delivery has been valuable in that it has enabled the educators to build relationships with other early childhood services in town, while also offering support to families.’

The centre is now fully operational, with an Aboriginal staff of 10 and includes a disability support worker and speech therapist working from the new premises. The new early learning service is also up and running, operating at full (35-place) capacity. ‘There’s been a lot of pressure on us to open!’ says Ms Johnston. ‘The children are just incredibly settled, even though a lot of them haven’t been to childcare before.’

Because many of the services (supported playgroups, early literacy programs, young mothers groups, men’s groups, sexual health groups) have been running from temporary premises in the lead up to the opening, the transition was fairly smooth, and just involved transferring location.

In fact, the official opening took place one year to the day of the first sod being turned, and Ms Johnston admits they were fortunate to have a supportive local council and building team. State support from Family and Community Services was vital, too.

‘They had a dedicated support officer who worked on that project, Simon Munro, so he was constantly bringing the partners and the community and the local reference groups and the staff together to make decisions on all sorts of things,’ Ms Johnston says.

Most importantly, community involvement was pivotal. ‘The thing that has really struck me about Gunnedah is that it’s a unified community, it’s a community where people can track back generations of their families. It has got a strength of Aboriginal families that have been around for a long time, and it’s got a community that functions well. There wasn’t a lot of division within the community, it was a very positive community to work together.’

Like all the ACFCs, Winanga-Li also has the position of Aboriginal Early Start: Early Diagnosis Coordinator attached.

The aim of this role is to provide timely and limited support to Aboriginal families with a child who has been recently diagnosed with a disability, or identified with a developmental delay and is awaiting diagnosis, by linking them with useful services and agencies. This role will also provide a valuable bridge between the centre staff and educators, and other services and agencies in Gunnedah supporting families,’ Ms Johnston explains.

How the community of educators within the centre works together is also vital. ‘One of the challenges we have faced is melding a united team when
Despite the apparent success of Winanga-Li and other ACFCs, Frank Hytten, CEO for Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), has been outspoken about concerns the newly formed services are not living up to their proposed objectives. He identifies three key areas of concern:

- a lack of Aboriginal control;
- insecure funding;
- changes to funding from Budget Based to Child Care Benefit funding.

“They were originally funded as Indigenous Child and Family Centres; at least half of them have very little or zero Indigenous input,” he says, highlighting the lack of Aboriginal control in South Australian services in particular.

“They have funding until the middle of next year and then the current funding runs out,” he adds. “It takes two or three years to get established properly, to build your network, and facilitate partnerships with other community groups.”

And if services change from a Budget Based Funding (BBF) model, Mr Hytten says they may become inaccessible to many Aboriginal people.

“The whole point of setting these things up was to create a centre that was holistic and a bit wrap-around, that could cater for the different needs in a non-stigmatising way—Aboriginal people talking to largely Aboriginal people,” he says. “What we’ve ended up with is a mixture of services where often Aboriginal people aren’t running them, where it appears it might become inaccessible to the Aboriginal community (to a poorer community, generally), and it will make the centres unviable if they have to chase attendance rather than [focus on] providing services to children.”

“It’s about creating an environment in which Aboriginal people, who remain the most disadvantaged people on this continent, can actually get services so they can stop being most disadvantaged people on this continent.”
A little girl sits at a table at Gujaga Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Service (MACS) and builds a tower with coloured blocks. ‘Look you’ve made a pattern’, says the educator. ‘Look here; it goes red, blue, green, red, blue, green! What do you think comes next?’ she asks. The child smiles then says ‘red, blue, green’ before repeating the pattern over and over as she builds her tower higher and higher.

Mathematics in the early years involves so much more than just counting and shapes. It is about solving problems, investigating, questioning, reasoning, reflecting, communicating and justifying. As children engage in mathematical processes they develop confidence, creativity, imagination, persistence and reflexivity.

Research demonstrates that children’s mathematical ability upon entry into formal schooling is a strong predictor of later academic success, more so even than early reading ability. Indeed the quality and quantity of early mathematical experiences are the central factors in determining future mathematical success and children who enter formal schooling with little mathematical knowledge will remain low achievers in mathematics throughout their school years.

Further, children from low socio-economic and disadvantaged backgrounds have a lower level of achievement in mathematics than their peers when entering formal schooling.

In a recent study Fischer, Dobbs-Oates, Doctoroff, & Arnold (2012), found children initially more interested in mathematics later demonstrated higher mathematical skills, ‘through increased time spent in math activities, increased levels of arousal, greater effort, deeper cognitive processing’.

Interestingly, many early childhood educators have their own anxieties and fears (often from a negative experience at school) about mathematics and are often cautious about intentional teaching around mathematics. However, there needs to be a greater acknowledgement of the importance of intentional teaching. This does not mean drill and practice of basic concepts or the introduction of worksheets into early learning spaces.

It means adapting content and experiences to provide opportunities to enhance mathematical thinking. It means having clear mathematical goals for children and purposefully creating learning environments that stimulate curiosity and provide for the exploration of mathematical concepts and ideas.

**SET FOR SCHOOL!**

Follow up interviews with (school) kindergarten teachers, supported by data from Kindergarten assessment Best Start Numeracy (NSW Department of Education & Training, 2009), provides evidence of the potential impact of this program on children’s mathematics learning and confidence in the classroom to engage, question, communicate and justify their thinking during mathematical experiences. Primary school teachers commented on children’s ‘good grasp of numeracy, number and operational skills and their ability to see, replicate and make complex patterns; confidence from day one to respond to questions, to participate and persist when solving problems; and their ability to transfer knowledge from one situation to another.’
Australian Research Council Linkages funded project implemented in collaboration with Gowrie NSW*. Sixty early childhood educators participated in intensive professional learning to build their mathematical content and pedagogical knowledge so they can enhance young children's mathematical thinking and reasoning skills through play-based and intentional teaching opportunities. Approximately 240 children aged 4 to 5 years across 15 Aboriginal communities in NSW and the ACT were involved in the project.


Children engaged in various patterning tasks where they copied, drew, continued and created various patterns made with blocks, tiles and natural materials. They explored spatial patterns through dice games, made hopscotch patterns for teddies, explored growing patterns of tiles and created border patterns around pictures. They solved various problems where they identified missing elements of patterns and visualised and drew what patterns looked like from different perspectives. While engaged in tasks, children looked for similarities and differences between patterns, generalised pattern structures using different materials and explained their strategies when solving problems.

Teachers were supported to identify opportunities to integrate patterning and engage children in mathematical experiences throughout the day. This included encouraging children to engage in mathematical thinking from storybooks such as Alexander’s Outing.

Educators set up an environment with various sized containers, water and a plastic duck so children could: explore measurement, capacity and quantity; use mathematical language such as ‘more’ and ‘full’; and count and compare, as they solve the problem of getting Alexander out of their container.

Educators were encouraged to document children’s engagement with mathematics in their play, the mathematical language they used and the solution strategies evident when solving problems.

They used this valuable information to provide additional learning opportunities that would extend on children’s current mathematical thinking and provide opportunities for the development of mathematical concepts, processes and reasoning.

**Gujaga’s PEAP journey**
Gujaga Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Service (MACS) is a 39-place community-based long day care centre located in La Perouse, Sydney. The centre caters predominantly for the Aboriginal community in La Perouse and surrounding suburbs. Gujaga MACS participated in the PEAP Program in 2012.

This program was particularly important as it provided staff with a structured and developmentally appropriate approach to ‘closing the gap’ in the educational outcomes of Aboriginal children once they start formal schooling.

**Mathematics in the early years involves more than just counting and shapes. It is about solving problems, investigating, questioning, reasoning and reflecting.**

Educator: ‘What pattern did you make?’
Ben: ‘Yellow, brown, red, orange, pattern three times!’

Exploring patterns in his block tower, Ben (5) at Gujaga MACS in Sydney’s La Perouse.
Gujaga MACS completed the PEAP Program with 18 children (17 Aboriginal, 1 non-Aboriginal) who started school in 2013. Three staff participated in the professional development: one early childhood teacher and two untrained Aboriginal educators (one of whom was studying for a degree in early childhood).

**Impact on staff: A professional and personal journey**

Some of the staff began the program with a personal interest in mathematics and for others the initial training helped to ‘demystify’ maths. All staff involved were excited to learn new practical skills which could help children grow in their mathematical knowledge. Gujaga MACS staff also felt the program was culturally appropriate and supported a positive cultural identity.

Staff became aware of the importance of patternning and the many benefits to be gained by children who could recognise and create patterns themselves. Staff became more focussed on mathematics in play, with an increased ability to recognise when children were engaging in maths play and the educator’s critical role in extending and building on this play.

For example, the children at Gujaga played various dice games including the Witchetty Grub game. This allowed them to explore number concepts, estimation, operations (addition and subtraction) and develop counting skills, including the ability to subitise (quickly identify the number of items in a small set without counting).

All staff felt energised by the program and not only increased their own mathematical understandings, but felt more like ‘real teachers’ as they could clearly see the children developing and growing in their maths abilities. Educators felt they now had the tools to properly support children struggling with maths and to extend and challenge those children who were excelling.

It also enhanced educators’ confidence in sharing children’s learning with families as staff felt more knowledgeable. As a direct result of the program, an untrained staff member is now enrolled in an early childhood university course.

**Impact of the program on children**

While improving the mathematical understanding of the children, the PEAP Program had various benefits for the children across several developmental domains. The children gained confidence in their own abilities, particularly with ‘direct questioning’, which is especially important for Aboriginal children once they enter school.

They developed an understanding of many maths concepts such as counting, addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, comparison, numeral recognition and ordinal numbers. They learned to look for patterns, recognise and describe them and identify units of repeat. Educators were excited to see children developing problem solving skills and persistence and then using these skills in new and different situations, not only in maths but across all areas of the curriculum. Children developed memory strategies and an ability to pay attention to details, but in particular to pay attention to the details that ‘mattered’. They were able to focus their thinking and they learned to verbalise their thinking strategies—in effect the children learned to ‘think about thinking’.

Children developed their ability to record their thinking and increased their fine motor skills such as how to hold a pencil or build a tower. The program allowed staff to work with children at their individual developmental level and all children made exciting progress. Educators were thrilled to see this growth and had a sense these children would be more confident once they started school and would attain better outcomes in numeracy.

**Patterning case studies**

- **Carly, 4 years old:** Carly struggled with significant behaviour issues and subsequently received a diagnosis on the autism spectrum. She had very low confidence in herself as a learner and difficulty verbalising her needs. At the start of the program, Carly could not count past three and had very poor fine motor skills. Carly gained many benefits from the 12-week program including a significant increase in her confidence.
Initially, Carly used language such as ‘I can’t’, ‘I don’t know’, or ‘I can’t do the rest’. Through engagement Carly began to develop her ability to verbalise a pattern and gained specific strategies for solving problems and remembering information.

Working on the tower tasks improved her numeracy and fine motor skills. She was able to represent patterns through drawings and confidently use mathematical language such as ‘more’ and ‘times’.

Ben, 5 years old and Sarah, 4 years old: Ben and Sarah started the program already having considerable mathematical skills and knowledge. The PEAP program helped them to better verbalise their thinking and develop problem-solving strategies.

Ben became highly engaged in working out why some patterns fitted around a border and why others did not. Staff worked on areas such as grouping, counting by 5s, multiplication and division to help Ben gain new understandings and develop his interest.

Staff challenged Ben by working on hopscotch patterns, cyclic patterns and growing patterns, usually not explored until primary school. Sarah became engaged in cyclic patterns and staff challenged her by creating problems for her to solve. She was interested in substituting materials to make patterns whilst keeping the pattern structure the same. This resulted in her using symbols to represent her pattern.

Mathematics in the curriculum

Staff became more focussed on incorporating mathematics into the curriculum. They planned more experiences specifically for exploring patterns and enhancing numeracy. They created learning environments and provided appropriate resources for children to engage meaningfully.

This included commercial resources already present at the centre such as threading beads, pegboards and blocks but also meant providing ‘collections’ of materials such as rocks, shells, leaves which children could use to create their own patterns. The educators focussed on their role in these experiences to make the most of modelling mathematical language and posing questions to motivate, challenge and extend children’s thinking. It was also important for staff to integrate maths learning with other curriculum areas such as literacy and the creative arts. Maths became a natural part of all areas of the centre’s curriculum and was used with individual children, small groups and large groups.

While play provides many opportunities for young children to engage in mathematics and develop early numeracy skills, intentional teaching allows us to create learning opportunities for children with specific mathematical goals in mind. It acknowledges the important role educators have in children’s learning. Every child has the potential to enter formal schooling with well-developed mathematical knowledge and understandings, to feel confident in communicating and reasoning mathematically, and engaging with mathematical ideas.

As early childhood educators we need to promote mathematical thinking and reasoning in the early years by:

- Providing authentic mathematical experiences where children can solve problems;
- Creating environments for children to explore and communicate mathematical ideas;
- Considering whether the resources and materials we provide to children allow for open-ended exploration and opportunities to discover mathematical concepts such as patterns, size, shape and capacity;
- Providing opportunities for children to reason and represent mathematical ideas;
- Modelling mathematical language and terminology;
- Looking for teachable moments and communicating and engaging with children.

Many early childhood educators have their own fears and anxieties about mathematics (often from a negative experience at school) and this can influence their teaching of mathematical concepts.

*The organisation Gowrie funded the ARCLP partnership but the partners on the ground throughout the three-year project were Gowrie and IPSU. ★

Dr Marina Papic is Associate Professor of Mathematics Education at the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University. After more than three years as the Head of the Institute she is now Director of the Children and Families Research Centre. Her current research is on mathematical content and pedagogical knowledge of early childhood teachers and the mathematical thinking and reasoning skills of young Indigenous children.

Priscilla Carmichael is an early childhood teacher and Nominated Supervisor with 20 years experience, working for 16 of those years at Gujaga MACS. Her interests include mathematics in the early years, research in practice and improving the educational outcomes and the transition to school process for Indigenous children and their families.

The PEAP PD project is supported by an Australian Research Council Linkages Grant (Papic, Mulligan, Highfield, McKay-Tempest, Garrett, Mandarakas, & Granite, 2011-2013). We’d like to acknowledge Gowrie NSW and staff and children from Gujaga MACS for their engagement and commitment to the project.
If we want an advanced society we need to foster children’s curiosity for science and technology in the early years. This is the philosophy behind the Little Scientists program—a series of workshops for educators, piloted by Froebel Australia.

Recent research in neuroscience suggests young children are developmentally ready to understand basic scientific concepts, but this is a typically neglected area of learning in Australian early childhood education and care settings. Founded in Germany, Little Scientists is a not-for-profit initiative encouraging educators to integrate science, maths and technology into their program.

‘Science and maths have traditionally been regarded as too challenging for preschoolers,’ says Little Scientists project manager Christine Schneyer. ‘It was assumed these subjects were only suitable for older children.’

However, recent neuro-scientific research shows the importance of a highly differentiated educational program in early childhood education and care services as the extent and type of neuronal networks is largely dependent on the way in which children are stimulated to ‘use’ their brain.

From a neuro-scientific point of view, it is therefore logical to introduce children to questions and topics relating to science from an early age, Ms Schneyer says.

‘Highly complex neuronal networks develop only if they are repeatedly activated and used. In addition, it suits the interests and disposition of preschoolers.

‘Children are by nature little researchers who seek to discover and understand their environment by active exploration and through trial and error. Children already naturally “do” science.’

Science education also fosters other learning outcomes, such as social skills, language development and fine motor skills, she says, and can easily be introduced to early childhood settings.

The Little Scientists program equips educators to introduce ‘more thoughtful and deliberate learning about scientific phenomena’, by guiding children through their questioning processes.
Integration of science, mathematics and technology should not just happen occasionally, but should be an ‘everyday and all-the-time affair,’ she says.

Intentional teaching in science should also look at the environment in which children learn.

‘Science corners can be inspiring learning spaces for children—you only need to reflect on how to equip and present them. Our workshops are designed to trigger the educators’ creativity in this regard.’

**Solving, hypothesizing, theorising**

In the Little Scientist program children are introduced to a scientific approach (the research cycle) that will remain relevant even until they reach university, Ms Schneyer says.

From an early age they get accustomed to finding ways forward by asking questions, trying and recording.

‘They experience the power of self-reliance and persistence when they are trying to find answers to their questions which will ultimately build their self-esteem and self-confidence as successful learners.’

The research cycle is a process that describes the way scientists think and work. Children are introduced to a scientific approach to experimenting. This entails six steps, each with its own distinct symbol:

1. Ask questions about nature
2. Collect ideas and hypotheses with the children
3. Try things out and conduct experiments with the children
4. Observe and describe
5. Document results
6. Discuss results with the children

The Little Scientists approach gives children opportunities to explore and demonstrates an interest in the children’s thoughts and ways of thinking. A key feature of the Little Scientists program is asking questions (as opposed to ‘giving answers’).

‘Educators establish where a child is with their thinking by asking questions; they also encourage the children to observe carefully by asking questions such as “What happened exactly?” “What did you see?” “What did the things do during the experiment?”’, she says.

During their experimentation together, children are on a par with the educators.

‘Their observations and ideas are sought and appropriately acknowledged. Their opinions count! Moreover, educators help make it fun! There is now scientific evidence which demonstrates that learning combined with enjoyment is more successful than without.’

Little Scientists workshops include scientific topics such as air or acoustics, and pedagogical approaches such as co-construction or meta-cognition as well as learning about the research cycle. Another important aspect of the workshops is to encourage teachers and educators to make experimenting and exploring in education and care services as accessible as possible.

All workshops are built around using existing, everyday materials, for example, recycled water bottles, plastic cups, food items (salt, sugar, flower, bicarbonate of soda, oil and food colouring), which are required for the topic ‘Water’.

**Science play in Shoalhaven**

Shoalhaven community preschool on the NSW south coast recently participated in a Little Scientists water workshop, which educator Larissa El-Helou explains has been a popular topic of interest at the preschool.

‘I went to the workshop with an open mind about science, hoping I would learn new ideas and ways to support a love for science! I did and was inspired!’

Since returning to her service, Ms El-Helou has created a science area for learning (pictured above).

‘I found the research cycle very practical, and also a great visual tool. I have made some research cycle cards to show evidence of the learning.’

‘This will also support the idea that science is all around us and exploring scientific concepts can happen anywhere! The possibilities are indeed endless.’

The preschool’s director, Kim Stouse-Lee, says one of the key messages that Larissa shared from her training, was that most services already do a lot of science but haven’t necessarily identified that in their program or used the vocabulary to support the children’s learning.

‘The opportunity to reflect on these sometimes overlooked areas of learning was invaluable,’ she said.

Ms Schneyer told Rattler that Little Scientists is currently in its pilot phase.

Other important areas the Little Scientists is currently focusing on are establishing relationships with trainers and network partners throughout Australia, finding suitable sponsors to ensure the funding of the initiative, as well as establishing an advisory board.

For more, see: littlescientists.org.au.

Community Child Care Co-operative (NSW) is a local network partner for the Little Scientists program initiative.
Building partnerships with families is not easy and there is no one correct way to do it. In a study on improving family engagement and the organisational context (2011), Douglas found that early childhood education settings with high quality parent-educator partnerships have structures that promote empowerment and a caring environment.

Indeed, the organisational structure, including the philosophy of the education and care setting, impacts on building successful partnerships with families. Douglas (2011) has stated that the increased bureaucracy and regulation of early childhood in the United States has led to educators being discouraged about caring and responsiveness to individual families. She identified that ‘positioning the professional as the expert with power over the parent’ (p. 14) was commonplace.

We would argue that in Australia the recent changes in the regulatory and curriculum frameworks actually position parents as the experts who have a powerful role to play (See: Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009).

However, prior to these changes, partnerships in many early childhood centres did focus on the educator as the expert with little regard for the role of the parent. So how has the field begun to reframe this partnership paradigm to ensure both the educators and parents feel empowered?

Authors such as Moss discuss the need to create ‘places of encounter’ whereby early childhood programs open up to other possibilities or ways of seeing or being. He argues by doing this the early childhood teacher creates endless possibilities for connections with families to be established. When we rethink how partnerships work and are developed we can reframe our approach and practices in the early childhood setting.

Dr Katey De Gioia and Dr Fay Hadley provide lessons of empowerment from the field, sharing stories of educators who have taken a proactive role building partnerships with families.

Each issue, Rattler turns the spotlight on one of the seven Quality Areas of the National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care.

6 Collaborative partnerships with families and communities

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

Partnerships
Firstly, questions we might ask ourselves are:
1) What is our role in developing partnerships with parents?
2) How does this unfold; should we expect parents to make the first step with this or should educators be actively engaging and developing this partnership with every parent in the setting/room?
3) How do we respond to parents who are harder to connect with?

In this article, we share some examples of how educators in the field have rethought their partnerships in particular situations and have taken a more proactive role in building partnerships with families.

**CASE STUDY Connecting with a culturally and linguistically diverse family**

Eliza* is a teacher in a small early childhood education and care service that is situated in a shopping centre. She had been trying to make connections with the mother of a three-year-old girl, Teressa*, who she taught. Teressa came three days a week and was dropped off and picked up mostly by her grandmother who spoke little English. Unfortunately, the centre did not have a staff member that spoke the grandmother’s language so getting information to and from the family proved difficult. Teressa was bilingual and had identified learning difficulties that impacted on her ability to communicate with her teachers.

Eliza was worried that she wasn’t providing the best learning environment for Teressa and had requested several meetings with her mother but these had not been successful in developing a clear plan for Teressa’s needs.

Eliza thought about what she could do differently to redefine this partnership. She decided one day to take some photos of Teressa achieving a new milestone. Teressa for the first time had mimicked the actions to a song that Eliza sang regularly with the children. Eliza created a one-page documentation panel of Teressa’s achievement and when she finished teaching for the day she went past the mother’s workplace in the shopping centre and shared it with her excitedly.

This simple action of celebrating Teressa’s achievement was the catalyst for changing the dynamic and beginning their partnership. Eliza noticed that the mother over time increased her role in dropping off or picking up Teressa. She began to share more information with the educators, communicating about Teressa’s needs and how they could support her learning.

Eliza felt like she had finally had her ‘breakthrough’ moment with the mother.

**CASE STUDY Reframing a partnership: A family experiencing divorce**

Veronica* is a director of a 40-place early childhood education and care service. One of the families whose child, Jason*, had been attending the service since he was a baby, were going through a divorce. The mother had always done the majority
of drop-offs and pick-ups for Jason who is now four years old and felt she had built a strong partnership over time. Due to the change in circumstances and therefore parenting arrangements, the father now either dropped Jason off or picked him up. Veronica noticed that dad spent as little amount of time in the setting as possible and was not keen to participate in conversations with her or the other educators at the service.

After several failed attempts at bridging this gap with him, Veronica wondered if he thought they had taken sides in the separation due to the nature of the relationship with the mother. Veronica decided to take a different approach to engaging with him.

The next time she knew he was picking up Jason, Veronica waited in the foyer with some artwork that Jason had spent a long period of time completing that day. When the dad arrived she approached him straight away (before he could move into the classroom to collect Jason) and began a conversation about the artwork. He spent about five minutes in the conversation, so from then on every time he was on pick up Veronica found something to share with him about Jason’s day.

Over several weeks the partnership grew and he no longer ran in and out quickly but stayed a while to talk about Jason. Gradually over time he began to share some of the challenges he was facing with Jason due to the change in care arrangements. Veronica listened, provided support and resources where she could and felt that she had begun to develop a partnership with the dad. Veronica believed her initial planned conversation about Jason’s artwork in the foyer was the catalyst for this change.

CASE STUDY Connecting to others: working fathers in the preschool

Amy* is the Director of a preschool in an area where the majority of fathers worked full-time, and most mothers worked between preschool hours; therefore they were the main point of contact for the educators. At a recent staff meeting there was talk of arranging an afternoon tea as a fundraiser. One of the educators shared her recent personal reflections of how the preschool only seemed to see mothers at any of these events. She had been thinking about this for a while and had raised it with a few of the mums who she felt comfortable to speak with. The response had been ‘they are working’ or ‘he needed time out so we thought we would come without him.’

The educator had been pondering on the message this sent to children about the place of dads in the preschool and what her role was in connecting with them. Amy could see many possibilities in this short exchange and decided to give this ‘project’ to the educator, Min-jun* to explore further.

Min-jun spent the next few weeks chatting to the other educators and as many of the mums as she could; raising her concern and what could be done to encourage dads into the preschool.

She decided to hold a pizza night just for the dads and their children. She learnt two things from chatting to the mums—Friday nights were the best option and from 7pm would enable dads to get home from work and attend. She enlisted the help of other educators in the preschool and the children to have them encourage their dads to come along. While there was much speculation about the turnout, over half of the dads attended. Amy, Min-jun and the other educators were ecstatic with the evening as were the children who were proud to introduce their dads to their friends and the educators.

Amy and Min-jun took some time at the next staff meeting to reflect on the event and the aftermath. While they acknowledged that the actual evening did not create individual partnerships with dads, it was the small changes in the ensuing weeks that were the most notable. Some of the mothers had spoken of increased interest in the dads asking about their child’s day at the preschool. One mother also stated that her partner had enjoyed the evening and asked when the next preschool event was being held. One of the dads had also taken

‘Partnerships with families are not static, they change and need constant work as families’ contexts and lives change and evolve.’
To develop real partnerships with families we need to notice who is being silenced, and truly listen, hear and understand their diverse voices.

the morning off to drop his daughter at the preschool and spent half an hour with her as she carefully explained everything that was available in the room for the morning.

There was a buzz amongst the children about their dads which had not been felt in the preschool before and the educators seized on this spontaneous moment to take time to talk further about the dads and encouraged the children to bring in and share photos.

Lessons learnt from these stories

From the examples we have discussed in this article, in the Australian context this notion of empowerment and providing space for individuality with parents also resonates. In summary, some of the lessons learnt from these educators include:

❖ Building partnerships is about ensuring equity, not equality. We need to work with individual families and treat their situations uniquely. This means we will have different approaches for different families in our setting.
❖ To develop real partnerships with families we need to notice who is silenced, truly listen, hear and understand their diverse voices.
❖ It is not always an easy path. Some families’ situations are complex and tensions can occur along the way (see Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001).
❖ Working from a strengths-based approach (see Dunst, Trivette & Deal, 1998) changes the power balance and gives parents agency in the partnership.
❖ Partnerships with families are not static, they change and need constant work as families’ contexts and lives change and evolve.
❖ When we take the time to invest in developing and maintaining partnerships with families, we provide a space for children and families to belong. Take time to think about and reflect on the partnerships in your setting. Are there some families with who you would like to rethink or reframe the partnership? What might be your approach to this family after considering these educators stories? ★

*The names of educators, children and parents have been changed to protect privacy.

Dr Fay Hadley is a lecturer and researcher at the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University. Her main areas of teaching include professional experience, working with families and leadership. She has worked in early childhood centres both in teaching and leadership roles, in both the community and private sectors as well as for organisations such as Lady Gowrie, NSW. Fay is interested in centre-parent partnerships (especially with diverse and marginalised families) and has worked with settings over the years looking at this issue.

Dr Katey De Gioia lectures at the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University. She has also worked in early childhood settings as both teacher and Director. Katey’s research includes supporting teachers, families and children from immigrant and refugee backgrounds transitioning into educational institutions.

For a full list of references, see: cccnsw.org.au/ratterresources

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Rebecca Comans* says she didn’t choose early childhood education, it chose her. The Macquarie University student and scholarship winner shares her journey of overcoming leukaemia and studying early childhood education to become a teacher.

What drew you to early childhood?
My parents own a preschool in Lake Cathie (near Port Macquarie) called Cowarra Park Preschool. I always liked children but never had the passion or dream of becoming an educator. In 2007, I fell sick with leukaemia. A few months into my treatment in hospital everything seemed dark and bleak. I had no hope, or reason to be happy.

I can still remember clearly how I was lying in bed crying, looking at the mouldy ceiling when two children ran past my room full of energy, laughter and life—changing my spirits and frame of mind! It had been my life’s lowest moment but it was at that moment that I believe early childhood education chose me.

Tell us about the obstacles you have overcome to make it to university
A major obstacle for any student is money. I was lucky to win the Alumni Ani Apcarian Memorial Scholarship, which helped me through my first year of university. However, my biggest challenge was leaving home after being sick with leukaemia and enduring years of treatment.

Throughout my illness I became very close to my family. Making friends at university helped me to gain a sense of belonging, and the lecturers and tutorial educators were all friendly, understanding and fun but I still became very homesick. It was hard having leukaemia, but the professional and personal achievement I gained that year was astounding and I am now one step closer to becoming a university-trained preschool teacher.

What do you think about the state of early childhood education in Australia?
I believe we have come a long way in acknowledging the importance of the first five years of a child’s life. However, we have a long way to go in supporting and ensuring all children have equal rights to quality care. But like anything, we can only get better.

I also believe we are losing graduates to the school sector due to the higher wages, more holidays and possibly the greater recognition of their profession by society.

What are the biggest challenges facing early childhood teachers?
Trying to be recognised and acknowledged as professionals and educators to the same extent that school teachers are. I believe each early childhood teacher is responsible for being an ambassador for early childhood education. Together we can make a difference and receive the same recognition, respect and hopefully remuneration!

What inspires you?
The children themselves inspire me. They are such complex and beautiful little human beings.

As Anita Rui Olds (1999) said, ‘Children are miracles’. I witnessed this first hand when I was uplifted by the laughter and life of those two small children I saw in the hospital.

In my spare time and university holidays I find myself browsing the internet, books and magazine articles for inspiration and extending my knowledge and understanding of early childhood environments.

I am excited and look forward to seeing what the future holds for me and where being an early childhood teacher takes me. ★

*A pre-service student-teacher, Rebecca is due to complete her Degree at Macquarie University in 2014.
**How to catch a monster**

Written and illustrated by Christina Bollenbach  
Published by Scholastic  
RRP: $24.99  
There are already libraries full of children’s books written to help tackle and tame monster fears. (Maurice Sendak’s classic *Where the Wild Things Are*, springs to mind.) The latest incarnation is Christina Bollenbach’s *How to Catch a Monster*, which can be read at bedtime or by educators within a group setting. Beautifully illustrated to reflect the protagonist’s dreamscape, it tells the tale of Lukas, a little boy who confronts his fears by building a monster trap. Lukas bakes a batch of ‘super-duper, yummy-tummy chocolate chip cookies’ that no monster could resist and plans to trap his nighttime nemesis. While this is a familiar tale—predictably, Lukas and the monster of his imagination become good friends—it is a sweet yarn that will appeal to children and the child within. Even the best of us once had a monster in our closet or under our bed, and this book is a sentimental reminder of those ghoulies and ghostsies … ‘and things that go bump in the night’.

**Don’t let a spoonbill in the kitchen**

Written and illustrated by Narelle Oliver  
Published by Omnibus Books, Scholastic Australia  
RRP: $24.99  
As the title suggests, *Don’t let a spoonbill in the kitchen*, is a whimsical what-if story about what would happen if a spoonbill, pelican or cormorant were let loose in your house. Featuring Australian waterbirds in outlandish human settings such as the airport, the laundry, a shoe shop or even a ballet performance, children will delight in the inevitable chaos that ensues. Written by artist, writer, teacher and champion of children, Narelle Oliver, this beautiful picture book combines Oliver’s trademark linoprints with collage and photographic elements. The result is a visual feast of contrasting natural and domestic environments. There is plenty of rhythm and rhyme and laugh-out-loud moments in this tale of fun and mayhem. My five-year-old and I found the illustration of the marauding pelicans pinching people’s personal belongings from an airport luggage carousel particularly amusing. *Don’t let a spoonbill in the kitchen* may inspire a life-long love of bird-watching, as children will almost certainly learn the names of native birds from the Jacana to an Osprey.

**Square Metre Gardening**

By Mel Bartholomew  
Published by Exisle Publishing  
RRP: $29.99  
This book has kick-started a global gardening trend that is changing the way people grow food. There are lessons to be learned by education and care services, which can no longer use the excuse of limited space. As the title suggests, *Square Metre Gardening* shows how to grow edible produce in just one square metre. Children and adults can grow anything from vegetables and herbs to flowers.

Packed with beautiful colour photography, planting charts, and detailed how-tos, it even shows how to create a vertical garden! There is no digging required and no need for lots of tools, so the method suits early childhood services, schools and community gardens or spaces where there might not be soil. I enjoyed the sections on creating a kid’s corner or a garden for people with special needs.

Demonstrations of the method can even be found on Youtube. In the US, it is known as square foot gardening, but this book has been converted to Australia’s metric system. *Square Metre Gardening* is full of joy and inspiration and has even got this black-thumb gardener plotting, planning and even planting.

**Young children learning mathematics**

By Robert Hunting, Judy Mousley and Bob Perry  
Published by ACER (Australian Council of Educational Research)  
RRP: $29.99  
*Young children learning mathematics: A guide for educators and families* is just that—an easy-to-digest summary of methods for parents, teachers and carers to recognise opportunities when mathematical thinking can be stimulated. And it can be in the everyday home environment using common objects (sticks, stones, stairs, toys) i.e. there is no need to buy fancy commercial mathematical materials. As a mother to young children I found this book particularly interesting. There are boundless opportunities for young children to learn mathematical concepts before school.

Some educators will already be familiar with much of the content but it may serve as a refresher or be completely new to others. Interestingly, our own adult attitudes to mathematics can have a strong influence on little minds. Many of us—myself included—had negative experiences learning maths, and we can inadvertently pass on this anxiety and negativity. The strongest message I got from this book is that adult interactions play such an important role in a child’s mathematical development. Yes, it all adds up, pardon the pun!

The book is well presented with illustrations and photography and is a handy size, easy to pop in a handbag and read on public transport or display at your service to interest parents and educators. ★

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