



Connecting to Country

A Pathway to Deepening Cultural Understanding

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This project of connecting to country with infants and educators is an act of reconciliation within a community of learners. Through examining our pedagogical and cultural ontologies we journeyed with the children, families and members of the Awabakal community respectfully engaging with ancestral language, knowledge about the land, animals of Mulubinba, and the importance of waterways.

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Elder Street Early Childhood Centre - Australia



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Introduction

This project of *Connecting to Country* with infants and educators is an act of reconciliation within a community of learners. Through examining our pedagogical and cultural ontologies we journeyed with the children, families and members of the Awabakal community respectfully engaging with ancestral language, knowledge about the land, animals of Mulubinba, and the importance of waterways. Due to a global pandemic our ability to wander while learning was constrained to our immediate learning environments. Therefore, we used experiences of digital media, music, art, and artefacts as our conveyance to other imaginings within this learning. Where we arrived at is a place of deeply reflective understanding about young children's capacity to share in the joy of cultural learning and the pathways this creates for whole communities to learn together.



Context

In the early months of 2021, we engaged in reflective conversations about the importance of respectfully and authentically embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture into our learning environments. Our centre's community is committed to culturally competent and safe practices while working towards reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait people through respecting, reflecting, celebrating, and educating our community of learners on their rich and present culture.

Throughout our discussions there were many moments we found ourselves questioning why we felt this was an important focus for young children. We discussed the importance of delving deeper into the research and culture of the Awabakal people and our belief that young children can build an authentic understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise that promoting a greater understanding of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being contributes to the richness of our community (DEEWR, 2009). Together the children and educators spent time engaged in processes of learning including touching, tasting, and exploring; with a hope to make new discoveries, experience joy, wonder and awe as the learning unfolded and connections with culture and country were made. This project involved three educators and eighteen children. The children were aged between seven months-old and two years-old.

Our children are deeply inspired by the world they live within and view this world through a cultural lens. This cultural lens is closely shaped, supported and reinforced by influential people in their world through the engagement of collaborative co-learning relationships (Fleer, 2018). Each day, the children gather on Awabakal country to engage in these forms of learning relationships. They construct knowledge on who the Awabakal people are, their connection to Awabakal land, and the importance of the dreaming through connection, storytelling, play, and exploring people and art. This form of learning supports the children to develop new understandings, unpack their thinking, and feel a sense of belonging to the land they play and learn upon each day. Our engagement in this learning aims to develop the children's understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture through an unhurried approach while creating meaningful connections to the land and with the local and broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.



Glossary of Awabakal Language

Forming a strong connection with Awabakal Country and culture entailed a rich and contextual understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and its people. As non-indigenous educators it was important for us to create early partnerships with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, partnerships in the community, and to reach out to members from the Indigenous Education and Research team from the University of Newcastle Wollotuka Institute. Prominent members of our educational advisory and collaboration team were Sarah and Daniel, who are parents to children involved in this project. Throughout the project Sarah and Daniel provided educators with guidance and cultural protocols to consider before introducing new concepts to the children. While in collaboration with Sarah and Daniel, educators also sought counsel from an Indigenous Education and Research Officer, Jade, a Wiradjuri woman, from the Wollotuka Institute for further support and guidance from her team.



Glossary

As we engaged in our learning journey of connecting to country, the children utilised the Miromaa Awabakal Dictionary (Miromaa ALTC, 2020) to enquire, research, and critically engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

Mulubinba – Newcastle ‘place of the sea-fern’

Watiyelong - Trees

Tibin – Bird

Keyarapai - Cockatoo

Werekata – Kookaburra

Muring – Sea

Berabakaan - Whale

Pamara - River

Always

Our Ongoing Commitment to Reconciliation

Throughout the year the children have celebrated a range of significant days for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Although significant, to have authentic ongoing commitment to reconciliation, we need more than just celebrating days. Through interactions with the natural world, children and educators began to construct emerging knowledge of the First Nations people and the importance of each country and the land.



The first protagonist for the children's journey of cultural understanding was their connection to natural elements from Awabakal land. The children would often spend time around the native midgen berry plant. In the early summer months, the children would curiously point out small flowers appearing on the plant. They would spend time touching, smelling, and observing the flowers and demonstrated a protective guardianship over the plant, telling friends and teachers about the importance of not picking them off. For the children, these flowers were a sign that midgen berries were on their way. A few short weeks later the white speckled berries would then emerge from the small flowers. Each day the children entered the playground they would race over to the plant to pick their own midgen berries, one by one, and enjoy the sweet treat that they had grown on Awabakal land. The children would listen intently as educators shared cultural stories of how these forms of bush tucker plants would provide Awabakal people with nutrients and ingredients to create their very own medicine.



The children are creative learners; it was therefore important to connect the children with traditional artistic and storytelling processes. The Indigenous Education and Research team from the Wollotuka institute provided educators with information and permission to source sandstone from a coastal extinct volcano site, Kintirrabin, Redhead Bluff. The children explored this cultural mineral autonomously through sensory investigation. They glided their fingers over the surface of the rock and closely observed the small grains of sand separate and crumble onto their hand. Compiling a collection of these sand fragments inspired the children to mix the minerals, transforming the sandstone into a natural pigment. The children then listened as educators explained the importance of this pigment being used to depict traditional Dreaming stories and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices of sharing information through art.



Connecting with Watiyelong

We noticed the children using artistic experiences to provoke discussions, ideas, and new learning pathways. To extend this idea, we created a space within the room where the children could collaborate and create visual artefacts demonstrating their ideas. Throughout this experience the digital projector provided depth to the children's learning environment. Projected images of trees enhanced their understanding of the natural environment beyond the scope of what our centre had access to throughout the pandemic.

“Up in the tree” Willow J. shared.

“Big trees” Frankie pointed out.

Emerging from this new adventure, we began connecting ways the children have utilised and adapted their environment with fallen tree leaves and branches coupled with their voices throughout experiences. **“Tree... Bird”** Jed expressed.

Willow J. opened the discussion by asking **“Where are they? Where's the birds?”**

Loula's response to this question was to point out the paper crane bird that was hanging about her head.

“Other birdies outside” Willow J. stated building the groups contextual information of where the birds are located within their learning environment.

The significance of the learning environments became evident. We chose to include the project space in the documentation.



The Project Space

We created a project space that would provide the children with a consistent area that was predictable and interactive. It would be a place where the children could share their thoughts and ideas and bring these to life through a creative medium. After interacting with the sandstone rock in the outdoor learning environment, Willow J, Remi, and Harry transferred their learning to the project space indoors.

“Lots water make paint” Harry expressed, distinctively making a connection with his previous constructed knowledge.

“Awaaa” Remi expressed to describe the transformation she observed.

The project space continuously adapted over the course of the project as the children gained a deeper understanding of country and shared their ideas. While engaging in this creative process, the children furthered their connection to country kinaesthetically through multimodal learning with the projector.



This visual artefact encouraged the children to interact and formulate their ideas while being completely absorbed in the natural world.

“Look, up in the tree” Willow J. stated when noticing a bird sitting in the tree.

“Touch the birdy” Ella giggled while reaching out for the projector.

“Big Trees” Frankie stated, describing the gum trees that were towering over the land.

“Birdy might be looking for it’s mummy” Willow J. expressed with concern after noticing that the bird was sitting in the tree for quite some time.



Loula was observed sitting close to the project space, mesmerised by the projection of the slow-moving gum trees. She demonstrated her interest by climbing onto the project table to be as close as she could to the projection to view the trees. This dialogue of learning transferred into the outdoor environment where educators noticed the children become more in-tune with the natural aspects of the outdoor environment.

“What that?” Willow J. asked, tuning into the noises of some birds she could hear in a nearby tree while pointing in the same direction. Remi gasped with excitement and swiftly moved towards the viewing platform to stand still and observe.

“Birdies!” Willow J. confirmed, while pointing to the exact location of the birds that were chattering and chirping while sitting on the branch of a tree.

“It’s a birdies in the tree” Frankie confirmed.

Ella – **“What’s that noise?”**

Paula (Educator) – **“I don’t know, what do you think?”**

Ella – **“It’s a birdie. See birdies”**

Harry – **“Birdies”**

Frankie – **“In the tree”**

Willow H. – **“Flap flap”**

Willow J. – **“Trees”**

Frankie – **“Yellow birdies”**

Bree (Educator) – **“What more can you see?”**

Ella – **“Spikey”**

Harry began laughing and pointing at the projections.

Bree (Educator) – **“Where do you think they are going?”**

Harry – **“More birdies”**

Jed – **“It that”**

Frankie – **“I wanna make a yellow one”**

Bree (Educator) – **“How do you think you could make one?”**

Harry – **“Red... Green”**

Willow J. – **“White one”**

Ella – **“Birdie red”**

Willow J. – **“Cocka birdie”**

Ella – **“Round and touch it here”**



Our assessment of the children’s learning has demonstrated that they are highly influenced by their learning environment. The excitement of viewing the birds in the outdoor environment provoked the children to begin collecting materials that had similar features to a bird.

“Look a feather and a leaf stuck to it” Frankie expressed while holding up a feather she found in the corner of the playground.

“Like a birdie one” Willow J. added, following Frankie’s discovery with a connection to the birds the children had viewed.



Connecting with Tibin

After some time exploring Watiyelong, the interest of Tibin sparked many different conversations. The children were responsive to the noises of the birds, images of them within their natural environment, and their presence in the playground. The project space was adapted to reflect the children's interest in birds.

Loula became fascinated by the way the hanging tree branches interacted and created shadows on projection to the wall. **"It's a Keyarapai. A white cockatoo"** Bree (Educator) explained to Loula.



We know from Loula's socio-cultural environment at home that the Keyarapai is something she often observes flying from tree to tree in the afternoons. Loula utilised resources such as gum nuts and foraged leaves from the playground to create her own clay bird. **"Birdie"** Bree stated, forming a connection for Loula between her interest of birds and the clay creation she had made.



Clay work of Tibin by Loula

Eli squished and manipulated the clay resources to create the body shape for the bird. He used leaves and sticks to squish into the clay to create “**spikey**” (Eli).



“**Daaa**” Grace expressed while pointing to the Keyarapai. She leaned over the table to be closer to the projection.

“**Red bird**” Harry suggested by reaching out to the tree provocation to source some red flowers to add onto his bird.



“**Frankie do two ones**” Frankie shared as she pulled apart her clay to create two birds.



“**Eating**” Ella stated with a curious expression while looking at the projection.

Sunny made connections between the bird on the projection and what she was making. “**Birdie here**” Sunny pointed out. Sunny’s attention diverted to exploring how she could create indents and prints using her fingernails and the resources. “That looks like the pattern on the bird here” Bree (Educator) pointed out in the projection to Sunny.

We continued to join the children’s explorations of the natural world with Indigenous perspectives in the learning...



The Kookaburra... and other Tibins

“When the sun rose for the first time, Bayame ordered the kookaburra to utter its loud, almost human laughter in order to wake up mankind so that they did not miss the wonderful sunrise” (Dreise, 2015, p. 5). The community garden space is where the children observe an abundance of birdlife flying from tree to tree, sitting on the power lines, and communicating to one another. After listening to the story, the children began hearing some interesting noises amongst the bottlebrush tree.



“Oh, what dat?” Ella gasped.

“Up” Harry pointed noticing the magpie.

“A birdie, twee twee” Ella expressed.

“Kaakaakaa” Willow J. giggled “like this, it’s a kookaburra”.

After observing the birds in the community garden, the children began discussing their idea of painting the birds in the project space.

“Probably I can do that” Willow J. responded clearly thinking about her plan,

“maybe I can do a parrot” Willow J. continued.

The children’s exploration of birds in the natural environment resulted in them becoming in-tune with the sounds of birds in the trees surrounding the playground.

“It’s a little madpie” Willow J. announced to everyone. Once Loula heard the word ‘magpie’ she tuned in with the environment surrounding her. “Ohhhhh” Loula gasped with excitement.



After connecting with different Australian birds, the children developed further understanding of how birds interact in the natural environment.

Loula noticed many different noises in the playground and the wider community.

“Oh” she expressed with a curious face, pointing in the direction she heard the noises.

“A birdie up there” Willow J. giggled.

Observing Connections with Awabakal Country



“What’s that rain?” Willow J. enquired one morning while peering up to the sky. “Is it raining yet?” Bree (Educator) asked Willow J. **“It’s raining soon”** Willow J. responded.

Willow and Bree talked about signs the Awabakal people looked for within the environment when it might be about to rain.

“Big cloud there” Willow J. stated pointing up to a grey cloud. “Can you remember how the birds may tell us that it’s about to rain?” Bree prompted Willow J. **“It’s a kadalookooka”** Willow J. stated with a giggle. Eli quickly joined this conversation sharing his knowledge on the kookaburra call, **“Kaakaakaakaaka”**. Warlpiri Elder, Jerry Jangala (2021) explains the importance of a reciprocal relationship between the land and people. He extends an understanding that is undertaken in a respectful manner, it is important for everybody to feel and know the land to live on it. The reciprocal relationship that is held between the land and the people is something that is central to Indigenous culture and was an important concept for the children to learn and understand throughout the project (Jangala, 2021).

To connect with their own theories, the children began standing on tree stumps and wooden logs to perform their own dance to inform each other of the rain they believed was soon to arrive.





Sprinkling raindrops emerged from the sky and the rainbow lorikeets responded by chirping in the tree across the road from the playground.

“What’s that?” Ella expressed noticing the sounds of the birds. Ella answered her own question by sharing **“they dancing there, like this”** while striking a ballerina pose.

“Birds telling us rain...look... birdy ballerina” Willow J. shared.

It was in this moment that we noticed the children make connections and build knowledge through the language of dance to tell a story about what they were seeing in their environment. The children utilised the slight slope of the playground to project their momentum while running through the playground in a dance-story experience connected to being birds.

“I’m birdy” Leo expressed while holding his hands out beside his body.

“Here I am” Willow J. expressed as she ran up and down the playground.

Some logs in the playground were utilised as a platform to enhance the children’s movement and experiences of soaring through the sky. Each of the children were aware of the movement of their arms, demonstrating intentionality by flapping them up and down to propel their body forward. The children moved swiftly through the playground with strength and speed. At times, the children stopped to pause on the logs, making a connection with the birds they see sitting in the trees. Their approach to this dance-story evolved when Willow J. made a connection with a traditional Dreaming story and asked, **“are you, my mummy?”** in an emotive voice.



Connecting to the Muring

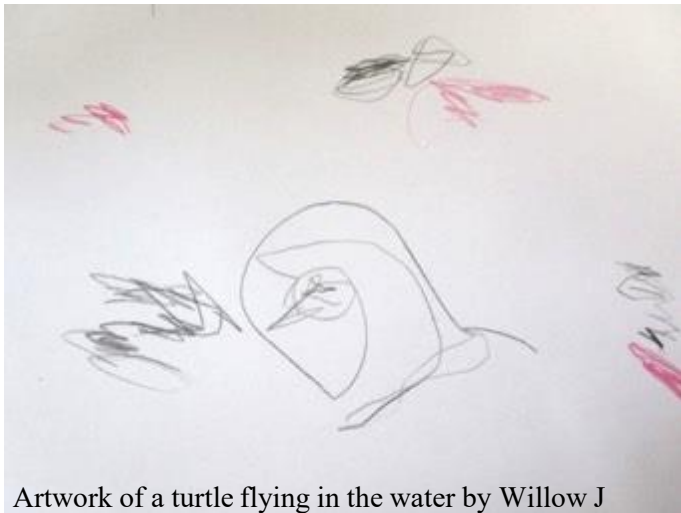
We noticed the children's conversations adapt to a new connection and interest in the ocean. The children began integrating this into their play, artwork, and interactions in the learning environment.

Leo retrieved a sea animal book one morning and returned to the rainbow mat where he was surrounded by a group of children. Not long after, Willow J. sourced some of the sea animal figures within the room and returned to the space to compare them to the book. The learning environment continued to play a large role in the children's connection to Awabakal land.

"It's a waaaave" Ella shared one morning noticing the clouds creating a pattern in the sky. Bree (Educator) observed Ella analyse the small movement of cloud from the wind.

"Moving" Ella shared as her eyes observed the cloud's movements.

As the children's interest in sea animals and the ocean progressed the project space adapted. The concept of the ocean became embedded within the children's everyday conversations.



Artwork of a turtle flying in the water by Willow J

Willow J. particularly expressed interest in this new adventure. She often utilized story books to build her knowledge of sea animals and to answer questions of "where do they go?" and "do they like the rain?" After building her knowledge, Willow J. set out a creative experience in front of the project space.

"Drawing a turtle" Willow J. shared.

"It's flying in the water" Willow J. further described from the knowledge she had gathered in projections and books of the turtle seemingly flying in the water.

Remi was observed comfortably propped up on the table watching the animals swim by.

“Ah, turtle” Remi explained with a large smile across her face.

“Turtle” Remi continued as she pointed and touched the turtle on the wall.



We created colours that linked to the colours of the ocean that we have been investigating in the projections. After the colours were dry the children used fine pens to mark intricate details on their ocean-coloured images.

“It’s a whale” Ella enthusiastically expressed, “lots of whales”.



Willow J. shared that the “fishies are flying in the water”.

The children used the water-colour paint as a provocation to explore their understanding of water movements circulating around the ocean. There were motions of dotted water bubbles, intentional glides from one side of the page to another and swift strokes of unique oceanic colours. At times, the children referred to the projection of sea animals swimming and sea animal figurines on the wall. The traditional movements of the animals inspired the children to re-enact them by embedding them into their artwork through loops and swirling motions.



The Muring - Home of the Whale



Living on the east coast of Australia it is our understanding that the beach and coastal life is familiar to the children, and that many of the children began their journey of connecting to the ocean with their families. As an environmental and marine scientist, Elizabeth Ella's mum, spent a great amount of time sharing information about the importance of the ocean to Ella. Ella's funds of knowledge of the ocean and the sea animals paired with traditional Dreaming stories of a whale's journey co-constructed a deep contextual understanding for the group of children. The children responded to this newly constructed understanding with enthusiastic responses of excitement and animation in their facial expressions and bodily movements.



“A whale I got here” Wyatt excitedly expressed while shooting up into a standing position and holding his whale figure on display for the rest of the children to see.

Awabakal tribes were closely connected to the information that was provided by whales migrating from south to north throughout the year. Whales began the great migration to move north into warmer waters in the cooler seasons to mate and breed new **“baby whale”** as Willow J. explained. Later when the cooler seasons were over, they began to move back down south to find fish in the arctic waters. This migration was an indication to the Awabakal people of change of seasons.



While Bree (Educator) explained the whale's migration, the children connected the information with what they knew.

“Baby get hungry” Frankie expressed.

“Be careful of the whale, it's going to eat the fish, yum! Whale swim in the rain and water” Willow H. . shared.



Connecting to Country through Language and Music

When reflecting on the project taking place over the year, we observed slowly emerging learning, discoveries, and evolution of theories made by the children. Educators were drawn to the children's ongoing interest in singing songs. Utilising this shared interest, we drew from all the aspects of the project to create our song. Together, we unpacked the children's understanding of animals, the land, and oceans we have explored, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dancing and music, to create our song to accompany our project. We engaged the children in group experiences experimenting with the melodies of common music and songs with the children. This was conducted through humming and mimicking the tune of songs such as 'Give me a home among the gum trees' by Wally Johnson and Bob Brown, searching for inspiration. Sunny's family shared that she practiced the tune of this song at home and began learning the lyrics to the song with her family.



Reflective Learning



Whilst exploring melodies to music, the children and educators looked over documentation panels together to choose the learning themes within the project to create a song. Bree (Educator) prompted the children to investigate the panels of documentation on the wall. “What do you think should be in our song about Awabakal Country?” Bree asked the children.

Willow J. immediately ran over to the whale figures and returned. **“The mummy and the daddy and the baby”** she expressed.

“The birdies tweet tweet” Frankie shared.

“Raining birdies for tweet tweet like the kooka” Willow H. . joined in on the conversation. **“The mummy kangaroo”** she added.

The song itself brings together all components of the children’s learning journey into one holistic representation; the children are the protagonists and authors of their own learning (Malaguzzi, 1993 cited in Rankin, Morrow & Gandini, 1993). It was important that the correct terminology and theories from the children’s learning journey were represented throughout the song.

“Flying turtles” was Remi’s interest in the turtles gliding through water in the projection and was included in the song as “home of the flying turtles”.

“Swishies” and **“Kadaloo”** is the exact pronunciation of how the children articulated the words ‘fish’ and ‘kangaroo’.

“ko-ka-ka-ka-ka” is Willow J.’s acoustic annotation of the sound a Kookaburra creates. These interpretations became the lyrics of our song.



Researching Awabakal Language

Watiyelong, Tibin and Muring; Awabakal for tree, bird, and sea, are words that the children became familiar with through hearing them in conversations while connecting to country. We used the photographs within the Miromaa Awabakal Dictionary (Miromaa ALTC, 2020) to inspire group discussion. Jed closely investigated each page of the dictionary. He smiled when he noticed an animal he was familiar with and moved it closer to the other children to view.

“That one” Ella expressed pointing to the Kookaburra. **“Werekata”** Bree responded. **“Whale”** Harry pointed out with excitement noticing the picture of the whale in the dictionary. **“The Awabakal word for that is Berebakaan”** Bree added. **“Yes”** Harry agreed.



The New Song

The song showcases the children’s vocabulary whilst also including their unique theories and stories they adapted from their ontologies and knowledge while connecting to country. While learning the song with the children, educators filmed the children singing and dancing to the song with a vision to create a digital documentation to share with our families and community. We welcomed our families and community back into the Possum Room to enjoy the storytelling imagery projected onto the wall alongside the children and educators. The digital footage showcased the documentation panels created throughout the project and filmed moments of the children singing their new song ‘Welcome to Awabakal Country’.

The Song : Welcome to Awabakal Country

Welcome to our home, Mulubinbah.

Near the muring.

The land that meets the big, big, sea.

We take care of the land.

The land takes care of we.

This is Awabakal country.

We live by the muring.

Home of the flying turtles.

Be careful! Big whales jumping...

They swim and swim and swim and swim,

to warmer waters up north,

and return back down to the swishies.

Welcome to Awabakal Country,

With many taruralongs.

The kooka fly to the big watiyelong,

they warn us of the rain

and dance behind the yurings.

Then we hear then werekata call

Ko-ka-ka-ka-ka, big rain coming!



Out in the bushland lives the kadaloo's,

they're called Mowane.

little kadaloo goes jumping,

looking for its mummy.

Big journey through the grassy trees,

making friends along the way.

The kadaloo had a very big day.

Goodnight kadaloo!

Welcome to our home, Mulubinbah.

Near the muring.

The land that meets the big, big, sea.

We take care of the land.

The land takes care of we.

This is Awabakal country!

Connecting with the Wollotuka Institute

Jade, from the Wollotuka Institute had been following and supporting the journey of this project through cultural guidance and mentoring. Towards the end of this journey, we were given the opportunity to contact Jade through a video call to perform our song for her.

“We have something very exciting to share with you” Bree (Educator) expressed to Jade.

The children began waving at Jade through the video call with soft smiles of anticipation.

“Are you ready?” Bree asked the children and Jade.

This connection was so special to the children. They clapped and cheered for themselves with gracious smiles after performing for Jade. Jade congratulated the children and expressed how proud she was of the song the children had created and noticed the significant attention to detail the children had when pronouncing Awabakal words ‘mowane’ ‘watiyelong’ ‘yurings’ ‘werekata’ ‘mulubinbah’ and ‘taruralongs’. As a token of appreciation of the children’s outstanding embedded research and learning about reconciliation, Jade invited the children to visit Wollotuka to perform the song for the rest of her colleagues.



Connecting to the Pamara

The new year brought observation of the children gathering around the water trough in the outdoor playground. This space fascinated the children and developed a curiosity in the movement of water. More specifically, it was a space that the children enjoyed being ‘together’. Much like the symbolic importance of a river, the water became an important meeting place for the children.



The River as a Metaphor

When we reflect on the children’s learning we envision a waterway. A waterway that absorbs all the creeks that feed into it, making space for new waters to cross and create a river. The symbolic importance of this water way is that each child that is a part of the Possum group brings something unique and different to the space.

Each theory, interaction, or creative outlet contributes to our unique waterway that is rich with the children’s voices and ideas.



Creating a Theory

While the children were investigating water in different forms; educators documented their theories, ideas, experimentation, and voices.

When I place my hand in the water what is going to happen?

When I glide my hand across the water what is going to happen?

If I drop a rock in the water what is going to happen?

If I sit my body in the water what is going to happen?

Vygotsky (1934, cited in Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2020) believed that children actively seek an understanding of the world around them. When children develop a theory, it is to generate their own explanation of why things occur in the world around them. Over the space of two months, the children engaged in building their own unique theories around water spaces in the playground. Oliver would extend his body over the viewing platform to reach out and feel the sensation of water running through his fingers in a downward stream, discovering the concept of motion. Loula continued to develop her theory of connecting to country through multimodal learning by immersing herself into the digital projection and observing, touching, and imagining the roaring movements of a river. Hank and Joseph built on their developing theories of water through exchanging splashes and colliding bodies in the water trough.



The Pamara in the Possum Room

While the children's interest in interacting with water increased, educators made the curriculum decision to support this interest by adding a river space to the digital projector space that reflected the children's learning, theories, and play.

“Woooooah” Loula expressed running over to the space. “What is it?” Bree (Educator) asked.

“Eeeee” Loula responded, while carefully making her way closer to the projection.



Inspired by family input from Grace's mum, Sarah, Bree began the experience by reading the story 'Where's Our Water?' This is a story developed for Hunter Water, in collaboration with the Awabakal and Worimi communities. Grace, Loula, and Addison were captivated by the illustrations within the story, particularly a green lizard that was sitting on the log close by the river. Loula, Addison, Remi, and Grace joined Bree to source some different textural materials to form a river artefact in the project space. Outdoors, Loula found some bark hidden amongst the plants in the atelier garden. Grace kneeled in the walkway and began playing with loose and fallen leaves that were also added into the project space.



We wondered... is the connection to the space a reflection of the rapid movements of the river flow in the projection and the children's interactions in the water trough?

To determine this connection, we planned an art experience where the children could incorporate the textural materials and paint colours in the project space. Each element was intentionally overlapped for the children to reconcile ideas and further express their understanding while closely supported by educators. Much like a river, this artwork symbolised the intersections of water sources that join to create a river. The children involved were focussed on the intentionality of their marks rather than communicating.

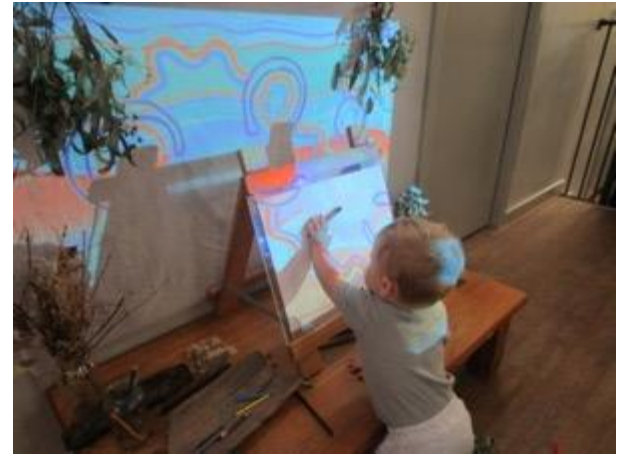
Creativity and Learning

Each time the children connected with a new concept, they returned to the project space to further develop their ideas. To support these emerging ideas, we would often project digital artwork or media for further investigation. We observed that digital investigation developed skills for artistic and imaginative expression such as drawing and painting (Lieberman, Bates & So, 2009).



Max explored an art projection by Wonaruah women, Saretta Fiedlding, entitled 'Mariin Kaling', a depiction of the Hunter River. He transferred a tapping stick over to the projection and tapped the digital art where the painting represents a ripple in the painting. Bree shared with Max how that pattern resembled a water ripple effect. A week later, Max re-visited this concept by utilising some pencils and paper with the same projection. He was observed lightly tapping the pencil on the paper, as he did the week prior.

Grace spent some time sitting and analysing the projection. She focused as she slowly traced the pattern of the art onto the paper. She made connections to what she was drawing by pointing out different elements in the painting to educators sitting nearby. A week later, Grace approached the project space again. After creating some distinct marks on her paper, she appeared to notice the paint on her hands. This prompted interest in submerging her hands into the pot of paint and exploring the motion of the Pamara from the art projection.





Long, long ago in the Dreamtime, the Earth lay flat and still. Nothing moved and nothing grew. One day, a beautiful snake awoke from her slumber and came out of the ground. This snake was known as the Rainbow Serpent. She travelled for a very long time, far and wide. As she made her way across the land, her body formed mountains, valleys, and rivers.

After another short rest, the Rainbow Serpent awoke and called out to the frogs, “come out”. The frogs woke up very slowly because their bodies were full of water. The Rainbow Serpent tickled their bellies, and water began to fill the tracks that the Rainbow Serpent had left. This is the story told by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of how the lakes and rivers were formed (Connolly, 2014).



When the Land was Flat...

Over a few weeks, the children continued to create theories based on their interactions with the river spaces and water ways. While creating these theories, educators were intentional in their strategies to support the children through **unhurried time** to interact, experiment and collaborate in these spaces.

We engaged further with the Pamara and the importance it holds for the Awabakal people. The children gathered out on the front steps in a yarning circle to listen to the dreaming story of the Rainbow Serpent and how it formed the Hunter River on Awabakal Country.

Soon after sharing the story the children began sharing their connections.

“Ssssss” Max expressed creating the sound and movement of a snake with his hands. This prompted Remi to lay down on the mat as the Rainbow Serpent.
“Aaaa” she shouted.



Enhancing the Connection and Recounting the Journey



We paused to reflect upon the connections the children were making. Seemingly, their language of connection was in the form of using their hands to touch and create. We next provided clay, sandstone rocks, water, and paintbrushes. Each of the earthy elements represents Awabakal country and the earth in which the Rainbow Serpent emerged and formed upon.

“**Tickle, tickle, tickle**” Remi responded while tickling her belly. “What came out of the frog's belly when the snake tickled it?” Bree asked. “**Ah warga**” Remi announced out loud. Remi and Grace displayed pride when relaying the story to other children and educators in the room.

“**Sssss**” Grace would share while creating snake movement with her hands.



We saw an opportunity for the children to extend on this learning through an interactive story. Educators encouraged the children to use their hands to pat the sand flat as the earth was flat in the beginning of the story. They used their fingers and hands to form the rivers and mountains in the land. After another short rest, their hands awoke again and began tickling the frogs that were full of water. Remi turned to Grace and began tickling Grace's belly. “**Tickle, tickle, tickle**” she expressed. “What came out of their bellies?” Bree asked.

“**Ah warga**” Remi shouted out loud with excitement. The girls used a water pipette to squirt water and fill the ridges to create Pamara.

It was now time to recount this learning journey...

Our Journey

We reflected on the significance this learning journey held. During these reflections we were faced with uncomfortable and unknown feelings. *How are the children going to understand it? Will the children understand what reconciliation is? How can we explore and connect to country with children at such a young age? What does this learning mean for the children?*

Our learning journey began on country. The country of our homes, our families, our community, and our place of learning; Elder Street Early Childhood Centre. A sacred land to the Awabakal people; whose clans are placed along the coastal area of what is now known as the Mid North Coast region of New South Wales, Australia. In these areas are places and landmarks of significant meaning and cultural connections for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These coastal areas are where the children play on the weekends with their families, connect with while going on walks and bike rides, and learn upon each and every day.

In the beginning stages of this project, the children used their varied dispositions for learning, and curiosity of the world they live in to drive their language of connecting to country and reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This occurred through different forms of creative expression. In these forms of learning, the children developed understanding of the importance and presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and culture in our community. From this knowledge the children developed understanding of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people hold strong connection with the land and how we can continue to care for Awabakal Country through our everyday learning and practices.

As the project came to an end, it was clear our journey of reconciliation continues.

This important work comes from our hearts and active social justice voices.



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Bree Creighton is a passionate and committed Early Childhood Professional that holds a strong philosophy for working alongside children as a co-researcher. She is dedicated to working closely with children to develop and nurture their creative potential and views children as powerful and capable authors of their own learning. Bree believes strongly in connecting children to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture throughout all aspects of her pedagogy as an act of reconciliation. Her practice combines current skills acquired from her Bachelor of Education studies, and progressive research as Educational Leader at Elder Street Early Childhood Centre.

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