Premier’s Xstrata Coal Rural and Remote Education Scholarship

Preschool’s Out for Kids in the Bush: Exploring access to early childhood services in rural and remote NSW and WA

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Introduction

There is a growing body of research that confirms that participation in quality early childhood education has significant and long term effects on a child’s future educational and social success. Whilst this is well documented for children across all levels of society, nowhere are the differences and advantages more apparent than for those children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Children are more likely to succeed at school where there is a commitment to education by their families. Therefore effective strategies are needed not only to provide access to early childhood programs for all children, but also to engage with families who may have experienced poor educational success themselves, and may have low levels of literacy, self-esteem and engagement with the school system.

The Study

The study was conducted at three rural and remote sites in NSW and three in WA, and included attendance at the ECA Conference in Perth. The study involved interviews with early childhood services, schools and community service agencies to provide a broad brush view of families in each community. Across Australia 80.9% of children access a preschool program in their year prior to school. In NSW the percentage is 74.7%, while WA fares better with 94.4%. (AEDI Report 2012). This study seeks to compare levels of access to early childhood programs in different communities with results on the AEDI, and looks at successful strategies in selected study sites.

Table 1: Study Tour Sites and Organisations

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Site Location** | **Early Childhood Services** | **Schools** | **Community Agencies / Other** |
| **Eurobodalla, NSW** | Moruya Preschool Kindergarten  Murray Street Preschool, Moruya  Little Yuin Preschool, Wallaga Lake | Moruya Public School | Eurobodalla Family Support Service |
| **Broken Hill, NSW** | Rainbow Preschool  Alma Bugdlie Preschool, Alma Public School  Central Preschool,  Broken Hill Public School | Railway Town Public School  Broken Hill School of the Air | Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation  Broken Hill Child and Family Health Service |
| **Moree, NSW** | Moree Preschool Kindergarten  Gwydir Day Care (Moree Plains Shire Council) | Moree East Public School | Pius X Aboriginal Corporation – Kiah Preschool |
| **Perth, WA** |  | Roseworth Primary School  Ashdale Primary School |  |
| **Kununurra, WA** | Ewin Centre Children’s Services | Kununurra District School  Dawul Remote Community School, DoonDoon Station  (100 km from Kununurra) | Save the Children Organisation  The Wunan Foundation  Shire of Wyndham / East Kimberley |
| **Broome, WA** | Mulberry Tree Child Care  JalygurrGuwan Aboriginal Corporation Preschool | Broome Primary School | Broome Community Health Centre |
| **Exmouth, WA** | Bernice McLeod Child Care Centre | Exmouth District School | Centacare Family Services |

Barriers to Accessing Early Childhood Services

The majority of respondents across both states indicated that there were large numbers of children not accessing any early childhood services in their communities. Percentage estimates varied, but 25% could be regarded as average. Most people interviewed, however, estimated numbers substantially higher than shown by the results of the AEDI 2012.

*“Up to 25% have had either no experience or have had such erratic attendance as to be basically nothing. These tend to be lower socio-economic families both white and Indigenous. I believe the barriers are cost, transport, and not feeling comfortable or not being able to get up and manage in the morning due to drugs, alcohol, depression etc. The Aboriginal preschool has a bus run for Aboriginal children which helps with regular attendance.”*

*NSW Primary School Principal*

In WA, not only are children not accessing early childhood services, but it is thought that there may also be high numbers of unregistered children, particularly in remote Aboriginal communities.

*“We know there are significant numbers that don’t access. There are also numbers of children aged 7, 8 and9 not coming to school and not enrolled in school. Possibly these kids are not registered anywhere and may not be on anyone’s radar. Whose responsibility is this?”*

*WA Deputy Principal*

Many towns with relatively high Indigenous populations have preschools enrolling fewer than 5 or even no Aboriginal children, indicative of marked racial differences in enrolment and attendance patterns. However, Aboriginal specific services are often able to attract all eligible children from the community, and most have buses to assist regular attendance.

Towns with mining or extensive agribusiness tend to have all available places taken by high-income earners, leaving no room for more disadvantaged children to attend.

*“There are not enough early childhood places. We know there are children not accessing preschool. We also have quite a transient population with workers coming in for the mines and other big businesses. They say they can’t find a preschool place anywhere. We have eight 4 year olds on the waiting list who have moved to town in the last 6 months”.*

*NSW Preschool Director*

Levels of access in both states are much lower for Aboriginal children. Not surprisingly barriers to access in both states are remarkably similar.

*“Access to early childhood is a significant issue for Aboriginal children who come to school with little in the way of school readiness skills. The barriers to access are a complex mixture of issues, around availability, attitudes to education, past negative experiences of parents, cost, feeling that they don’t belong, transport and other family impacts like drugs, depression etc”.*

*WA Deputy Principal*

*“There are barriers for all families isolated and living in poverty….. The barriers for Aboriginal families include social and geographical isolation, cost, families not secure in their own lives, low value placed on education, depression, drugs and alcohol, chaotic living conditions etc.”*

*NSW Family Support Manager*

Looking at the Australian Early Development Index

The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) provides a snapshot of children’s development across the country at school commencement age. Results are provided for geographical areas, which are also rated according to the SEIFA (Social and Economic Index for Areas) and the ASGC (Australian Standard Geographical Classification) Remoteness Areas. The AEDI measures child vulnerabilities across five developmental areas:

* + physical health and wellbeing
  + social competence
  + emotional maturity
  + language and cognitive skills (school-based)
  + communication skills and general knowledge.

The results of the AEDI data collected in 2012 show significant numbers of children in Australia who are developmentally vulnerable as they enter school.

* + 22.0% of Australian children are developmentally vulnerable on one or more of the AEDI domain/s.
  + 10.8% of Australian children are developmentally vulnerable on two or more of the AEDI domains.

Demographic factors have a significant impact on the development of Australian children.

* + 47.1% of children living in very remote Australia are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain/s, and 30.5% are developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains.
  + 32.0% of children living in the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain/s, and 17.5% are developmentally vulnerable on two or more of the AEDI domains.

(AEDI National Report 2009)

There are significantly higher proportions of Australian Indigenous children developmentally vulnerable compared to non-Indigenous children.

* + 43.2% of Indigenous children are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain/s, and 26.0% are developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains.

In Eurobodalla, the least remote area studied in NSW, there is a strong correlation between preschool attendance (higher than NSW average) and a corresponding reduction in the numbers of children developmentally vulnerable at school entry. In Broome, which has high levels of preschool attendance, the percentage of developmentally vulnerable children is lower than other areas in WA. However in Moree and Broken Hill, which are much more remote, even though preschool attendance is higher than the NSW average, there are much higher percentages of developmentally vulnerable children. The same is evident in Kununurra, WA.

While it would appear that participation in a preschool program is a mitigating factor in developmental vulnerabilities, socio-economic factors, geographical remoteness and Aboriginality are hugely influential.

**Table 2: AEDI Data 2012 – Study Tour Sites**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Children attending preschool program prior to school 2012 (%)** | **Children developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains of the AEDI (%)** | **Children developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains of the AEDI (%)** |
| **Australian Average** | 80.9 | 22.0 | 10.8 |
| **NSW average** | 74.7 | 19.9 | 9.2 |
| **Eurobodalla** | 89.2 | 16.5 | 7.6 |
| **Broken Hill** | 81.1 | 41.4 | 31.4 |
| **Moree** | 81.5 | 43.4 | 30.2 |
| **WA average** | 94.4 | 23.0 | 11.2 |
| **Perth (Girrawheen)** | 93.1 | 32.8 | 16.7 |
| **Kununurra** | 89.2 | 37.1 | 21.3 |
| **Broome** | 96.2 | 25.6 | 15.4 |
| **Exmouth** | 93.8 | 27.8 | 25.0 |

The Vision

Service staff were asked what their ideal vision would be for children and families in their communities. Three themes were consistently raised.

The first is a vision for a holistic community approach to children’s wellbeing, for integrated services where families could access early childhood education, health and welfare services at the same site.

*“There would be a fully funded preschool here on site that would be free. There would also be a Family Support presence here and Allied Health providing speech, optometry, hearing, vision screening and assessment. All these would work in conjunction with the school counsellor. It would be a total package – a one stop shop. That would be really good for us, our children and our families.”*

*NSW School Principal*

*“I’d like to see a more unified approach to child health and wellbeing for all families in a more integrated way – a holistic approach.”*

*WA Pre-Primary Teacher*

*“A bus that could take specialists and allied health workers to the family where the family can’t get to the service. You know, getting the team together to go to families. We have big distances and crappy roads, especially after the floods.”*

*NSW Preschool Director*

The second theme demands a real commitment to cultural inclusion.

*“The first step that needs to be done is to look at the cultural diversity and really address that. For so many people here there is a huge cultural division, and yet we all want the same things for our children.”*

*NSW Deputy Principal*

*“It would be kids going to school regularly. It would be serious cultural inclusion in the school curriculum, which doesn’t happen enough. It would be seeing the parent and the family have more involvement in decision making for their child’s education, and that decision making being culturally appropriate. It’s not a one size fits all approach.”*

*WA Social Worker*

*‘’I think the Family and Child Centre model will be good. Here it will be built between the Aboriginal housing area and the school, so people will need to walk past. As well it will be open, encouraging people to walk through.”*

*WA Deputy Principal*

The third involved communities having the ability to address issues of poverty and disadvantage through the provision of more early intervention services.

*“I would like to see everyone who should be coming to school. I would like children to have a safe family situation, free of drugs, alcohol and domestic violence, all of which are significant problems in this community. I would like children to enjoy coming to school, and to come consistently. I would like for them to have enough food for the day. I would like parents to value their education.”*

*WA Deputy Principal*

*“Criteria for access needs to be very clear and not negotiable. Preschool needs to be able to offer care to those who really need it rather than to those who can choose to go elsewhere.”*

*NSW Preschool Teacher*

*“We need to empower the local people that have some pull over the community. By the time the children are coming to school it’s almost too late. Intervention needs to start early, when children are first born, intervention and help needs to be provided then. The level of neglect that we see here that goes unreported or is not dealt with is not what we would see in somewhere like Sydney. We need to ask ourselves why that is so.”*

*NSW Kindergarten Teacher*

Significant Learning - Examples of What’s Working

Following are local examples of innovative and exciting practice, where committed teachers, workers, parents and significant people in the community are working together to develop and sustain better outcomes for children and families in their communities.

Roseworth School – A Vision for Extended Services

Even though Roseworth is not in a remote area, the innovative practices incorporating extended service provision could be replicated on a smaller scale in other communities.

Roseworth School has approximately 400 students from kindergarten (preschool) to year 12. Situated in a low socio economic area of Perth it has many vulnerable children, approximately 25% Aboriginal and 25% from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Sudanese and Vietnamese.

The school has developed partnerships with the Fogarty Foundation (philanthropic), Smith Family and Edith Cowan University, enabling a greater level of community engagement and professional development for staff.

The Integrated Service Model includes a suite aimed at engaging children and families from birth right through their school years and includes:

* + Community Playgroup; Caters for 20 families with children aged 0 to 3 years. Staffed by an early childhood teacher with assistance from university researchers and students. Parents can access other services - eg. Child and Family Health Nurse
  + Kindergarten (Preschool) Room; 20 children aged 4 to 5 year old attend 15 hours / week of early education at no cost.
  + Inclusion Class; Caters for children of mixed ages with a variety of additional needs. It is located close to regular classes which allows children to move between, accessing it when they need to.
  + School Dentist; On site three days / week for all children from kindergarten (preschool).
  + Psychologist
  + Therapy Services; Speech and Occupational Therapy provided by 4th year university students in an onsite therapy room.
  + Viewing Room; Used to examine student teachers and teachers’ work and provide feedback.
  + Classroom Management Strategies Team

Elders Promote Respect for Preschool in Eurobodalla

Little Yuin Preschool is situated in the Yuin nation “Koori Town” in Wallaga Lake, which started as an Aboriginal Mission. It is a severely depressed community, both socially and economically, and is isolated from the surrounding residential areas of Wallaga Lake Heights, Akolele, and Bermagui. Despite its social problems the residents have a strong connection to country and the Yuin traditions.

The Management Committee is made up of the elders in the community who also discipline younger community members. The preschool is well regarded in the community and is not subject to the vandalism evident throughout the town.

The preschool is open for 3 days each week, and caters for up to 25 children from 2yrs to school commencement. All the children in the community attend, and some also come from outside eg Bermagui & Narooma. Local schools report improvements in school readiness following preschool attendance.

The DEEWR funded Family and Community Centre is attached to the preschool and offers:

* + Transport for families requiring it
  + Homework Centre for primary and secondary children,
  + Playgroup, and
  + A variety of mothers / community groups

Teaching Yawru Language to Pre-schoolers in Broome

Jalygurr Guwan Multifunctional Aboriginal Community Service is situated in “Old Broome”, a low socio-economic area with large numbers of Aboriginal residents. It is managed by Jalygurr Guwan Aboriginal Corporation, whose board of directors is made up of elders and members of the Aboriginal community. The service has 31 preschool places for children aged from 8 months to 5 years, and 22 Out Of School Hours Care places. Children can attend from one to five days, and all are Aboriginal. Almost all families are low income, and morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea are provided.

At this small centre, extended services include;

* + Bus for preschool and school-age children
  + Inclusion Support program for children with a disability.
  + Referrals taken from other agencies, including Department of Child Protection.
  + OOSHC
  + Vacation Care
  + Nutrition program run by BOAB Health.
  + Speech therapy services.
  + Aboriginal Language Unit – elders and Aboriginal staff teach the local Yawru language to all children. The corporation has produced a children’s book in Yawru.
  + Mobile Playgroups to outlying communities more than 200 km away. *“We have many young mums at Beagle Bay and at first it was difficult to get them to come, but with locals running it things have improved a lot.”*

Railway Town Public School is the western most school in NSW. It is situated in a low SES, predominately Aboriginal housing area. The school has 25% Indigenous students, as well as a majority of “battlers” – low income working parents. Rainbow Preschool is community based with a total enrolment of 160 children and a waiting list. They also knew there were many children not accessing preschool, particularly in disadvantaged areas. Partnerships were established with Railway Town to set up a mobile preschool for 15 hours per week for 25 children. Within a week of opening 12 children were enrolled, quickly growing to 18. The mobile services are managed by Rainbow Preschool and fees are kept low. There is no bus available but the preschool sometimes provides taxis.

The Principal sees that attending preschool on the school site can help build links within the community and prepare children for the transition to school.

*“Children getting used to their new environment and the different routines of school. Being able to sit down, listen, sit at a desk, play safely. Successful transition also identifies individual children on a continuum – from extension to remedial”*

The preschool also recognises the value in school transition.

*“The children at the mobile preschools have a very good transition – they visit the kindergarten class, the school library, computer rooms, and can participate in assembly and generally recognise the principal, teachers and older students.”*

An Early Intervention Class has recently opened at Railway Town operating for 2 ½ days per week, and accessing the Far West Health Service. University of Sydney allied health students in OT, speech, physiotherapy, optometry and audiology support as part of their practicum compensating for the scarcity of such services locally. The university students screen and refer children to local Community Health Services or Maari Ma Aboriginal Health. The unit can occasionally access locum doctors and specialists. The school and preschool also have relationships with Mission Australia, DOCS, Brighter Futures and respite agencies.

Turning the Tables in Kununurra

Kununurra was built specifically to service the Ord River scheme only 50 years ago. With no consultation between the WA government and the original inhabitants, many Aboriginal people were displaced when the mighty Argyle Dam was constructed. This is the first Aboriginal generation in this remote area to perform regular work and the town is divided between the affluent and employed white population and the disadvantaged and largely unemployed Aboriginal population. The town also has significant numbers of Vietnamese immigrants.

The Wunan Foundation’s motto is “reward for effort” and focuses on housing, employment, education and living change for Aboriginal people. At present 80% of their clients are on welfare. Through the PACE program they have set up playgroups in the Neighbourhood Centre, in each school in the town and in neighbouring Halls Creek. Wunan has embraced the EYLF, and through the theme of “belonging”, has started a group for women who felt they didn’t “belong” anywhere.

*“these Mums have invited other mums in – one very young mum new to town and a Thai mum with two little kids.”*

Using a “circle of security” they create a safe haven so they can commence working with families.

*“mums need to work with their child at playgroup so they interact and learn how to play.”*

Wunan also works in conjunction with Save the Children Fund to host a Community Play Day once per term. 20 families attended the last function.

*“The parents loved the Community Days so much they started asking for activities in the school holidays – they wanted to do things with their kids. So we organised a BBQ at a local swimming hole. It was great fun and dads and grandparents came too. We’re going to do some more of that.”*

Kununurra District School is very enthusiastic about the two playgroups operating in their school.

*“For Indigenous families it helps build familiarity with the school and staff and breaks down barriers. Children need to engage (with the school) fully by Stage 2 or it’s too late. It starts with relationships – someone parents feel they can trust and discuss issues with. Someone who they can say “I know that lady, she’s OK.”*

Conclusion

Despite the fact that WA provides free access for 15 hours per week to all 4 year old children, and the percentage of children attending an early childhood service in their year prior to school is significantly higher than NSW, the levels of child vulnerabilities as evidenced on the AEDI are higher overall than for NSW and clearly demonstrate the impact of geographical isolation, Aboriginality, and remoteness.

The complex range of issues surrounding barriers to children accessing early childhood services is remarkably similar in each state, as are the solutions that educators and health and welfare workers propose.

The NSW State government is addressing the provision of universal access and equity for all the state’s children. The adoption of the recommendations of the Brennan Review is a significant step in making this a reality. NSW has also embraced the notion of extended and integrated service provision with the establishment of the Connected Communities Strategy, with Moree East Public School being one of the targeted schools.

The thoughts below echo many other welfare, health and education professionals that were interviewed on the study tour.

*“We need education in this community – education for parents about valuing school, education for early childhood services and schools about sharing information and working more closely with organisations like ours and also health, and education for the whole community on the big picture stuff of what is good for children and families. Also it would be a community and a whole country where there is no racism.”*

*NSW Family Support Worker*

*“To solve the problems in this town, it’s no use just a pile of bureaucrats in some office somewhere coming up with all these so called solutions. Without engaging with the people on the ground and the local community it won’t work. It has to be from the ground up.”*

*NSW Deputy Principal*

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