

Preparing socially and emotionally for preschool with *Little J & Big Cuz*

One Tree Community Centre
Yera Children's Service
BATCHELOR, NORTHERN TERRITORY



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Special thanks to Keirynd Christodoulou, Early Childhood Worker and Jessica Maddison, Director

The mural images used in this case study were painted by art students at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

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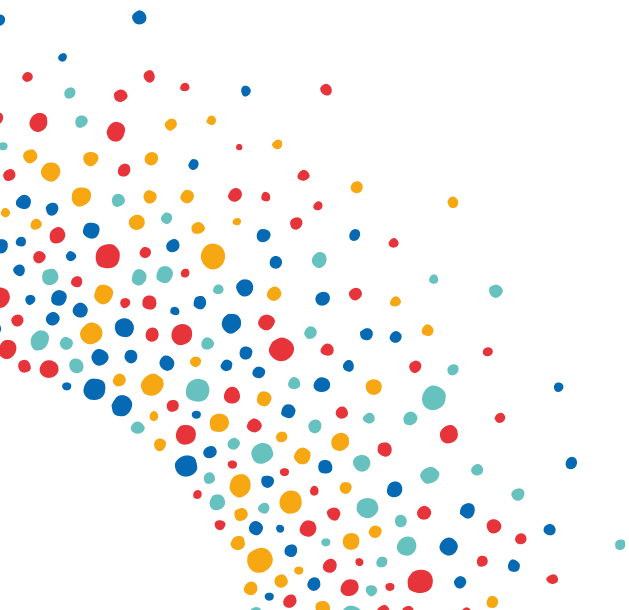
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Context

Yera Children's Service is a remote early childhood centre that is part of a group that forms the not-for-profit Yera Children's Service. This Service provides childcare to children aged six years and under in centres located in Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Victoria. The Yera Children's Service in the Northern Territory is located within the campus of Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) in the township of Batchelor, 98 kilometres south of Darwin. The Northern Territory Department of Education early childhood centre and primary school are nearby. The township of Batchelor has a population of 336 people. Students studying at BIITE who live in very remote Indigenous communities travel in several times a year to undertake intensive face-to-face classes, and live in the accommodation provided on the BIITE campus.

Yera Children's Service at Batchelor has 34 places for children from birth to three years of age and a 'kindy' room that caters for children aged three to six years of age. The early childhood educators prepare development programs for the children, including programs to develop children's social and emotional wellbeing and prepare them for their transition to junior primary school.

"It is Keiryn's view that with good teaching, the various episodes of *Little J & Big Cuz* can be used with junior primary and primary children."

TEACHING EARLY CHILDHOOD CHILDREN

Keiryn Christodoulou has been an educator at the Yera Children's Service at Batchelor since 2010. With the support of the Director, Jessica Madison, Keiryn incorporated all the episodes of *Little J & Big Cuz* into her learning program for the children in her early childhood group. The children in this group were aged between two and four years, and comprised nearly equal numbers of Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.

While Keiryn used *Little J & Big Cuz* in her programs for children up to the age of four, she discovered informally that children up to the age of 10 enjoyed watching the episodes. The older children came into the Yera Children's Service after school, and were content to sit with the younger children (a bit like the characters, Little J and Big Cuz), to follow the various stories of these characters. It is Keiryn's view that with good teaching, the various episodes of *Little J & Big Cuz* can be used with junior primary and primary children.

INCORPORATING *LITTLE J & BIG CUZ* INTO THE CHILDREN'S LEARNING

With the children at Yera Children's Service, Keiryn would play one episode of *Little J & Big Cuz* and then immediately discuss the stories with the children. She noticed the two types of English language used in the episodes: the more formal language inside Ms Chen's classroom and the more colloquial language used outside of the classroom by the characters Nanna, Little J, Big Cuz and Old Dog.

Keiryn also read the book *Where's Aaron?* to the children in her group. The children immediately recognised the characters in the book, and realised that it and the television episode were different. The children enjoyed pointing out these differences. Keiryn found that she could highlight different types of language used in books and on television. She found that together the *Little J & Big Cuz* book, *Where's Aaron?* and the television episodes, meaningfully engaged the children. The various resources linked to *Little J & Big Cuz* provided Keiryn with different learning strategies to use with the children based on stories they had come to love.

Once the childcare group had viewed all the episodes, they requested to rewatch their favourites. Keiryn observed that the children connected with the stories and stated that "everyone is related – *Little J & Big Cuz* model their own stories".

PREPARING FOR PRESCHOOL

Keiryn included *Little J & Big Cuz* in her education program to assist the children to make the transition to preschool. Keiryn thought that the television episodes subtly assisted with this preparation in several ways. She considered



Mural artwork at Yera Children's Service

the stories provided a good way to show the children how to interact with each other by talking and listening with care, respect and empathy.

Keiryn also noticed that when the episodes involved time in Ms Chen's classroom, the children would model some of the behaviours of the onscreen children, such as sitting up and crossing their legs. She liked the way the children paid attention when Ms Chen was teaching something formally. Keiryn also thought that the multi-age group in Ms Chen's class was similar to her own experiences of school, and would likely be experienced by the children she educates. The way the differences in ages of the children were approached in episodes such as 'Lucky undies' and 'Big plans' showed some ways in which children and teachers in multi-level classes can overcome concerns that a child might be 'too little'.

SUPPORTING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Social and emotional development is a large part of the overall early childhood program conducted at Yera Children's Service. The television series was integrated into the transition from play to lunchtime. That is, the children were settled down to 'quiet time' by having the 'special treat' of watching *Little J & Big Cuz*.

"Children would model some of the behaviours of the onscreen children, such as sitting up and crossing their legs."

“Messages in the episodes reinforced the learning on which she was working.”

Watching television programs is not a preferred way of educating children at Yera Children's Service; however, Keiryn found that the children loved the stories and would be highly engaged for the ten or so minutes of each episode. She observed that watching one program per day helped the children to transition to lunchtime, by sitting down, like Little J and Big Cuz and their friends do when in Ms Chen's class.

The children especially liked the character Old Dog; they found him funny and empathised with him. When Little J and Big Cuz were throwing a ball in 'Big plans' and Old Dog wanted to get involved, the children sympathised with Old Dog being left out, saying: "Old Dog sad".

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Keiryn was enthusiastic about using *Little J & Big Cuz* for many reasons including that the students could see respectful language being used. The episodes are expressed in a level of language the children can understand. The children heard all the main characters use phrases and expressions that were normal for them. In addition, Nanna helped the children with their learning.

Keiryn also found that messages in the episodes reinforced the learning on which she was working. For example, the use of the phrase "all you have to do is ask" supported the learning about how to request something rather than to stretch across and grab it.

AUTHENTIC CONNECTIONS

Keiryn felt that the stories were authentic to the children's experiences. The children connected with little things in the episodes, such as the graphics and settings in each episode. The backyard that leads out to the different environments was familiar for the children, as they too live in urban yet remote settings on the edge of the bush. The colour and design of Nanna's doona were recognisable to some, and all of these images provided a sense of authenticity to the stories of *Little J & Big Cuz*.

Keiryn thought that all the episodes were well written and the children would make comments about the familiarity of the voice-overs; for example, "She talks like my Mum", was a comment about the character of Nanna.

Keiryn noticed that the children liked how Nanna prepared food familiar to them, and that the food was not an idealised or romanticised view of the food eaten by Indigenous families. The children recognised food such as spaghetti bolognese and damper, as well as 'bush tucker'. One of Keiryn's Indigenous children wanted to catch a goanna to eat after watching the episode, 'Goanna ate my homework'.

Conclusion

Through the 13 episodes of *Little J & Big Cuz*, Keiryn was provided with authentic resources that the childcare children enjoyed and that resonated with their own experiences. In subtle and explicit ways *Little J & Big Cuz* modelled some of the behaviours Keiryn was deliberately trying to develop in the children, especially respectful and empathetic relationships with each other and adults.

The episodes provided Keiryn with many 'teachable moments'. She used the television program as the basis for discussions with the children after each episode, and these discussions linked directly to her planned education program. Keiryn found that in her professional setting, *Little J & Big Cuz* particularly supported the students social, emotional and language development – all important for preparing them to make the transition from childcare to preschool.

Keiryn and the children at Yera Children's Service thoroughly enjoyed the episodes and are looking forward to the second series of *Little J & Big Cuz*.

"In subtle and explicit ways *Little J & Big Cuz* modelled some of the behaviours Keiryn was deliberately trying to develop in the children."



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