

Karen Anderson Balnarring Pre-School Interview transcript

Link to the web page: <https://balnarringpreschool.org.au/philosophy/>

Link to the Boon Wurrung Foundation mentioned in the video:

<http://www.boonwurrung.org/>

Willum Warrain foundation:

<https://www.willumwarrain.org.au/>

Link to World Forum:

<https://worldforumfoundation.org/>

Link to the books mentioned in the video:

Bundjil: <https://www.yarnstrongsista.com/product/bundjil-creation-story/>

Barraeemal: <https://www.yarnstrongsista.com/product/barraeemal-story/>

KG: Today I am interviewing Karen Anderson who works at Balnarring Preschool. Balnarring Preschool has won a raft of awards for their incorporation of Indigenous perspectives but also, they won the Victorian Early Years Awards in 2019 for Creating Collaborative Community Partnerships and so I'm really delighted to have you here today Karen to talk about this. Can you tell us a little bit about your setting and its diversity?

KA: Balnarring Preschool is on the Mornington peninsula. It's a community preschool so it's run by a committee of management. We have two 4-year-old groups with 27 children in each group attending 15 hours a week, and two 3-year-old groups with twenty children in each group attending for 2 1/2 hours a week. We have a very rustic, I'd probably say, outdoor space that reflects the living and learning with nature philosophy that we've

embedded into the programme. That outdoor space has been really important this year through the pandemic of course 'cause that's where we've mostly done all our learning outside. It has large rocks, a fire pit, lots of natural elements, a great big sand area, mud pit, chooks, a vegetable garden, and lots of trees and bushes. So, it's a really special space and it's quite big. We also run a programme at the beach in the bush once a week for four to five hours that also obviously reflects that philosophy and part of that philosophy is honouring and celebrating first peoples' cultures.

KG: Wonderful. And so, when you are honouring and celebrating first peoples' cultures how has that worked with building community in your setting in particular and have you had any challenges or constraints? Especially with coronavirus you mentioned that you were outside a lot, but has that added any additional challenges?

KA: So, when you say community are you thinking the actual preschool community or you thinking in the term of first peoples' community?

KG: Your community in Balnarring and the community that the children and families work in and live in. How are the ways that you focus on building community in your setting?

KA: Relationships are extremely important with our preschool and never so much as this year through the pandemic is it been important for us to maintain those relationships. We have a really strong ethos of welcoming families into our programme at whatever capacity they have to do that, and we involve them in all aspects. Whether it's on the committee of management, whether it's coming in each day and helping the team, maybe people have got skills that they want to share with us so we're really welcoming all the time of everybody. Obviously, that was much harder this year. Many of my relationships this year were developed through car windows so quite different to normal and I think we're just really open with our families and community and we invite their opinion and contributions

to everything that we do. And as far as our, like with the nature programme, we involve them down at the beach in the bush so that they can experience that for themselves and also the children take home their learning. So, their parents are quite fascinated by what their children are learning and then they'll come and ask us for a little bit more. It's just a really welcoming environment from the first day they start. I would I think they'd all agree with me. And it's something that we nurture -that relationship. We nurture really well. This year we've done lots of visits to homes. You know I have been singing songs on people's front lawns and different things like that just to try to keep that connexion to the preschool for the families and build those relationships. It's just something that we pride ourselves in and we work on hard all the time.

KG: Yeah and that sort of constant contact has engaged the families and they're coming back and being alive in the centre and in the preschool?

KA: The teaching team are quite passionate about what they're doing so our enthusiasm and our striv(ing) to keep on learning more inspires the community to learn what we're doing and be involved in it.

KG: I notice on your website each of your groups has an Indigenous moniker or name. Can you talk a little bit about how you're incorporating language or Indigenous language into your teaching and learning and how the families have accepted that?

KA: So originally, we worked with Priscilla Reid-Lyons, the Indigenous consultant that worked with us to build the teams' understandings, knowledges, and confidence, I guess. And she worked with the children and their families as well for a few years and then we connected with the local elder of Boon Wurrung country N'Arwee't Carolyn Briggs. We've spent many, many hours with her listening to her and being guided by her. With the naming of the groups we asked her if we could have some names for those groups and we actually

had chosen names and then we spent about 3 hours with her and we changed what we were going to what we're going to call them after listening to her and her stories behind some of those words. So we've just slowly built up the vocabulary, I think, of what we can use within the service with respect and permission from N'Arwee't Carolyn Briggs and also Boon Wurrung elder Faye Stewart Muir, just as things come up we ring them or contact them and just say you know is there a word for this or that and they give us permission to use that. A lot of the language is connected with our nature programmes so when the children are out learning on the land, they are able to name a lot of the animals that they see in the Boon Wurrung names. And we also have made up quite a few songs that include some of the language. So, we've only got, I don't know, we may have 30 or 40 words that we have access to, but the children were here at least one of those words every day and they will use that language in their storytelling whenever they see a black Raven. They would never use that word anymore. It's always "Waa " so they've come to know those birds through a different lens and what we would have when we were growing up and then they take that language home to their families. It's really beautiful. I actually heard one child having quite a strong argument with his grandmother one year about an emu and she was saying "this is an emu" and he was saying "no, it's a Barraeema" and she said "No, it's an emu" and having this back and forth 'cause she didn't know what he was talking about. So, I guess the language has been really embraced by the children and they use it all the time probably in place of the English words now.

KG: That's fantastic, that's incredible. And the families have just adopted this and are continuing the practise?

KA: They think it's amazing. And they sing the songs all of the time, so they become quite a part of our programme and I think the children are ... just proud to know that they are

saying words from a really ancient culture that's still with us today. But it's you know... some of the oldest words in the world. So, they almost understand the significance of being able to speak those words.

KG: That's fantastic. I think that's wonderful that you're giving them another sort of perspective and tying that language to their learning. You've mentioned that you were working in cooperation with some local elders. Have you worked with any other partner organisations around sort of the incorporation of Indigenous language or in your teaching or your outdoor school and working with families?

KA: We have a local gathering place near us called Willum Warrain. We visit them, and they are certainly part of a festival that we run each year to celebrate and honour first peoples' cultures. I would say the partnership is growing there but their elders that we work with are probably they're our experts and they are the people that we will, that we go to, especially Carolyn Bridge. Our relationship with her is really strong and it's quite a reciprocal relationship and that she's given us some of her stories and asked the children to illustrate them. We've published two books now of her stories and we are currently doing the third one, so I think for us if that's the relationship that we worked on the most. It's not always easy to be able to access First People. They are super busy and pulled in many directions so we're really respectful of that.

KG: You are really creating your own resources aren't you with the stories and with the songs that you're creating as well in sort of in partnership which is fantastic. If you could share any wisdom or insight into your practises with other educators what would you like to share to anyone who came to your practise or if you had anything to say about your practise?

KA: I would say especially if you're talking about embedding first peoples' perspectives is that what you're thinking their first step would be for you personally to develop some knowledge about the history of the first peoples, and then for your team to do the same. And then from there once your knowledge grows and your understanding of what's happened historically then you can start to think well then what role have I got in presenting to young children the truth and building a society that respects those first custodians of the land and then walking together to create practise that celebrates them. You know the children are so excited to be learning about first peoples not just Boon Wurrung but from all across Australia, and that's what I would encourage all educators and teachers to do is to bring that into your programme so that it becomes a daily practise. It's not an add on, it's not just during reconciliation week or NAIDOC week. It's just something that happens every day just as if art and music and electricity would happen it would be just everywhere. And also, by doing that it's creating culturally safe environments for the families of those first peoples to come in and be part of your service and contribute to further knowledge of that culture.

KG: Apart from the books and songs that you guys have created, if someone was interested in incorporating more indigenous practise what are the steps that they should take?

KA: Exploring where you can get that knowledge from. So, whether it's through books, conversations, working with first peoples- but that will come with a cost so that's to be included in our budget. We have a budget that covers the cost of working with all different first peoples. I think immersing yourself personally, so it's almost like a personal commitment first that you're going to do this. Then you seek out "where can I go to learn more"? so I want to hear stories from all different people across Australia through music, through art, through Theatre, through books, through interviews there's like so much

available now through many different organisations. I think just immersing myself personally is what's helped to build my confidence and my commitment to continue this and grow in my service with the team that I work with and then beyond if I can like I am today. It takes a long time, it's not something that just happens it's you know it's been 8, 9, 10, maybe longer, years that I've been interested in this. And I'm still learning every day I learn something whether it's big or small that will impact on what I deliver to the children and their families.

KG: This leads beautifully into my next question. You talked about the past a bit and what you want to do for the future but what where do you see the programme going? Where do you see your development going, or the development of your team and the families and communities?

KA: Good question. For me personally I'm now part of the World Forum Education and Care Foundation and I'm global leader this year and as part of my global leader role I had to develop an advocacy project. I recognise that lots of teachers were looking for guidance from me of "how did I begin this type of practise" and how could I support them? I created a project that we've been working on all year and we meet once a month and I've just been inviting first people into this space to share with the participants their stories and there's been stories about intergenerational trauma, there has been stories from Torres Strait Island, and there's been stories about cultural awareness. That's my goal I guess is to support and help other teachers right across the education spectrum so from family day care to secondary school help build their confidence that they can bring it into their service and so that they can see that it's not just indigenous studies but it's actually woven through everything that you do in a day. That project has been really successful and will continue next year now, I think. I'm also part of the World Forum Foundation Indigenous Peoples'

Action Group. I'm meeting with indigenous peoples from across the world even though I'm not indigenous so that's a bit of an honour that I can be part of that and hear those stories from across the world and also strengthens my commitment that a lot of wrongdoing has happened in the world. And you know it's our role now to teach our children to change that and make it a better place for everybody. Within our service we just have a commitment that we will just keep growing. So, we've just redone our reconciliation action plan and added more actions to that. So, thinking a bit more broadly than we maybe would have before. As your knowledge deepens your thoughts around what the practise looks like expands and deepens as well so we all have a commitment personally and professionally to continue our learning and never think that we've done enough. One teacher is doing their PhD around, I can't remember the topic, but it's about first peoples. And the educators also all have got little commitments they just want to learn more about. Whether it's storytelling, whether it's about truth telling, whether it's about being involved in practises such as mindfulness or wellness practises that come from first peoples, we're just constantly doing that. I think because they're working with N'Arwee't so closely and we've got more books to write, or not write sorry, illustrate- that just keeps us in those conversations all the time and learning all the time. We just have a commitment that our learning will keep going.

KG: Wonderful, thank you so much for your time that's pretty much everything. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

KA: I was just thinking I should show you the books?

KG: Yes, please that would be delightful.

KA: This is Barraeemal which is about the emu. So, inside all the children that have been involved in illustrating- all their names are in there. And then there their journey is in there and that relates to the story. Then in the Bundjil one the children have actually created the

images in response to the text. We're really excited about that and also the Barraeemal one, 'cause you were talking about language before, it also has a page on it which is that the Boon Wurrung words and then the children of illustrated them so then this is in our resource for people to use in their schools or kindergartens.

KG: And these are available through your website?

KA: They are available through the kindergarten so they could contact us through our email, or they are also in several book shops. They're at the Koorie Heritage Trust and Yarnstrong Sister, and the Melbourne museum, and the Botanical Gardens.