

Dolls and Yarning

A Parental and Community Engagement (PaCE) Project

Geraldton Western Australia



PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The project involved Aboriginal parents and carers in a collaborative, community arts process, making dolls that reflected Aboriginal people's identity and culture. Creating hand crafted dolls made from recycled textiles, buttons, straw and natural materials.

During the doll making workshops participants were encouraged and supported to yarn about their own childhood, life, family and community experiences, reflecting on the importance of learning at home. As well as creating dolls, participant's educational stories were captured to form part of the Museum Exhibition which finalised the project.

Yarning sessions during the workshops included opportunities to share thoughts on:

- Early childhood development and school readiness
- The importance of education and sharing the responsibility for learning (at home and at school)
- Aboriginal ways of teaching and learning
- Values and strategies that can be shared between school, the family and community
- School, family and community partnerships and communication
- The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) and what this means

The year long project is now complete. It ran from December 2011—December 2012.

OBJECTIVES

- Increased understanding by parents of their role in providing adequate preparation of children prior to pre-school education and for the secondary years ahead
- Increased understanding by parents of the foundations of child development
- Enhanced engagement of parents with the school, through participation in the project, which requires collaboration on what messages will be included in the exhibition and the way they will be presented.
- Increased support for children's learning at home encouraged through doll making

KEY PARTNERSHIPS

- Geraldton Regional Community Education Centre (GRCEC)
- Geraldton (WA) Museum in all aspects of the Exhibition and Exhibition booklet
- Northampton PaCE participants
- Local Schools, including AEIO's
- Narrogin Noongar Doll Makers



PROJECT ASSESSMENT

This project exceeded the participation target of 15, achieving a regular attendance of 35 parents and carers from Geraldton and Northampton.

A total of 55 dolls were created throughout a series of 11 workshops. This also exceeded the anticipate numbers of dolls and workshops.

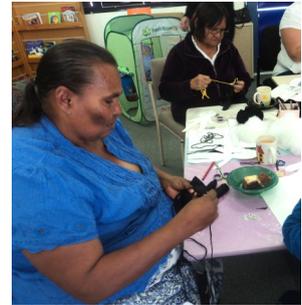
The main success was the visible increase in participants' confidence levels. This alone increased their capacity to engage.

The yarning topics allowed for healthy discussion around the importance of the parent/carer role in early learning and the way learning can be incorporated into everyday activities at home.



Proud Parent with Doll

The success of this project lay in its ability to use doll making as a platform for expression, discussion, networking, engagement and celebration. These dolls were not faceless or nameless; they represented real people who had family connections to the participants. As such they acted as conduits in participants remembering and sharing stories and learning.



Geraldton Workshop



Northampton Workshop

QUOTES FROM THE PARENTS AND CARERS:

'It was one of the best projects I've seen and been involved in for a long time'.

'I feel really proud looking at the book and these dolls'.

"The way they (GRCEC) ran it was great. Rose (Project Manager) was very supportive and the way Bianca (Artist) came across when teaching us was so good. I'll never forget that time with Rose. The YARNING WAS REALLY GOOD and I would love to have it back again'.

'I loved the project, loved it so much'. If I had the opportunity again I'd be making 1 or 2 dolls more'.

'It was such a proud moment when people recognised the work we had done and wanted to buy the dolls'.

**Parent quote displayed
on Exhibition Wall**

***"At home we sing ABC,
and other nursery rhymes..."***

FEEDBACK FROM THE PROJECT MANAGER AND PROVIDER (GRCEC):

The most effective activity in this project was using the dolls as the 'hook' and the doll making itself, both Jenny and Rose commented. *Using the participant's senses while delivering activities and educational messages was the key to this project*, Rose said.

It was surprising to see the learning take place in amongst the doll making activity. Learning became part of the discussion/yarning. *It's amazing how much talking flowed when they had a needle and cotton in their hands*, said Rose. This is certainly a practical and inclusive way of working with Aboriginal people.



Exhibition Dolls



Doll making workshop with whiteboard topics of engagement in education

Involving the local schools was a positive step for both participants and schools. Jenny stated: *its great the schools now see parents as having a role in the importance of education and Aboriginals being able to show they are valued in education.*

Jenny stated: *This experience has strengthened our relationships with other agencies and within the Indigenous community. One of the benefits was most notably the increased connections for GRCEC.*

And our relationship with DEEWR—***the way we work together in an open, honest, accessible manner is an excellent way to work.*** It creates opportunity to work in positive partnership.

It is clear the Provider choose the right person for the job (with a great support team). Rose truly did a tremendous job in organising, guiding, facilitating and implementing this project. This has been recognised throughout Geraldton and the wider community with people still talking about the project. Both Rose and Jenny were acknowledged for their work in receiving local NAIDOC awards.

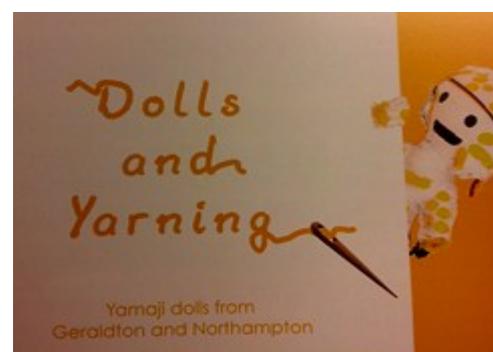
SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Whilst the project had many success there were some learning's along the way which GRCEC were able to accommodate. Jenny confirmed its important to be flexible, be prepared to adjust, make changes/be responsive to family and community needs. Being open to a different approach to manage any issues that arise throughout the project.

Rose indicated: ***it is important to have Aboriginal people involved in delivering the project and nurturing role modelling within the group, building confidence and Aboriginal leaders.***

Recommendations include:

- a dedicated arts/crafts space for Aboriginal parents and carers to meet and discuss parenting and education issues in a safe relaxed space.
- Volunteer parent/carer skills register so parents and schools can work together in the education of their children by parents coming into classrooms in curriculum areas, in which they feel comfortable.



Exhibition Booklet



Proud parent sharing her experience and benefits of involvement at the Exhibition opening

CONCLUSIONS

The project concluded with an official Exhibition Opening on 17 October 2012. The Opening and Exhibition were a resounding success with 95 people attending the Opening and some 6168 people visiting the Exhibition between 28 September—5 November 2012. **'THIS WAS WAY BEYOND WHAT WE HAD ENVISIONED'**, said Jenny Allen.

Feedback from the community confirmed the Exhibition displayed a real sense of joy and **pride**. Jenny stated: *'it was so rewarding to see so many community members and elders attend the Exhibition'*.

Rose indicated: *when participants seen their educational quotes on the Museums Exhibition wall, it brought back fond memories, connections to the dolls and their relevance to education and engagement.*

*"We played schools,
my sister was
always teacher..."*

On completion it was evident the transferable skills participants had learnt during the project were not only craft but educational. Rose commented: *these skills will always remain with the participants and have improved their connections to school, with the added benefits of promoting the positives of education and learning in the home environment.*

A highlight of the Exhibition was the 'Wall of Acknowledgement'. This concept included visitors comments of their education experience captured on paper dolls. At the end of the Exhibition a total of 311 paper dolls adorned the wall.

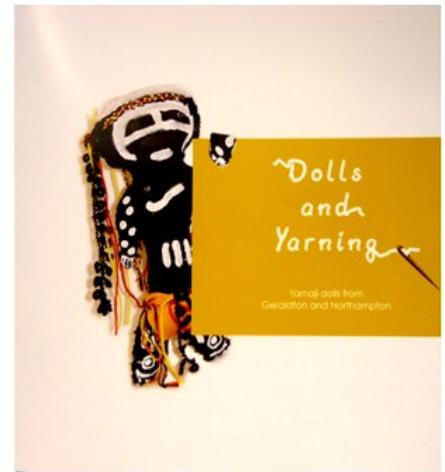
Rose expressed her delight in working with the WA Museum and acknowledged the professionalism they brought to the project.

The dolls project has created a stronger connection between the parent group in Northampton. The Northampton Project Coordinator said: *A real bond between the group has formed and **the biggest change I've witnessed is the 'I can't do' to the 'I can do' attitude.***

This project is a good example of an organisation willing to extend their ideas and include other key agencies for the benefit of the participants and the wider community.

In finalising the project every school in Geraldton and Northampton received a copy of the Dolls and Yarning Booklet accompanied by a letter encouraging them to invite a project participant into classes to show students how to make dolls. Whilst there are many aspects linked to sustainability this certainly demonstrates reaching into schools and encourages engagement.

The successes of this project will continue into the future. During my visit to the Midwest region in 2013 each and every agency, service and individuals I had contact with **'raved'** about the dolls project. They spoke so highly of the project, the concept, the staff delivering the project and the Exhibition. Amongst the community it is so well acknowledged and they are so very proud of what the project achieved.



Exhibition Booklet



Wall of Acknowledgement



Dolls show cased at the Exhibition