
Chapter 8

Self-Determining Support for Indigenous Children in Australia: The Bubup Wilam case study

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Introduction

Bubup Wilam, meaning ‘Children’s Place’ in Woiwurrung language (the Indigenous Australian language spoken by the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation¹), is the name of an Aboriginal Child and Family Centre in Melbourne, Australia. Bubup Wilam supports the education, health and wellbeing of about 100 Aboriginal children each year, aged 6 months to 6 years, and their families, many of whom face challenges and complexities in their everyday lives. The centre emphasises a strength-based approach to learning and wellbeing that promotes high expectations and supports the self-determination and aspirations of the children and families it works with and learns from.

Bubup Wilam ensures that Aboriginal identity is embraced, and the children and families have a strong sense of who they are, where they come from, and to whom they belong. Using both Aboriginal and mainstream pedagogical approaches, Bubup Wilam supports children to be strong in ‘both ways’ – strong in their Aboriginality and strong in mainstream skills and knowledge – and thus well prepared for life beyond Bubup Wilam.

This chapter outlines the practices used by Bubup Wilam to build a place for Aboriginal children where they can grow strong, make choices and develop relationships. The rights-based principles which guide this work will be explained and illustrated through examples taken from the work with the children themselves. These rights include: the right to self-determination; the right to grow in culture; the right to know who you are; the right to be calm; the right to speak, be heard and understood; and the right to be strong.

Building strengths

Longstanding, historical transgenerational trauma and ongoing institutional racism within Australia increase the likelihood that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families deal with complex trauma and vulnerabilities (SCRGSP 2016). These include issues such as family violence, suicide and self-harm, child protection notifications, children in out-of-home care, housing crises, incarceration, drug and alcohol challenges, and unemployment.

The Australian government is struggling to address the life disparities or ‘gap’ between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, referencing Indigenous children as ‘the most vulnerable group of children in Australia’ (COAG 2009). Data from the Australian Early Development Census² also reveals that ‘Indigenous children in 2015 were

¹ The Kulin Nation consists of five language groups and are the traditional owners in the Port Phillip region of South Central Victoria, Australia.

² The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is a nationwide data collection of early childhood development across five developmental domains at the time children commence their first year of full-time school. (Results of ‘developmentally vulnerable’ are those who measure in the lowest 10 per cent.) See www.aedc.gov.au/about-the-aedc.

twice as likely as non-Indigenous children to be developmentally vulnerable in one or more social, health and educational domains, and up to four times more likely to record difficulties in the areas of language and cognition' (DET 2016).

While the children and families with whom we work face many significant challenges, the moment they walk through Bubup Wilam door we see them as strong and resilient. Challenges are addressed through a strengths-based lens, where the aim is to work through the trauma, not be defined by it. This allows the strength of children and families to shine.

Bubup Wilam operates from a philosophy of Aboriginal community control, decision making and self-determination through employing an Aboriginal CEO, Aboriginal staff and an Aboriginal board of management. Aboriginal self-determination serves as the heartbeat of our practice and is evident in all that we do. Bubup Wilam's curriculum states that self-identity, self-esteem, self-belief and self-regulation all underpin the bigger self of self-determination.

Self-agency

Young Aboriginal children and their families are the key stakeholders at Bubup Wilam, and it is their involvement in making their own choices and setting their own goals which are seen as the indicators of success. Martin (2017) explains that the voices of young Indigenous children and their families in the early childhood education space are often displaced by a narrative of deficits, not achievements, where inadequate development, homes or parental skills are seen to predominate. The things children and parents see as important or special about early education are often not recognised.

Fleer (2004) explains that 'families having a voice' means a dismissal of Aboriginal stereotyping, an enabling of agency and sense of power as involved and respected knowledge-holders, and the building of trust through collaborative processes. Children and families have a strong voice at Bubup Wilam and are positioned as holders of diverse and valuable knowledge. This approach aligns with international evidence (Preston *et al.* 2011), incorporating strategies that privilege Aboriginal pedagogy, promote language and culture, provide qualified Aboriginal teachers, and empower parents and community to participate in governance and everyday activities.

An additional core element of Bubup Wilam's approach is a focus on social justice, and advocacy for the rights of Aboriginal children and their families. Hard, Press and Gibson (2013) argue that 'intentional' early childhood leadership³ can generate socially just educational spaces that redress inequality. The Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal leadership at Bubup Wilam melds two worlds of knowledge to 'embrace diversity and actively confront inequality in order to change the traditional constructions on education and afford access and opportunity' (Hard, Press & Gibson 2013).

³ Hard, Press and Gibson (2013) describe 'intentional leaders' as courageous decision makers, who work collaboratively towards collective goals, and challenge assumed knowledge, power relations and practices of oppression.

Building relationships

Bubup Wilam has developed an innovative award-winning⁴ training model to deliver the Certificate III and Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care on site. The training is designed and delivered by Aboriginal people who have worked through their own trauma, putting them in a unique position to support the healing journey of others. The training also aims to build workforce participation and sustainability, and to develop the career goals of Aboriginal people.

This approach is not task-focused but is responsive to needs and building relationships. Time is made available to get to know people and to respond to any situation which may arise, offer a non-judgmental safe space and be respected with honest responses. Parents may want to talk about their children; have help with planning quality time with their children, especially if they have little experience of how to be with them or play with them; or challenge and help a family to make changes that will benefit their children. Bubup Wilam also works hard to build relationships with government departments and can advocate for parents at risk of losing their children.

Having rights

Having 'rights' may be something non-Indigenous peoples can take for granted. Our 'rights-based' principles are presented below, and while not the sum of our work, give insight into the values that underpin our work. A holistic approach ensures the principles do not act in isolation; rather they support interrelated ways of learning and connecting, and 'facilitate the goal of wholeness to which Indigenous knowledge aspires' (Battiste 2002).

Right to self-determination

Self-determination is about ensuring the children's rights to be strong in identity, to be in control of themselves and to be key leaders in the organisation and as future Elders and leaders of their communities. Bubup Wilam is supporting children and families to advocate for equity, social justice and their distinctive rights as the First Peoples of Australia. Changing the future for our children means gifting them with the knowledge and skills for making their own choices and striving to realise their own dreams. Instilling our children with a belief in self-determination helps them grow up knowing that they can do anything, voice their needs and access things as others do.

'These children get it'

Aboriginal advocate Clinton Pryor, known as the Spirit Walker, recently visited the centre while walking in protest of the injustices faced by Indigenous Australians. His long Walk for Justice began in Perth, Western Australia, and he was heading to Australia's capital city, Canberra, to speak to the Prime Minister, stopping off at Aboriginal communities and gathering additional messages along the way.

The children were very excited to meet Clinton as they had been following his journey; and as advocates for their people and themselves, they understood what he was walking for.

⁴ Bubup Wilam's training model was awarded the best in the state of Victoria and one of the top three in the national Australian Medium Employer of the Year category in 2016.

The children drew pictures and gave messages to Clinton to take with him, including: 'Our Elders should be the boss of the country', 'Don't put our people in jail', and 'Tell the truth'.

One of our children drew a picture of people behind bars and outside of this she drew police. She showed her picture to Clinton and quite forcefully told him to tell the Prime Minister that he needed to stop putting our people in jail; and that the Elders were the boss of the country, not him. 'Our Elders know what our country needs', she said.

Clinton was amazed at all he heard and said to the staff: 'These children get it.' In response to the children's strength and advocacy, he presented them with a boomerang that he had made in his country, along with a pair of shoes he had walked in. He told the children that his Elders were teaching him about how hard things were and that we always need to respect the hard fight of our Elders and continue the fight for them. The children then invited Clinton to march with them outside the building. He got out his Spirit Walker banner and joined the children in an impromptu demonstration march, shouting out 'It always was, always will be, Aboriginal Land!'

Right to grow in culture

The Bubup Wilam model does not teach but surrounds the children with their culture. Opportunities are constantly provided for children to co-create environments and systems of care that nurture culture as an experience, an aspiration, an identity and a way of communicating about how to respectfully engage with the world.

'Culture sings to them, and it shows them their heartbeat'

All the children participate in the daily ritual of the flag-raising ceremony and take turns to collect the flag from a display box, carrying it over their shoulders ensuring it doesn't touch the ground. Another group of children call the community at Bubup Wilam to the ceremony by chanting 'Flag raising, flag raising', while playing clapsticks. Even children who are not yet verbal hum and attempt to say the words as they join in the chant, and then join in the 'Acknowledgement of Country' that follows, to show our respect to the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land.

Recently visitors came to tour Bubup Wilam and a 3-year-old child who is relatively new to the service wanted to support staff in taking the tour. When she went past the flag display box, she noticed that the flag had not yet been raised. She quickly grabbed the flag, put it around her neck without it touching the ground and grabbed a pair of clapsticks. She then requested that the door to the kindergarten room be opened for her and walked in on her own, playing her clapsticks and chanting 'Flag raising, flag raising'. She then acknowledged country for everyone. This is so important for her as she lives with her non-Aboriginal father and he brings her to Bubup Wilam for her connection to her identity. He is so proud of her and how much she is teaching him about who she is.

On another occasion a Wiradjuri artist made and presented the children with clapsticks. He stayed for the morning, teaching them to use them, beginning a learning journey of how clapsticks work and where they are from. The children were shown how to get different sounds out of the clapsticks and how to hold them. Culture is an engagement of all the senses. The beautiful smell of the wooden clapsticks stayed on their hands the entire day. After he left, the children spoke about having to respect these clapsticks 'as they are a special gift from Wiradjuri country'. We found a special basket to put them in. The children were then teaching each other about how to respect and use them, remembering they sound like their heart beat, and that you need to hold them softly, so they can make the best sound.

Playing clapsticks is an opportunity for the children, and the Aboriginal artist who guided them, to live and revitalise culture.

Everyone also takes part in the weekly smoking ceremony, which brings strength and healing to the children. This takes place outside in our sacred space, where there is a permanent fire-pit area. Eucalyptus leaves are collected and placed in the fire-pit, where they are lit to create smoke. The children then move around the fire, bringing the smoke into themselves by drawing it up with their arms. A fire is also often lit outside for both warmth and cooking. The fire is calming and nurturing for the children and it is important that they know how to be safe around fire as it is a part of their cultural life.

Being on country is also an important part of a child's right to grow in culture, as it ensures children have a direct opportunity to learn about respecting the country they are on and their custodianship rights and responsibilities to look after it. Bubup Wilam's 'Connection to Country' program enables the 3- and 4-year-old children to be in a bushland space for five hours each week to explore and build their own unique relationship with Aboriginal land. They learn about the foods and medicines that grow in the bush and are free to explore and connect with the land, test themselves and take risks.

'Looking after the land and each other'

The children have been learning about Bunjil, the Wedge-Tailed Eagle, who is the spirit creator of Wurundjeri land, the land the children are on. They have been creating clay sculptures, drawing, reading stories and acting them out.

When out on country the children remind each other when needed: 'You are not respecting Bunjil because you are not respecting the land'; 'we need to do the right thing on this land for the Wurundjeri people and for Bunjil'; 'remember Bunjil is watching us to make sure we are looking after the land.'

We have one child who is Wurundjeri, and when one of the children dropped rubbish on the ground during lunch another child got up and went over to them and said: 'You are not respecting J's country. This is her land, you know, and you are not looking after it for her.'

On another visit the children also discussed not bringing anything back from country because it belongs to that land and should not be removed. On returning to Bubup Wilam that day, one of the children went outside and grabbed a large stick that was on the ground. She painted it red, yellow and black like the Aboriginal flag. She then told her educator: 'This is a stick from Wurundjeri country. It needs to stay here at Bubup Wilam because it belongs to this land and can never be taken away.' We hung the stick up in our foyer with her words beside it to respect her and showcase her knowledge and respect for country.

Families are owners and participants in all of that Bubup Wilam offers, and are deeply engaged in the service, including as teachers of culture.

A grandfather of one of the children taught the children a song for their graduation ceremony to celebrate their achievements at the centre before they leave to start school. The children could barely wait for him to come and perform with them; and his granddaughter said: 'This is my poppy' and proudly showed him off to the other children. The children recorded the song in a studio and were proud to know that the song was originally written for some of their parents when they were young. The parents became very emotional on receiving their children's recording and seeing their pride as they sang these songs.

Bubup Wilam's philosophy of instilling and strengthening children's strong sense of Aboriginal identity is about knowing who you are, who you are connected to, and who your mob is. Your mob is the land you are from, and the group or nation of people of that land which you are connected to by ancestry. Every child has a wooden block with their name and the name of their mob on it, which they carry from room to room. Each room is named after one of the five Kulin nations⁵ that are closest to the centre. An Indigenous language map of Australia, with a picture of each child, is in every room and used as a teaching tool. Outside the rooms for all to see is a large map with photographs of all the children and string connecting them to where they are from. Children learn the colour of their mob, and together with their family can see the connections our Aboriginal children have across Australia.



'Pride in who she is and how she is connected'

The children are very proud of who they are and who they are connected to. On Remembrance Day we spoke to the children about the Aboriginal soldiers who fought for us in the First World War. One child's great-great-great grandfather fought in the war and she had great pride in learning about this and learning about him. As a part of her learning she painted an amazing picture that showed him and his friends all holding Aboriginal flags to respect him as an Aboriginal man, and then underneath painted five poppies that showed his respect for the non-Aboriginal soldiers who fought with him.

⁵ The five language groups of the Kulin Nations are Boonwurrung (Boon-wur-rung), Dja Dja Wurrung (Jar-Jar-Wur-rung), Taungurung (Tung-ger-rung), Wathaurung (Wath-er-rung), and Woiwurrung (Woy-wur-rung) commonly known as Wurundjeri.

The picture was a remarkable depiction of solidarity and showed her pride in who she is and how she is connected. She proudly stated that her great-great-great grandfather was the same mob as her and he fought for their land. This developed an even deeper connection for her and the struggle for her people's rights – a legacy that she already talks about continuing.

Right to be calm

It can be taken for granted by many people in mainstream society that feeling calm, or returning to a state of calm after stress, is a common experience. Children living with ongoing trauma and chaos cannot simply self-regulate as their brain's normal state is one of alarm (Perry 2006). At Bubup Wilam, we purposefully create a state of calm to reduce stress, so children can be available to learn new things, and develop an embodied memory of what it feels like to be calm and access this bodily memory when life becomes chaotic. Providing calm relational experiences aims to build new neural pathways that regulate emotions in a healthy way (Siegal 2012), which is especially important during the first 1,000 days of life during early brain development (Schore 2015; Shonkoff 2004).

This is more than just a matter of providing an environment to be calm; it is a right to experience what it is like to be calm that underpins our work. We teach children to self-regulate, broaden their emotional range and make their own choices on how to best nurture themselves in an environment that is not overstimulating or overwhelming.

'She is learning empathy and self-regulation'

It took a long time for one of our children to transition from the Boon Wurrung (infant) room into the next room when she turned two. We wondered if this was due to the connection she had with her educators or whether it was due to her comfort in being with the younger children. As an infant she seemed to understand when other babies became distressed, alerting an educator if they were not getting to a baby who needed them quickly enough.

Now she is 4 years old and still likes to go back to the Boon Wurrung room, either for a short visit or for the day. She is given the freedom to go there and care for the babies when she needs to. She was visiting the room when visitors took a recent tour of Bubup Wilam, and when asked what she was doing in the infants' room she stated: 'Oh I'm working in here today, and they need my help. I'm working in the babies' room today.' She was sitting with a baby, feeding them at the time.

Bubup Wilam supported this little girl to develop at her own pace, and her empathy for others provided her with a sense of belonging and purpose. She found pride in being allowed to have some responsibility and being given choices. The babies' room offered her a place where she found nurturing, learnt to read herself and know the days when she felt she needed some quiet time, aiding her own capacity for self-regulation.

The rooms at Bubup Wilam are deliberately decorated with muted colours and minimal stimuli to help establish calm and self-regulating processes. Additionally, a high staff-to-child ratio gives educators time to help children learn to slow down and support children to work through situations and emotions. The children are learning that emotions are not bad things and that it is okay not to be happy sometimes, as well as learning that there are different ways to deal with disappointment.

When a child becomes overwhelmed and can no longer self-regulate their emotions, educators step in and support the child to take deep breaths, offer physical comfort by rubbing their arms or legs (or cuddling younger children), and speak softly to let them know

they are safe and that we will remain with them until they feel calm. If they are physically lashing out, we carry them safely to our Zen room, where adults remain with the child and talk them through the self-regulation process. Once calm, we talk to the child and together develop strategies for the future and remind them of these strategies in their everyday play.

Right to speak, be heard and understood

Some children at Bubup Wilam experience expressive and receptive language challenges and have been assessed by mainstream professionals as having language or developmental delays. This led us to question how such standardised thinking was applied to all children and if it was truly representative of the way Aboriginal children communicate. While a speech therapist is on site to support children with serious language delays, the therapist also works collaboratively with educators and families to maintain the right of children to communicate in their own way. Western communication relies largely on verbal communication, which is different to Aboriginal ways of communicating and learning (Yunkaporta 2009) and does not capture the nuanced ways our children express themselves and effectively get their messages across.

This led Bubup Wilam to develop their own 'Ethics of Communication' program. This respects Aboriginal children's right to be heard, rather than simply measured, and supports them to find their own voice and gain the communication skills needed to help them transition to school. This involves a child's right to communicate: the right to speak, the right to be heard, the right to be understood and the right to understand.

Children need to feel safe, secure and supported and to know that adults will respond to their needs when they request it. This applies especially to children who carry trauma or live in chaotic environments. When babies cry, for example, they are responded to immediately and priority is given to enabling their feelings to be understood. A staff member will sit with them and support them in finding their own way back to feeling calm.

Art as a form of communication is an integral part of the Bubup Wilam program. Children can express themselves and their story through their art, and their understanding becomes visible to others.

'Telling her story through art'

A 6-year-old child struggled to communicate verbally and required extensive speech intervention. Due to this, her cognitive abilities were often underestimated. Through art she found a medium to express her knowing about the world, and to showcase her incredible and well-developed conceptual understanding.

After the children had been engaging in a long-term learning encounter regarding the invasion of Australia by Captain Cook in 1788, this child wanted to do a drawing. She was having an emotional day and things were overwhelming for her. Art for her was not only a form of communication but also a way for her to self-regulate her emotions. We took her into a quiet space on her own and she was given a large canvas to use to express herself.

Over time she worked on her painting when she needed time out and didn't give up until it was completed. She began by drawing a large circle and inside drew many shapes which then became Aboriginal flags. She drew two horizontal lines across from each side of the circle to make the whole picture an Aboriginal flag. On the right she drew another shape with dotted lines leading to the larger circle; and on the left she wrote 'Aboriginal Land'.



She explained her art work to her educators. The circle in the middle represents her world. The flags represent the many mobs in Australia, all under one flag as it is all Aboriginal land. The shape in the right corner was the *Endeavour* (Captain Cook's ship), and the dotted lines represent his voyage to Australia and back to England. In the bottom of the ship are children – they are the children he had stolen from their families.

She said: 'Captain Cook came to steal our land and he stole the children and took them away. But he really didn't steal our land because it's still here and it's still ours – it always was and always will be Aboriginal Land!'

Right to be strong

Mainstream data and narratives about Aboriginal peoples are largely deficit and focus on what is lacking and fails, rather than focusing on the strengths and values that Aboriginal people bring to society (see Fogarty *et al.* 2018). Bubup Wilam is a strong, visible face of the Aboriginal community. It is not entrenched in a negative welfare context; it is situated in community, in a beautiful building architecturally designed to meet the needs of the centre.

When children have strong culture, and when they are nurtured and free to feel calm, they have a strong base from which to learn. Children are supported to define and protect their own boundaries and develop positive ways of being in relationships that can carry them into adulthood, where they do not need to please others at the expense of their own rights, or demand things of others that disrespects the rights of others.

Children leave Bubup Wilam knowing who they are and who they are connected to, and proud and strong in their Aboriginal identity. Our transition to the primary school program, in partnership with families and local schools, is about building skills and self-belief in children that supports them to be ready for school. School principals and teachers report back to Bubup Wilam that our children are excelling at school, that they are starting school on a par with, or ahead of, their peers, and that they are leaders, innovators and keen, self-directed learners.

‘Strong Aboriginal children with strong voices for change’

One of our children, who now attends a Catholic school, didn’t think it was right that the school prayed to God everyday but didn’t know how to acknowledge the country they were on. He took it upon himself to facilitate an Acknowledgement to Country every day in the classroom before prayer. He also gets up every Monday in front of the whole school and acknowledges country at the full school assembly. This child is 5 years old!

His mother also shared that when he was saying his prayers at bedtime with her he prayed for his mob. He told his mum he wanted to use the money he had saved in his money box to ‘feed the mob’ who were living on the street in Fitzroy, a suburb of Melbourne. He then went and got donations of food and he ran a barbecue on the street for the Aboriginal people, so they could have a feed. He also e living on the street in Fitzroy, by himself.

A child who has just started her first year at school came back to visit Bubup Wilam. She told us, ‘My school is alright but I miss Bubup Wilam. Don’t worry though, I only have to just go to school for a few years and then I will come back to Bubup and be a teacher to teach the kids how to look after country!’

Another of our children, now at school, was worried about a homeless person she saw in the street, and so went and told the school principal that something needed to be done about the issue of people being homeless. Together they ran a project to support the cause. She is a quiet child with a strong voice who knows she has a right to be heard and respects the rights of others. Again, this was a child of only 5 years of age!

Transferable learning

Bubup Wilam delivers an Aboriginal cultural model of early years learning focused on supporting children’s leadership and capacities through safe spaces, child-led practice, engaging community members and operating in a culture of expectation for excellence and the right to be strong. Bubup Wilam’s knowledge of cultural ways of knowing can empower practitioners, children and families to break cycles of trauma and do more than survive, but thrive. The rights-based principles of practice discussed in this chapter offer transferable learnings based on children and families’ right to:

- Self-determination – Children are self-determining contributors and seekers of knowledge who can make decisions in their own way.
- Grow in culture – Culture protects children when they can learn in culture, engage in what their culture means and understand how it connects people and place in positive ways.
- Know who you are – Supporting a child’s identity, enabling them to know who they are and who they are connected to, empowers them to move forward as a strong and proud person.
- Be calm – Slowing down and being calm can help create an environment free of stress and chaos, where children can take control and learn to self-regulate their emotions
- Speak, be heard and understood – Practise an ethics of communication with children that ensures an educator or practitioner has asked: ‘Did I give this child an opportunity to convey a story in their own way, did I hear and understand

their story in the way they intended, and when I speak did I wait to ensure they understood?’

- Be strong – Every child is seen as a strong child who is not defined by the challenges they face and is capable of building and learning skills. Every parent can be supported to parent well and be supported to ask for help if challenges arise, through the building of honest relationships. With access to quality and contextually appropriate training, every educator or practitioner can build skills to model strong practices and relationships.

Above all, the key to the success of Bubup Wilam is the strong voice and leadership of Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal community of Bubup Wilam is truly committed to delivering a place for children within which they can thrive, paving the way for a different future for this generation of Aboriginal children, and for the generations to come.

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