



## Engaging Families in Early Education | Digital stories

Life in poverty contexts can move with lightning speed. One small set back can quickly cascade and destabilise all that families have built. Professionals who work for and with families experiencing adversity require specialised skills. They need to need to pay careful attention to each family to understand what keeps them safe and strong in precarious circumstances. Deep listening and trust building are key components of this skill set. These digital stories have been co-produced with the people in the stories - families who have experienced significant adversities and the professionals who build deep partnerships with them. The process of developing these digital stories is as important as their content. This brief offers insights into the approach we took to making these stories as well as some ideas about how they can be used in teacher training and professional development. The digital stories themselves are deliberately open ended so they can be adapted to suit many training purposes.

### **Partnering with families – collaborative non-extractive approaches:**

There is evidence that strong relationships between educators and families in early childhood settings strengthens children's engagement with education (Lewis et al, 2023; Hadley et al, 2021). However, when educators have poor understandings of family contexts and experiences, they may default to deficit approaches or withdraw from relationship building. Deficit approaches often take the form of professionals telling families what they think the family needs to know, while withdrawing from relationship building means delivering a one-size-fits-all service. Partnership and strength-based approaches require getting to know families and opening channels of communication that deepen over time. These digital stories are products of such relationships and can be used to build the capacity of the workforce to engage with the strengths in families.

Narratives from life are powerful tools for reflection in professional training and for changing organisational practices so they are aligned with the lived experiences of people they wish to serve. Research and evaluation has long been interested in people's lived experiences as part of the evidence needed to develop effective systems and responses. However, traditional evidence production methods have relied on extractive techniques such as outcome measurement surveys or qualitative interviews where researchers guide participants through questions they deem to be important. Indigenous scholars Tuck and Guishard (2014:812) note the problems of this approach

*"the stories that are considered most compelling, considered most authentic in social science research are stories of pain and humiliation. Reporting on that pain with detailed qualitative data and in people's "real voices" is supposed to yield needed material or political resources; this is the prominent but unreliable theory of change in the academy."*

In contrast, anticolonial/antipoverty/justice approaches to evidence question *Who gets to know? Who gets known? Where is knowledge kept, and kept legitimated? What knowledge is desirable? Who profits? Who loses/ pays/gives something away? Who is coerced, empowered, appointed to give away knowledge?* In the making of these digital stories, we have been attentive to these questions. We worked with documentary filmmakers experienced in non-extractive co-production methods to develop stories palatable and meaningful to the people telling the stories. Non-extractive documentary making

is as new as non-extractive research methods and there was much to learn. Engaging participants as co-producers of knowledge takes time. All participants in the research have had many experiences of having their knowledge, and ways of being, disrespected. Many people have developed 'scripts' to guard against intrusion while meeting the requirements that enable them to access the most basic of resources. Inviting people to share their stories in non-extractive ways requires working with these past experiences and building people's confidence in the capacity of researchers/professionals for deep listening.

The Engaging Families research team worked from outside in, starting with educators and moving to families once trust was built at the service level. We used ongoing iterative methods that began with asking families broad questions about children and their experiences of early childhood education and care. Through an ongoing iterative process, we reflected back on the interview with participants to open a broader discussion about what educators and policy makers would benefit from understanding. We then invited participants to create digital stories for teacher education and to influence policy making. This was with the caveat that they could withdraw permission at any time and, most importantly, at the end of a co-editing process. Sometimes, it took several years of engagement to arrive at consent for the digital story to be made available. For one digital story, the participant agreed for their digital story to be used for several purposes but not to be publicly available. In other cases, people agreed to have their story used but told by others, namely told from the perspective of their child's trusted educator.

The content of these films does not seem sensitive. By engaging in a process that embraces the right of participants to control their information, people have told stories about their strengths. They offer insights into what is safe to say and therefore to ask, how we understand strengths when they are not immediately obvious to us, what children may know that is not immediately obvious, and then consider how we can use this knowledge in our teaching.

## How to use these stories

In this brief, we offer some background to each story, some ideas about how it could be used to provoke reflection and some links to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). However, the stories are multidimensional, and educators may see many themes in these stories beyond our suggestions. We encourage educators to use these stories in their own way for their own purposes.

All digital stories have two versions – a version with captions and one without.

## Family stories

### Cultural practices and embedded values | Origami story

#### Description

In Japan, children are celebrated on 5 May with a public holiday, Children's day, *Kodomo no Hi*. In this digital story, Kimi (pseudonym) shares her joy of being invited into her child's preschool on Children's Day to share her culture with the children. She chose a traditional activity – origami - which requires significant careful attention from children and detailed precision at each step. These are celebrated values in Japanese culture.

#### Links to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)

Principles:

- Respect for diversity

- Continuity of learning and transitions
- Culturally responsive curriculum

## The settling nature of bees | Working with funds of knowledge

This film has some restrictions on its use, please contact research team

### Description

This digital story features parents talking about their experiences of growing up with food insecurity and how gardening and growing their own food is value that has been passed through the generations. The two parents are from different cultural backgrounds (Aboriginal/Islander for one and Vietnamese for the other) but this focus on cultivating food connects them. They talk about the practice of harmony day which calls on their children to select a 'culture to be' and how they manage this schooling practice which has little resonance in their family. The mother, Lisa, speaks about her daughter Lily's reticence to engage in early childhood education and how their preschool incorporated a beehive and experiences with gardening to build connections between home and the preschool.

### Links to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)

Principles:

- Respect for diversity
- Continuity of learning and transitions
- Culturally responsive curriculum

## Experiences of early education | Somali Families

### Description

This digital story is about families who are unfamiliar with preschool education. These families are refugees and have experienced extreme shortages and trauma prior to arriving in Australia. They face many structural barriers as they adjust to life here. Their local community is among the most economically challenged communities in Australia. They found a sense of belonging in a small not-for-profit preschool (kindy) in their local area where Somali inclusion staff were employed. In this digital story, two Somali educators and a Somali parent talk about the experiences with education in their community.

### Links to the EYLF

Principles:

- Respect for diversity
- Partnerships
- Equity, inclusion and high expectations

Practices:

- Holistic, integrated and interconnected approaches
- Cultural responsiveness

## Securing affordable housing | Somali families

### Description

This digital story is about Somali refugee families living in Brisbane. These include families who have experienced extreme shortages and trauma prior to arriving in Australia and who face many structural barriers as they adjust to life here. The setting is a small not-for-profit preschool (kindy). Experiences of poverty in the local community are high. Children who attend the service come from culturally and linguistically diverse families, including families from Somalia. In this digital story, two Somali educators and a Somali parent talk about some of the housing challenges Somali families face in Australia.

### Links to the EYLF

Principles:

- Respect for diversity
- Partnerships
- Equity, inclusion and high expectations

Practices:

- Holistic, integrated and interconnected approaches
- Cultural responsiveness

## Disability and inclusion | Somali families

### Description

This digital story is about Somali refugee families attending a small not-for-profit preschool (kindy) in Brisbane. Their local community has few economic resources and is among the poorest in Australia. Children who attend the service come from culturally and linguistically diverse families, including families from Somalia. In the digital story two Somali educators talk about the importance of being culturally responsive - being respectful of a family's beliefs and cultural practices, taking time to build trust before starting to introduce the family to early intervention.

### Links to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)

Principles:

- Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
- Respect for diversity
- Equity, inclusion and high expectations

Practices:

- Responsiveness to children
- Cultural responsiveness

## Educator stories

## Respecting faiths | Jackie

### Description

The setting for this digital story is a not-for-profit preschool that is licensed for 40 children a day. The preschool is situated in a richly diverse community in the outer suburbs of a major Australian city. Families who attend the service come from culturally and linguistically varied backgrounds, including First Nations families and families who have newly migrated to Australia. The area where the preschool is located is also among the most disadvantaged communities in Australia. Jackie, the director, shares aspects of her own funds of knowledge with the children and respectfully engages with children, families, and staff, to build her knowledge. She talks about tuning into children's religious knowledge and what happened when she did.

### Links to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)

Principles:

- Respect for diversity
- Continuity of learning and transitions
- Culturally responsive curriculum

## Paula | Recognising different communication styles

### Description

This digital story is focussed on the importance of attending to the micro interactions that are part of children's communication repertoires. The story is told by Paula who has many years of experience working with families and children in high poverty contexts. She relates some stories from her setting which is a 40 place not-for-profit preschool situated in a richly diverse community in the outer suburbs of a major Australian city.

### Links to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)

Principles:

- Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
- Respect for diversity
- Equity, inclusion and high expectations

Practices:

- Responsiveness to children
- Cultural responsiveness

## Paula | Sharing culture

### Description

In this digital story, Paula, a Wiradjuri educator, talks about the importance of making a child's culture visible in her setting and how this enables children's sense of belonging and learning. Paula shares her experience of not knowing about her own cultural background growing up and how this meant she

struggled for a sense of belonging. She suggests that when educators can bring their culture to work, relationships between staff open up to become richer and more reciprocal.

### **Links to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)**

Principles:

- Equity, inclusion and high expectations
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives

Practices:

- Cultural responsiveness

## **Nadine | Inclusion and neurodiversity**

### **Description**

In this story, Nadine, a Family Day Care Educator, shares her experience of working with a young child with additional needs and how this changed her practice. When the child began at her service, Nadine noticed he was not meeting all the milestones and she describes her journey of working with him and his family. She recounts the strategies that she used to raise her concerns with the child's carers and how she needed to critically reflect on her own programming to ensure she was meeting the needs of all the children. This included designing the learning environment to support children's self-regulation of emotions and behaviour.

### **Links to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)**

Principles:

- Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
- Respect for diversity
- Equity, inclusion and high expectations
- Critical reflection and professional learning

Practices:

- Responsiveness to children
- Cultural responsiveness
- Learning environments