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Towards quality education: A 'learning for school' program developed from the foundation of the family's culture

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Across cultures, young children learn primarily within their family, with the family's culture positioning the values, language and purpose of children's learning toward the family's goals. Quality education begins within families. Children's learning within their families is critical to their educational success at school entry age. Naturally, Western schooling is based on young children's experiences within the culture of Western families. With the spread of Western education across nations, a global problem for families of non-Western cultures has emerged regarding how adult family members can prepare their young children to learn in the Western culture of school while retaining and enhancing their family-centred learning.

This paper offers original insights from research into a local solution to this global problem. It discusses a 'learning for school' program developed from the foundation of the family's culture. Located in central Australian communities and initiated by Indigenous families, this program emphasises the role of the family. It respects the family's cultural values, which frame young children's learning of the practices of the school's culture.

A case study grounded in sociocultural learning theory explored how this program enabled the families to prepare their young children for learning at school over the first 20 years of this bi-cultural program. Within this research, the inductive analysis of program documents, personal journals and family conversations revealed unique findings regarding the learning content and the families' cultural ways of learning. The findings were interwoven to shape the program for the families' purposes.

The findings of this research are particularly relevant to non-Western nations and communities. As Tuia noted in 2020 when discussing the impact of colonisation, family values and culture are at risk of 'melting' in the 'rush' for education. This paper offers an evidenced pathway for re-instating young children's learning for school within the family through the cultural ways of the family as they guide their children's journey towards quality education.

Keywords: Learning within the family; playgroups; young children learning for school; cross-cultural families; learning within relationships

INTRODUCTION

A pervasive global problem for families of non-Western cultures is how to prepare their young children to learn in a Western school culture while retaining and enhancing the learning within the family's cultural values. The families in this program observed that their children were not learning at school and requested assistance in developing a community Early Learning program within which they could prepare their children for school.

The literature has two contrasting views on why children lack readiness to learn at school. One view is that some form of family disadvantage limits children's opportunities to learn within their families before attending school (Brown, 2017). From this view, at a global level, early years programs are often implemented as interventions to provide children with the additional experiences they may have missed (Heckman & Masterov, 2007). At the local level, early years programs are often implemented for Indigenous families in central Australia to 'overcome generational disadvantage' (Mason-White, 2013, p. 3). This view places minimal value on family culture.

The other view is that children's experiences at school-entry age are shaped by the cultural differences between the families and the school's cultures (Spodek & Saracho, 1996). Within this view, the usual assumption of family disadvantage as the reason for children's early experiences is questioned, as their experiences may instead reflect their early life within their non-Western family's culture (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2022; McTurk et al., 2008; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This second view recognises the value of family culture.

Cultural differences are frequently recognised in children's early learning, but, as Ball (2010) points out, there is more 'rhetoric' about responding to these differences than 'evidence' (p.1). Refreshingly, this research extends our knowledge about recognising cultural differences in young children's learning by offering a response rather than mere recognition as well as a response to through evidential findings rather than rhetoric.

The research reported in this article was conducted in a local program. The program was eminently suited to advancing knowledge about dealing with cultural differences in education because the participating families were from a different culture than the school's and were living within acknowledged family disadvantage (SCRGSP, 2000). As a result, the local program has two crucial aspects. First, it is positioned in the context of families choosing to prepare their children for learning at school, in contrast to programs where children are not prepared for learning at school by their families. Second, the program has its foundation in the difference between the cultures of the family and the school, in contrast to early years programs that address a foundation of family disadvantage. By way of clarification, the basis of this article and program is that school culture, educational systems and most early years programs that prepare children for school are derived from Western culture, while the families of the local program are from an Indigenous culture.

In this paper, I first use diagrams to situate the local program within the broader global problem for families of non-Western cultures as they experience formal education. I then describe the local program and the research methodology before reporting the research findings and discussing the implications of the findings. I draw attention to this research's contribution to comparative dialogue and practice, noting that the findings present a family and culturally based solution to the global problem of how families of non-Western cultures can prepare their children for learning in the Western culture of school while maintaining their children's learning within their family and cultural ways.

SITUATING THE LOCAL PROGRAM SOLUTION WITHIN THE BROADER GLOBAL CONTEXT

Diagrams 1 to 4 illustrate the bi-cultural nature of the research problem and the connections from children's early learning within their family to the families' cultural goals and goals of economic participation. The generic content of these diagrams is intended to create a shared space across cultural groups for comparative dialogue about the issues and findings of the research that is 'grounded in the local yet embedded in the global' (Chan et al., 2018, p. 1).

Diagram 1. Western Culture Family Goals

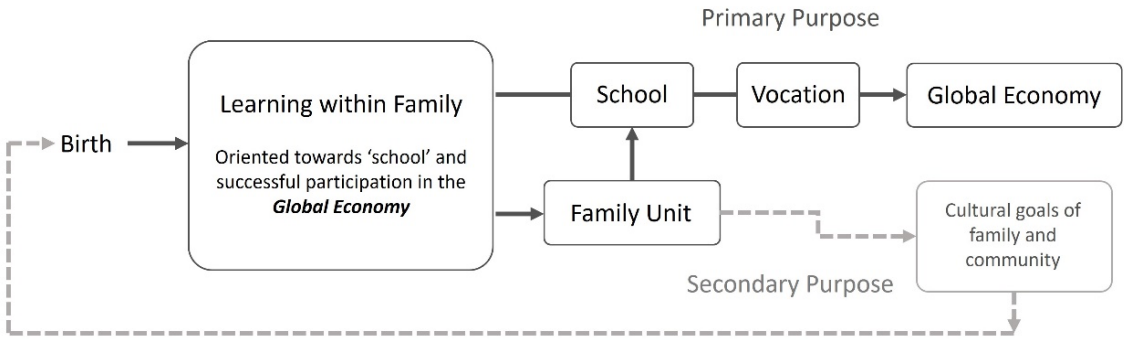

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Diagram 1 illustrates the learning journey of young children in a Western family culture. Their early learning in their family is orientated primarily towards the family's cultural goals, which include school and participation in the vocational and global economy. In Western cultures, young children's learning within their family is expected to prepare them for school learning because schooling is the next step towards their family's cultural goals (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Diagram 2. Non-Western Culture Family Goals

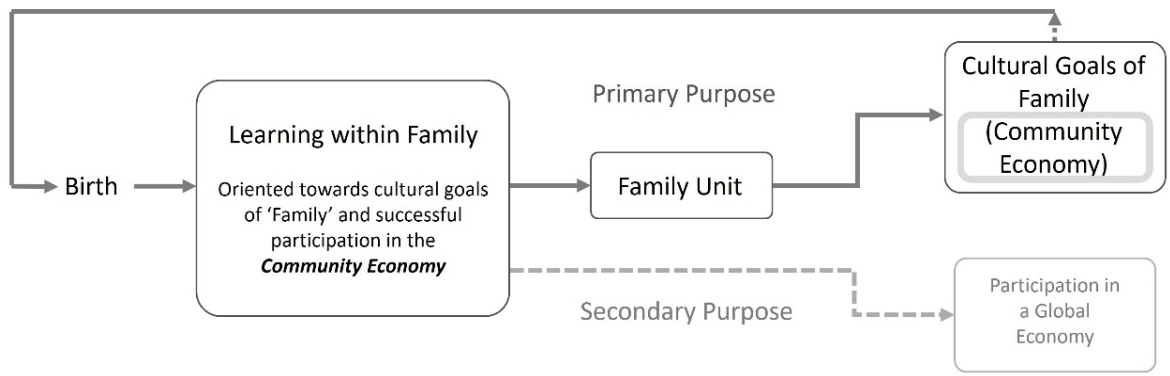

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Diagram 2 illustrates the learning journey for young children within a non-Western family culture, such as the Indigenous children of this program. Their early learning in their family is orientated primarily towards the family's cultural goals and participation in the community economy. However, in many non-Western cultures, the emerging influence of Western culture has created a secondary purpose: participation in the global economy (Chinnammai, 2005).

Although, ideally, there should be complementarity, economic participation may exist in competition with family goals.

Diagram 3. The complex problem for non-Western families and the emerging global economy

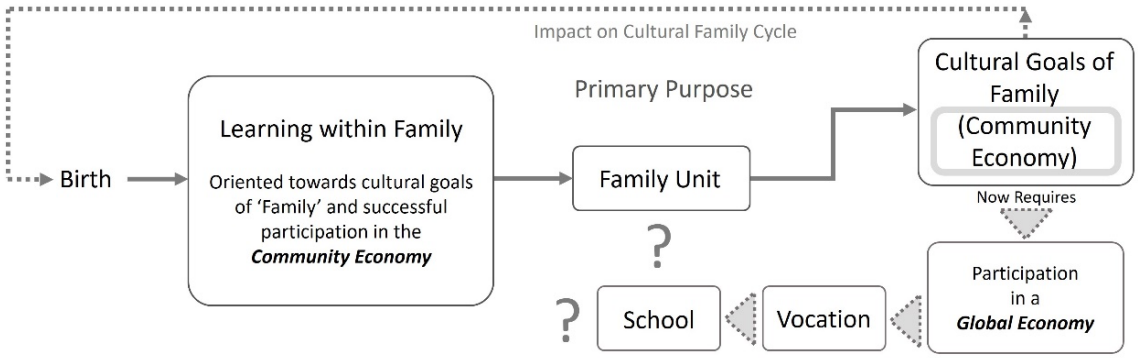

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Diagram 3 illustrates the complex problem created for non-Western families by the global economy's increased influence on their families and communities. While their young children's learning is still orientated within the family, sustaining a community economy becomes increasingly difficult outside of participation in a global economy. This difficulty impacts the family cycle because successful participation in the global economy is primarily determined by successful participation within the Western school and vocational educational systems. Diagram 3 explicitly highlights the lack of connection (? & ?) between young children's learning within the family and the introduced Western cultural educational systems. This disconnection reflects the situation many may find themselves in, including the families and communities of this local program (Harris, 1990).

Diagram 4. A local program solution to this complex global problem

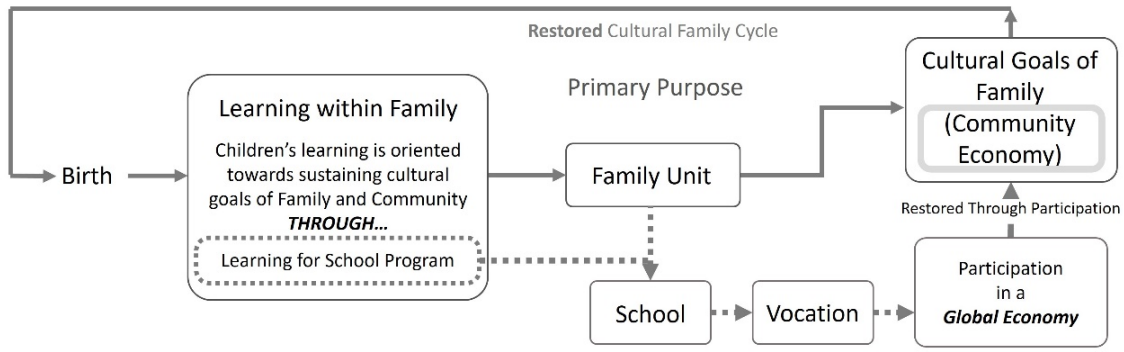

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Diagram 4 addresses the disconnections within Diagram 3. It situates this local 'Learning for School' program as 'learning within the family', establishing the connection between children's early learning within their families and the educational systems of school and vocation. Importantly, this new and additional learning for young children is framed within the families' values, language and cultural ways. Therefore, the learning-for-school program is a means for families to reach an extended set of goals (Rogoff, 2003).

Having situated this local program within the broader global problem, the following section briefly outlines its context.

THE PROGRAM AND ITS BEGINNINGS

The playgroup program was developed in response to families' requests for assistance in preparing their young children for learning at school. The families were located in remote Indigenous communities of the Western Desert area of Australia. Indigenous languages predominate in each community (Glass, 1990), with Harris (1990) describing Indigenous people living across these communities as 'confident and unconscious carriers of traditional culture' (p. 3.) My family moved to the community in 1993. My husband and I initially worked as teachers. Because my husband and his family had lived in an Aboriginal community in rural Western Australia when he was a child, our family was known by some community members.

Western schooling had only been a part of these families' lives for about 12 years. However, the families had already recognised that their children were not doing well at school and concluded that their children were not prepared for learning at school. One day, near the end of our second year as teachers, senior Indigenous women in the community asked me to assist them in preparing their children for school and to teach them how to do this.

I was surprised by their request but, as I wrote in my journal at the time:

> I was not overly concerned . . . because, as I told myself, I knew what was helpful for children to know prior to day one at kindy, both as a teacher and as a mother, and they knew their children and their ways of helping their children learn new things. (Shinkfield, 2022, p. 1)

The primary invitational factor was that they asked me to help them as family adults – they did not ask me to help their children. Consequently, I was pleased to work alongside them in the shared development of a new program because I firmly believe that families are the best teachers for young children and that if children are not ready for learning on day one of the school system, it is difficult for them to catch up.

The program commenced in 1995. It was called 'Little Kid's School' and was for family adults and their 0-4-year-old children. The families said they wanted their children to learn:

> [S]chool readiness activities, especially early literacy in their (home) language, to make it easier for children to learn at school. (Shinkfield, 2022, p. 81)

During 1995 and 1996, the families and I met together every school day morning in a community room that I set up as a 'kindy-like' early learning environment. Through shared participation, the families became familiar with the activities, routines and expectations required of children at school, with the family adults guiding their children's learning in their cultural ways and their home language. In the family's culture, the family structure is that of the extended family and 'everyone is regarded as being related to everyone else' (Glass, 1990, p. 26). Therefore, adults from a child's extended family brought children to playgroups. To recognise and respect this reality, the term 'family adults' will be used in this article rather than the word 'parents'.

During the program's establishment years, I kept daily journals of the activities and responses of the adults and children to observe what model the playgroup program developed as the families shaped it to meet their purposes with their children. By the end of 1996, after about

300 playgroup sessions, the chosen sequence of activities and routines had been established with the families. This sequence was still framing the program in the early 2020s (Shinkfield & Jennings, 2006; Shinkfield, 2022).

SITUATING THE RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

I was the playgroup's Program Facilitator/Educator for various blocks of time between 1995 and 2019. During that period, I maintained an archive of historical documents about the program, journal notes, program journals and operational documents.

At around the 20-year mark of the program, by which time the second generation of young children participated, the families asked for the story of the program's development to be documented so that their children and future generations would know how the program had reached this stage. Consequently, the research, a qualitative exploratory case study (Yin, 2014) of the program, began in 2015 and was conducted in conjunction with the ongoing program. The community elders informed me that it was fitting that I take on the researcher role to gather the information in collaboration with the families and write the story of findings of this research about their community program (Shinkfield, 2022, p. 56). My researcher positionality was firmly shaped by my extensive experience living in the communities and working alongside the families in this program for over 20 years. Consistent with my relationships with the families over the years, my additional role as a researcher was relational, set within the 'nuanced complexity of locating oneself' with research participants (Chin et al., 2022, p. 33).

Research data was gathered across multiple sources, with fieldwork, observation and auto-ethnographic descriptive strategies utilised within the study's bilingual and bicultural context (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). Program documents, both current and historical, informed the understanding of the program's day-to-day development and operation. Observations, descriptions and reflections about the program written in my program journal contributed to the rich collection of observations as a data resource for this research despite not being written for this purpose. Semi-structured conversations with current program participants were held in 2017 and 2018. I also kept a research diary as a data source to document personal observations, questions and reflection and to integrate my reading, observations and data through 'writing as a method of inquiry' (Richardson et al., 2005, p. 959).

The community elders chose representative participants for the semi-structured interviews, reflecting the families' collectivist culture. The participants were from the current generation of family adults who had participated in the program over the last five years, with invited participants spread across family community groups (Shinkfield, 2022).

From the start of the research process, inductive analysis facilitated the search for meaningful data by 'refining and revising categories' to group the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 209). To create the story of the program's development chronologically, as the families had requested, I used a method of ordering 'events over time' (Miles et al., 2014, p. 194), identifying the program's 'key episodes' (Stake, 1995, p.40). Throughout the inductive analysis, my focus moved from the family adults, children and program to the role of the family adults with their children in the program to the enablers within the program's facilitation that enabled the family adults to prepare their children within this program. Subsequently, four common themes emerged within the data across the periods, identifying four major findings regarding how the program enabled the families to prepare their children for school. Ethics approval was granted by Monash University, Victoria, for this research, Project Number 8722.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research question for the study was, 'How does the playgroup program enable family adults to prepare their children for school?' The research revealed four findings:

1. The program is a learning program.
2. The purpose and content of this program are to prepare children for learning at school.
3. Learning is within the family.
4. The tasks and place of the program facilitator are situated in the relational context of walking alongside the families.

Each of these findings has its basis within the family's relational culture. Rogoff (2003) writes that 'cultural practices fit together and are connected' (p. 368). In this program, the findings are interwoven in each activity and shape the development of the program for the families' purposes. Each finding contributes to understanding how the program enabled the families to achieve their purpose of preparing their children for learning at school.

Finding 1: This program is a learning program

This finding revealed three ways this program is a learning program: as a program of new learning, an adult learning program and a learning-through-participation program. First, this is a program of new learning that the families had not yet had the opportunity to learn. By recognising the cultural differences discussed above, it was possible to position this program as new learning for the families because they knew their children could not learn another culture's practices within the child-rearing practices of their family and culture (Hamilton, 1981; Kearins, 1984; Rogoff et al., 2017).

> Why do you bring your little child to playgroup? Nintirringkula . . . to get learned (Family conversation, 2018). (Shinkfield, 2022, p. 143)

Locally, this bi-cultural playgroup has always been likened to a bridge between the two cultures, with the family's culture contributing to the cultural and linguistic ways of learning and the program's culture contributing to the program's content, environment and facilitation. It is on the bridge that the families participate in this learning together. In the literature, the importance of coming to a shared bi-cultural space for new learning is reflected in the writings of Moore (2023), which describes a bridge-like place of learning as a relational space; of Nakata (2002), which identifies it as a 'cultural interface' (p. 5); and of Tuia and Iyer (2015) which call for the negotiation of a 'third space' that includes Western education, and family and cultural values (p. 130).

Second, the adult learning program reflects the initial request from the family adults 'to help them prepare their children for school' and 'to teach them how to do this' (Shinkfield, 2022, p. 4). From the beginning, the program's play and learning environment doubled as a situated learning environment for the family adults (Merriam & Baumgarten, 2020) so they could simultaneously learn and participate as teachers in this learning program with their children.

Third, the learning-through-participation nature of the program reflects the sociocultural context of the community's families. Similar to learning within a community of practice, the learning of the family adults is situated in the context of their purpose and shared family learning, with each day's activities demonstrating the expectation that families would become

increasingly knowledgeable in the context of their 'changing involvement [in the] legitimate peripheral participation' within the activities and routines of the program (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 284).

Surprisingly, little literature in early childhood program research reflected this finding. In contrast, each aspect of this finding was saturated in relevance to the literature regarding sociocultural learning (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978), learning within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and learning programs for family adults (Merriam & Baumgarten, 2020). Perhaps this was to be expected, with Fleer (2003) noting that the focus of guiding young children's learning within the early childhood literature is usually child- rather than family-adults-centred.

Finding 2: The purpose and content of this program is to prepare children for learning at school

Three related findings make up Finding 2. First, the single purpose of this program is to enable family adults to prepare their children for learning at school, reflecting the prioritising of the cultural place of the family adults as their young children's teachers. Thus, the purpose of this program was not simply to prepare children for school but to enable family adults to carry out that responsibility, as they had requested.

> For me, it's important to bring my kids so that they can learn, you know . . . so that they can get learned when they're young and small. (Family conversation, 2018) (Shinkfield, 2022, p.114).

Within the literature, the finding of this single-purpose program contrasts with the dual purposes of many other early childhood programs, which are strongly linked to 'changing the course of disadvantage' (Mason White, 2013, p. 3). The single purpose as a learning program contrasts with the purpose of supported playgroup programs, which are geared more towards supporting the parents within the context of the program rather than assisting parents in guiding their children's learning (Williams et al., 2015).

Second, the finding is that the program's content is the additional set of learning-for-school experiences of children within families in the Western culture. Consequently, these young children have two distinct sets of experiences during their early life within their family: one within the culture of their home and one with their family at playgroup for the cultural purposes of the school. Interestingly, there was no expectation that the program activities would be carried out in the cultural context of home, as the cultural separation of activities was intentional (Harris, 1990). This decision, however, contrasts with literature that presses for strong links between children's learning at home and school, which could indicate the need for further research into cultural factors within this expectation (Evangelou & Wild, 2014; World Bank, 2019).

In framing the learning-for-school content as additional to learning within the family's culture, I describe the program's content as the 'repertoires of practice' for the school culture. I have borrowed this term from Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003), who recommend that 'when learning new cultural practices . . . everybody is able to, and benefits from learning to do things more than one way, expanding their "repertoires of practice"' (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003 as cited in Rogoff et al., 2017, p. 879). Harris (1990) also used this term, describing the process of learning the repertoires of activities, skills, and routines of the Western culture of school as like a 'giant role play' (p. 16). Significantly, this framing identifies these additional experiences as 'not having been learnt yet', which Rogoff et al. (2017), when considering the differences within

child-rearing practices across cultural groups, explained as 'in today's world, it is often an advantage to know the skills necessary for school. But it is not a deficit to not know how to do so "yet"' (p. 879).

> For the families, once they walked in through the gate to participate in their new program of additional experiences each day, there was no link to any family disadvantage or deficit that may exist within their family situation outside the gate. (Shinkfield, 2022, p. 133)

Third, the programs' purpose and content combine as an introduction to the Western cultural practices of learning at school. Consequently, there were no apologies for the different cultural expectations within the program. These differences were requested and expected in the cross-cultural learning program so that family adults could teach their children about such cultural expectations in their language and cultural ways before school. In contrast, the literature frequently notes the absence of any introduction to the school's culture (Mason-White, 2013). However, it is likely that once children are at school, it is too late to introduce them to the school culture as the time for introductions is over and immersion is in place.

Finding 3: Learning is within the family

This finding reflects the prioritisation of young children's learning within the cultural ways of their families, with the place of family adults as the young children's teachers defined by their family's culture, not the program's culture. Although the new forms of learning were not possible within their homes, it is possible to stage the learning process within their family in the playgroup as an out-of-home but within-family environment. Three family-related factors contribute to this finding.

First, family adults are their young children's teachers, as the families had initially requested. Consequently, children learn new and unfamiliar cultural content within their known family and cultural ways of learning (Rogoff, 1990). Within diverse cultural contexts, Rogoff (2003) describes the ways family adults teach their children as 'guided participation in cultural activities' (p. 283), explaining that the ways families interact through 'mutually bridging meanings' and 'mutually structuring activities' are constructed within the family's cultural ways (Rogoff, 2003, p. 299). Therefore, families could teach their children new content in the same cultural ways and language they use in everyday learning at home (Shinkfield & Jennings, 2006)

> I tell her, I read to her in our language, then after that, I explain her. I tell her, oh, turn the page, then she turns the page. She always watches me when I read it. Then I tell her, 'Something hiding there, got to lift it, have a look, then what's in there?' (Family Conversation, 2017). (Shinkfield, 2022, p. 119)

Secondly, the families' home language is the language for learning in this program. Although the content is new, young children continue learning in their home language (Ball, 2011). This finding is demonstrated in each day's program during the shared family Storytime routine, with young children, from babies to four-year-olds, enjoying picture storybooks written in their home language with their family adults (Shinkfield & Jennings, 2019). Additionally, the home language made the place of the family adults essential to the program, both as teachers of their children and translators for the program facilitator and the children.

Thirdly, learning within the family meant learning within their extended family, a finding that illustrated the 'interdependent' and the 'communal' nature of family learning in this culture (Merriam & Baumgarten, 2020, p. 286). Through the shared extended family's responsibility

for children (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2002; Glass, 1990; Hamilton, 1981), many adults within the communities had the opportunity to bring a family child to playgroup. Consequently, the knowledge of the program's purpose quickly spread across the communities, further embedding the program across family and community life. Within the literature, however, the daily embedding of cultural family structure in a program is minimal, with writers suggesting instead that an extended family structure requires special consideration when implementing early years programs (McTurk et al., 2008; Mildon & Polimeni, 2012).

Finding 4. Walking alongside: The tasks and place of the program facilitator in relational practice

This final finding identified four essential tasks of the program facilitator. These tasks underpinned Findings 1, 2, and 3 and enabled the families to participate in the program with their children.

The tasks of the program facilitator were and remain:

- Taking responsibility for operating the learning program within the workplace expectations of the program's culture
- Planning, implementing and modelling the sequence of learning-for-school activities and routines in the program with the families
- Negotiating cultural differences within the program, upholding the program's cultural authenticity and sharing cultural knowledge about the purposes of these activities within the practices of the school
- Supporting the alignment of the program's Western cultural content with the families' cultural ways of learning

From the beginning of this program, the families asked for a learning facilitator—they did not ask for a room full of resources or a teacher for their children. Finding 4 demonstrated how prioritising the parents' cultural place as the teachers of their children prescribed the role of the program facilitator as assisting and teaching the family adults so that they can guide their children in this new learning. Within the literature, Cole (1985) uses the concept of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) to explain the roles of the family adults and the program facilitator as 'participants who exercise differential responsibility by virtue of differential expertise' (p.155) within the two cultures of this shared learning environment.

Finally, and of the utmost significance, this finding confirmed that the program facilitator's tasks are positioned within the relational practice of walking alongside the family adults in this shared program development. Therefore, in the context of mutual relationships and respectful collaboration, for these families, participating relationally was the key to their learning (Johannsson-Fua et al., 2020; Reynolds, 2022).

IMPLICATIONS FROM THE FINDINGS

First, I return to questioning assumptions regarding children's early learning in the literature. These four findings work towards untangling the implications of cultural differences from arguments about family disadvantage in the case of the experiences of children from diverse cultures at school-entry age. Responding to recognising the difference between school and family culture, this learning-for-school program was developed from the foundation of the family's culture rather than the program's. Significantly, in this program, the families distanced

themselves from the pervasive disadvantage narrative that frequently accompanies their participation in programs of Western cultural origin. Knowing that their young children could not learn the practices of the Western school culture within their family culture, the family adults requested a new learning program in which they could purposefully participate as teachers of their children. Consequently, the findings encourage a closer inspection of learning-for-school programs with culturally diverse families to ensure that the programs' foundation strengthens the place of family adults, as well as the family and cultural values in young children's learning before school.

Secondly, returning to the global problem acknowledged in this paper, the findings demonstrate that families of diverse cultures can prepare their children for learning at school through a participatory program that has, as its foundation, the culture of the families. The 'problem' of the family culture has now become the 'solution' as the foundation of this new learning program. Family adults can be their children's teachers using their cultural ways and language. The result is the enhancement of the role of family and cultural values in young children's learning-for-school, as illustrated in Diagram 4. The findings suggest the conditions for a learning-for-school program developed from the foundation of the family's culture that could provide a model for developing family-centred learning-for-school playgroup programs in non-Western cultures beyond the immediate context of Western Australia.

CONCLUSION

I conclude this paper by advocating that the journeys of children of families of non-Western cultures towards quality education should begin as a shared family journey within their family's cultural values and language. The interwoven findings of this research reveal that families can prepare their children for learning in the different culture of the school by positioning their family adults as their teachers, guiding the children through shared participation in a bi-cultural program. The findings reveal that this is possible within a program developed on the foundation of the family's culture rather than the program's. Consequently, the story and findings of this paper may 'help improve the social, cultural and educational life situations for former colonised Indigenous people living in a globalised world' (Tuia, 2013, p.214).

The local program described here is a single case. However, by positioning the findings as a local solution to a global problem, the program can contribute within the broader framework of implicit comparative research. The evidenced pathway described above for (re-)instating young children's learning within the family enables families to prepare their children for learning at school. Importantly, it also necessitates the ongoing central positioning of family and cultural values in young children's journeys towards quality education. I close with the words of a valued Indigenous colleague, who frequently reminded the families of this local program that it is essential that young children learn from family adults and in family cultural ways because 'children are the future of our community'.

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