FOREWORD

Leaving the four walls behind

A wise four-year-old once said that he wished every day could be spent outdoors. Over the years, I have often thought of this child and wondered why he had to yearn for this early experience, when engagement in and with the outdoors could be a regular part of what we do in early childhood education. After all, outdoor learning and play are not new concepts, but perhaps just 'newly important' (Gray et al., 2017). This coming-of-age publication, *Early Years Learning in Australian Natural Environments*, addresses the theory and practice of immersive nature play programs. To be immersed means to be deeply absorbed, and here means to be immersed *in* and entangled *with* nature as an incitement for play and learning in the early years. On a quest to define 'what is a uniquely Australian INPP', the authors explore and problematise theories of learning and concepts of nature, illustrating ways to unsettle normative and instrumental approaches to learning and teaching. The chapters draw on theory and research to emphasise both *why* the model is important and *how* to enact an INPP. *Early Years Learning in Australian Natural Environments* invites an unsettling of one's thinking; in particular, disruptions to the ways we think about nature or how nature is objectified, defined, rationalised, distanced or enfolded within curricula and pedagogies.

The book introduces the term *immersive nature play program*, or INPP, with the aim of encapsulating the multiplicity of outdoor nature play program possibilities, while also defining core principles. INPPs are described specifically as an Australian early years play-based program that are conducted in an outdoor environment, typically beyond the 'gate' or demarcations of a centre. Play and learning *in* and *with* nature are distinct yet concomitant concepts, meaning attention to both the context and processes of INPPs are significant. INPPs recognise that children are part of the nature-culture commonworld, meaning children embody nature and nature embodies children. Little hands, feet, hearts, and whole selves act relationally and are affected by others, including the flora and fauna of the shared world. An in-depth understanding of INPPs is particularly significant given the extractive history of humans and the epoch of precarity the commonworld is confronting (Common Worlds Research Collective, 2020).

What is particularly poignant about *Early Years Learning in Australian Natural Environments* is the authors' emphasis on context, or the land beneath children's immersion, in nature play. Context influences, for example, whether children encounter an acacia tree or eucalypt shrub in Australia. Each offers endless affordances for play and learning. Beyond the practical considerations inherent

with the pedagogical implications (e.g., documenting and assessing outdoors, risk management, co-constructing curriculum) and the affordances of a context, the authors also emphasise the need for a deep connection to land within Australia, particularly the importance of fostering relationships with First Nations People (i.e., the traditional custodians of this land now known as Australia). Learning and re-learning land is another form of unsettling inherent within an INPP model. Through reflective stories that present unsettling ideas of land, and by relearning land with Indigenous ways of knowing (Harwood et al., 2020), several contributors within the publication help demonstrate how to foster ideas of relationship, trust, respect, and reciprocity. Indigenous knowledge systems tend to perceive the human as inseparable from the landscape, viewing the child (human) and land as reciprocally and relationally connected and accountable to one another (Tuck et al., 2014). This Indigenous 'kincentric ecology' views *all* natural elements as 'kin' or relations of people, affected by and affecting one another within a human-nature reciprocal relationship (Salmon, 2000).

The journey to establishing an INPP is an invitation to unsettle, a disruption or calling into question of educators' practices, policies and perspectives. Unsettling can be unnerving for some, but within the publication the authors provide a 'how to' list of considerations to guide educators' deep reflections, thinking and advanced planning that is needed to transition to an immersion model in the outdoors. Although a recipe for pedagogical practice in the outdoors is a misconception, Gray and Pigott (2018) support a facilitation model that includes a focus on 'resilience, reflection, and relationships' (p. 199). Similarly, the authors advocate for 'nature taking the lead' within embodied experiences that include risk and adventure. The chapters help to advocate for slow pedagogies that are anchored to stories, connection and thinking with place through a central focus on relationship building.

Much can be learnt from the Australian experience described in this book of the authors' journey to define their model of INPP, including the role of policies (e.g., NQS, ACECQA), training frameworks (e.g., Parks Victoria 2018 *Bush Kinder Handbook)*, professional networks (e.g., Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Network), and grassroots initiatives. Although essential, policy directives and frameworks on their own often lack the 'how to' fundamentals needed to support educators' transformation of practices within outdoor environments. Importantly, the publication helps move the discussion beyond terminology and policy by defining clear research and theoretically informed principles. INPP principles are holistic and focus on the experience and process of learning and play immersed in nature, while

also involving deep reflection-in-action by educators, and an invitation to examine complex problems from a variety of perspectives and contexts.

In addition, *Early Years Learning in Australian Natural Environments* advocates for careful listening, inviting educators to be differently *attuned* to the commonworld (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2016). This requires educators to pay attention to what happens in between children and the spaces, places and materials (both living and non-living) that they encounter. Several ways to foster this attunement are suggested: sensory moments, community partnerships, or exploring environmental impacts. An affinity with spaces/places develops over time within an immersion model, offering opportunities for children to learn, experience and be sensitive to what is natural (e.g., local fauna) or non-natural (e.g., rubbish, invasive species). The authors offer other ideas to develop local flora and fauna knowledge, including relying on the teaching of First Nations People, park rangers, councils, or community nature groups. Additionally, they suggest educators support children's interests in wildlife protection and advocacy and adopt the principle of 'leave no trace' behind. Fostering children's sense of agency and active participation in sustainable actions is also highly recommended. Australia, considered a world leader in early childhood education for sustainability, can help pave the way for exemplifying the 'transformative, restorative, and generative actions' needed within early childhood nature programs.

The metaphor shared in the book, 'drop a pebble and watch the ripples' reflects what the authors have achieved here. *Early Years Learning in Australian Natural Environments* has 'dropped the pebble' by illustrating new ways of thinking about outdoor play and learning within an immersive model. Preconceived notions or misconceptions about outdoor play and learning can often inhibit and intimidate educators, parents, policymakers and communities. Thus, the real-world examples of various programs in this book and the theoretical and pedagogical nuances explored within various INPPs help allay the many practical concerns of educators and communities. Sharing their journey to define INPPs, as well as stories from across the sites of practices, has already made ripples that will help build confidence, knowledge and capacity, and illuminate the potential and promise of INPPs to be enacted throughout Australia—and beyond.

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Acknowledge the First Peoples of Country which will inform your understanding of Country

The epistemology of Indigenous knowledges are written within our natural environment, providing us access to *Parbin-ata's* (Mother Earth's) grand masterplan of learning. Despite an inheritance of dislocation and disconnection, Indigenous ways of seeing, being and knowing Country remain firmly embedded within the roots of our cultures.

Kummargii Parbin-ata, Kummargii Yulendji, Gadhaba.

Together, Mother Earth rises, knowledge rises.

Through this understanding we can be taught not to fear, but to see ourselves as part of the cycle of life. When I work with children at bush kindergarten, they learn experientially through play, through *Yulendji* (deep listening), through *Wurrung* (language) and through mimicking the sounds of birds. By using clap sticks they learn to understand the importance of trees, the value of strees. Through practising *Djilbruk* (respect) they can gradually grow into their own unique role in building a safe and healthy *Djeembana* (community). They become my climate action *Bubups* (babies), my little *Wurnee't* (water) rangers.

By becoming a part of something bigger than ourselves, *Parbin-ata* becomes a constant teacher in our paths and patterns of learning. What begins in childhood carries through to adulthood, laying the foundations for *Yirramboi* (future generations). At this time of adaptation, when we have broken with the *Wurrungi-biik* (Laws of the Land), it is more important than ever that we learn to read Nature's signs, in ourselves and in Country.

We are all *Kirrip's* (friends) in *Parbin-ata's Djeembana* (Mother Earth's community) and that is why spending our early years learning in Nature is essential to growing *Balert Koolin* (strong people). She is our teacher, with an abundance of teaching aids. We have the opportunity and privilege to learn with Her, as we have practised for over 60,000 years.

N'arwee't Dr Carolyn Briggs AM
Yalukit Weelam Boon Wurrung