



## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

In the lead up to this edition of *Voice* I have been thinking a lot about ECA's submission to the inquiry into the agreement between Australia and Malaysia on the transfer of asylum seekers to Malaysia (see excerpts from the submission overleaf).

I wondered how many people are like me and find this question, and the issues behind it, difficult to deal with. I think I had been expecting that the strong base of ECA's values, positions and *Code of Ethics* would make it simpler. But of course the problem is complex and confronting, as we clearly saw in the recent SBS series *Go back to where you came from*.

ECA would usually speak only about the wellbeing of children, and indeed ECA's submission focuses strongly on this. However there are issues where it is clearly impossible to think about the wellbeing of children without thinking about the wellbeing of adults and about broader social issues. The need for this is strongly voiced by our members from time to time, and leads us to promote positions that go well beyond our more traditional areas of advocacy. Examples of this are our views on reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and our position on environmental sustainability.

These are areas where we are aiming at not only outcomes for children today and into the future, but where we are seeking particular long-term effects for society across future generations. I believe that our response to asylum seekers is such an issue. How can we think about the rights and wellbeing of children without thinking about the rights and wellbeing of all people? I look forward to input from

and further discussion with ECA members and stakeholders on this question.

We can learn a lot by stepping back and reflecting on 'hard' issues and thinking about how best to deal with them. This applies not only to the question of asylum seekers. It applies in any situation where we are tempted to respond with a rapid 'kneejerk' reaction, and perhaps especially where we are afraid or feeling threatened.

Giving time and energy to careful reflection is not always easy or comfortable, but it does help us at least to work out what all the issues are—what facts we need to learn and consider, and to avoid leaping to simple solutions to complex matters. Reflection is the basis for challenging our own assumptions and finding ways forward that are strongly based in principle, which will stand us in good stead over time.

Thinking about the ECA submission in this way has led me to believe that our—and our governments'—manner of thinking and talking about important issues affects who we become, and even what our society becomes. It is about much more than winning political points on the day, or short-term outcomes. In the end it is about our humanity and civilisation.

**Margaret Young**  
National President  
Early Childhood Australia

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## EYLF IN PRACTICE ON THE COCOS (KEELING) ISLANDS AND CHRISTMAS ISLAND

Recently I was privileged to deliver ECA's *Early Years Learning Framework Professional Learning Program (EYLF PLP)* training sessions on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Christmas Island. These islands are part of Australia and are classified as Indian Ocean Territories, so educators there also need to be engaged with the EYLF, despite being so remote.



### Cocos (Keeling) Islands

The Cocos (Keeling) Islands are 27 small coral islands forming a horseshoe-shaped atoll and are located approximately 2,936 kilometres north-west of Perth. Only two of the islands are permanently inhabited—West Island and Home Island.

West Island residents are predominantly expatriates, while Home Island is home to the Cocos Malay community. The school has a campus on each island. On West Island the campus provides education for children in the years K–10. Older children attend school on the mainland for Years 11 and 12. Another K–6 campus operates on Home Island, approximately eight kilometres across the lagoon by ferry.

Cocos (Keeling) Islands are a unique environment; culturally, physically and educationally. For 85 per cent of children, English is a second language. Classes on the Home Island primary campus are delivered in English but each class has a teaching assistant who speaks Cocos Malay to support children in their learning.

The EYLF PLP Workshop on Cocos, was held in the library at the school, primarily for the staff working in the early years, but it was also attended by other school personnel; nine participants in total (there are no child care centres or family day care, but there is a playgroup for children from birth to five who attend with their parents). It was held in the middle of Ramadan so some of the Muslim educators apologised to me in advance if they yawned—they explained that it didn't mean they weren't interested, just sleepy due to lack of food. I appreciated knowing this in advance!

The participants seemed to feel that the Workshop helped their understanding of the EYLF and were appreciative of the opportunity to have specific training. Some of their written feedback included comments such as 'I am a teacher (early childhood) who for 20 years in five states has wanted this—Yahoo', and, 'The EYLF is an umbrella for a fantastic whole-school culture'.

The next day I caught the ferry over to Home Island (approximately 20 minutes away) to visit the school there. It was delightful to meet the beautiful children there, to participate for a short time in the

program and to see the elements of the EYLF being implemented. The teacher asked the children what they needed to ask me; if they wanted to know what to call me. With help from the Cocos-Malay speaking teaching assistant, I was asked if I had any children; if I had any grandchildren; the name of my eldest grandchild; and how old I am! As a sign of respect, adults are referred by the name of their eldest grandchild so my name while I was there was 'Nek Jack'.

During the morning the teacher and children talked about the birth of a new sibling. This led to a conversation about what babies play with. One of the teaching assistants told the children that when she was a little girl they didn't have toys so they made dolls out of leaves. The children wanted to know how to do this so it led to a wonderful experience involving gathering large leaves and rolling them to form the body, then the arms and then a veil for the 'dolls'.

It was so special to see an experience with so many links to the Vision, Principles and Practice of the *Early Years Learning Framework*.

▶ Continued on p. 3





## Christmas Island

Christmas Island is located 975 kilometres east-northeast of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. It is very different to Cocos and has many aspects that make it a unique place. The population is bigger and more multicultural. It has a phosphate mine which provides work for many of the people and it has the Immigration and Detention Centres (IDCs). There are two IDCs: one that caters for single women, unaccompanied minors, families, or vulnerable clients; and another where single men are detained. Both centres are located quite a distance from the settled parts of the island.

The Christmas Island District High School has approximately 400 students from kindergarten through to Year 12. The school is operated by the Western Australian Department of Education.

The school had invited three educators from the Christmas Island Daycare Centre as well as two educators from the Neighbourhood Centre to join the four teachers working in the K-3 classrooms for the EYLF PLP Workshop. Two of the participants had attended a conference in Perth organised by the Professional Support Coordinator for WA (Child Australia), so were already engaging with the EYLF. Other participants had very little knowledge. It was interesting to see the interactions and networking that took place during the day that indicated the community involvement that is present on the Island. They too were very appreciative of the opportunity to learn more about the EYLF.



The next day I was invited to visit the Christmas Island Daycare Centre. The centre is located in a former technical school and they are making adaptations to the surroundings to make them more aesthetically pleasing. Heather Simons, the Coordinator, had the idea of creating a mural on a long brick wall and approached an art teacher at Christmas Island District High School who agreed to assist. The design incorporates some of the unique aspects of the flora and fauna of the Island and also gave numeracy opportunities. There is one baby Booby bird, two Golden Bosun birds, three Frigatebirds, four Christmas Island Thrushes, five Christmas Island Blue Crabs, six fish, seven Christmas Island Red Crabs, eight green fish, nine pink fish and 10 turtles. It was achieved through community involvement with families, children and educators, who were all involved in choosing the colours and helping with the painting. It really was the EYLF in action!

### Heather Barnes

EYLF PLP Workshop Facilitator



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## ECEC REFORMS MUST CONTINUE

The need for the package of reforms in early childhood education and care (ECEC) to go ahead in the time frame agreed by COAG in December 2009, was addressed earlier this year by ECA in the report *Our future on the line* (at [www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/pdf/our\\_future\\_on\\_the\\_line.pdf](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/pdf/our_future_on_the_line.pdf)). Some people are continuing to lobby for delays, suggesting that parents cannot afford reform; that they do not have enough qualified staff; and that there is too much pressure on people working in the sector.

ECA says that we cannot afford NOT to make the reforms—for the wellbeing of children, for the peace of mind of parents and ultimately to support educators in the sector to be better qualified, better resourced and better recognised. It is important that when we think and talk about the reforms we tell the facts and the full story, including the time lines—that many of the qualification requirements allow people to be studying for the qualification (that it does not require that they have attained it already)—and that many services are well on the way to quality improvement already.

We believe that it is the responsibility of leaders in our sector to motivate and support people as they work with the changes; to be strong in their management for a better future for children and


their services; and to be energetic in lobbying governments for additional assistance to families where this is needed.

This is a clear example of a complex area where we need to work carefully on different issues at once—not give up and seek postponement because of the challenges we meet.

**Margaret Young**  
National President  
Early Childhood Australia

### Reference

Early Childhood Australia (2011). *Our future on the line: Keeping the early childhood education and care reforms on track*. Canberra, ACT: ECA.



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# PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S AGREEMENT WITH MALAYSIA IN RELATION TO ASYLUM SEEKERS

Following are some of the points made in ECA's recent submission to the Senate's inquiry into the agreement between Australia and Malaysia on the transfer of asylum seekers to Malaysia (ECA, 2011). The full submission can be viewed at [www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/legcon\\_ctte/malaysia\\_agreement/submissions.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/legcon_ctte/malaysia_agreement/submissions.htm).

## Moral and practical significance

'Our submission speaks to the moral and practical significance for the children involved, and for all of us, in considering and protecting children's rights. We believe that at present the moral imperative for considering the rights of children in the situation is lost in the rhetoric of "stopping boat people", "stopping people smuggling" and "stopping queue jumping". We also believe that we should not, as a nation, declare a policy to be "in the national interests" without having addressed the fundamental question of human rights.'

## The rights of children who are refugees

'ECA strongly supports the long-held principle of the United Nations, enshrined in this convention and policy [the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989)], that governments making decisions about children must first and foremost act in a way that will provide for the wellbeing

of those children—the best interest of children will be paramount. We believe that this fundamental principle of the UN provides the benchmark against which any policy proposal regarding children of asylum seekers and unaccompanied child asylum seekers, should be assessed.'

## Acting to protect rights

'The acknowledgement of fundamental rights for human beings places some obligation on all of us to protect those rights. In defending the rights of others we are defending them for ourselves. Not to defend the rights of others is to undermine those entitlements for everyone. In the case of children this is particularly important—children are dependent, vulnerable and need special care and protection to realise their potential. A commitment to recognising and protecting the rights of Australian children as a fundamental principle requires a commitment to recognising and protecting the rights of all children in Australia—including children seeking asylum—as a fundamental principle.'

▶ Continued on p. 6



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'ECA does recognise that the enormity of the numbers of people seeking asylum and the complexity of the issues makes this very difficult, but we believe that not to try to find a way to address this, makes us less human.'

In this situation, it is the responsibility of governments to lead from principle, to change the language and focus of the discussion, and to be clear about the primacy of human rights and the commitment to these. As a community we need a realistic understanding of the situation; we need broad, informed and incisive debate about the issues and we need a rights-based, compassionate response.'

### Policy implications

'We note that the UNHRC Policy on Refugee Children [UN High Commissioner for Refugees (1993)] says that "Protection and assistance activities are intrinsically linked". We believe that using the UN convention and policy to inform rights-based decisions about the treatment of asylum seeking children in Australia in conjunction with the evidence about [what] children's wellbeing, leads to the following conclusions. Families with children and unaccompanied minors should be placed in the community while their claims are assessed. There is strong evidence that holding children in detention has very negative effects on their long-term health, particularly their mental health.'

#### '... ECA's position is that:

- The UN conventions on the rights of children and the policy on refugee children should provide the benchmark for Australia's approach to refugees seeking asylum in Australia.
- The Australian government should respond to the question of children seeking asylum here in its own right, de-linking it from the need to stop people smuggling and giving priority to the rights of the children according to the *UN Convention on the rights of the child*.
- Following from this, refugee children in Australia are the responsibility of the Australian government and should not be sent to a third country, but should have their applications for asylum processed here. There is clearly no evidence that the wellbeing of these children will be better served in Malaysia, or even that it will be well served there.

- Further, it is fundamental to the wellbeing of children that they remain with their families, and so families accompanying children should also remain in Australia and have their applications processed here.
- Also following from this, all refugee children (and their families if they are with them) should be held in the community, not in detention centres. They should have access to the services and supports that are available to all children and families in Australian communities.
- The public comment by all political parties about "boat people" seeking asylum in Australia should reposition these people as refugees seeking asylum in Australia because they are the victims of war and persecution, who have suffered unknown traumas and Australia is obligated to protect their human rights.

Again, ECA acknowledges the complexity of the issues but at the same time believes that each piece of the solution should be defensible against our obligations under the UN conventions dealing with the rights of refugees and of children.

Finally, while ECA is fundamentally opposed to sending the children of refugees seeking asylum in Australia to other countries, if this occurs then Australia must negotiate conditions which ensure the strictest regime for the protection and long-term health of these children and their families ... that these countries are signatories to the UN conventions on the rights of refugees and the rights of the child.'

ECA welcomes feedback from members and stakeholders.

#### Margaret Young

National President  
Early Childhood Australia

#### References

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