Noongar Culture, Arts Learning and Wellbeing Literacy in Early Childhood Education

A Case Study of The Song Room's Deadly Arts Early Years Program in Western Australia Government Primary Schools

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which our students and educators work, learn and create - the Whadjuk Noongar people. We honour the storytellers, artists, and culture bearers who continue to share knowledge, language and traditions through song, dance and art on Whadjuk Boodjar.

We deeply respect the ongoing continuation and preservation of Noongar culture, and we value the opportunity to have these teachings shared with children, supporting them to appreciate and celebrate their own identities, strengths and wellbeing.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and acknowledge their enduring contributions to the life, learning and cultural richness of our community.

Drawing of Country by Zara who participated in the Deadly Arts Early Years program.

Glossary

The following glossary provides translations of Noongar language used throughout this report. Noongar language encompasses a number of regional dialects and spellings of terms may vary across communities.

Baamba	Stingray
Bip-Mart-Mokiny	Milky Way
Boodjar	Country
Boorloo	Perth
Deadly	Excellent / Great / Impressive
Deman	Old people
Dwerdawarent (dwerdawanart)	Dolphin
Goonininup	Campsite at the base of Mount Eliza
Katitjin (Kaartdijin)	Knowledge
Koolunger (Koorlangka)	Children
Kworlak	Bull shark
Makaru	June-July Season
Matagarup	Place where the river is only leg deep
Moort	Family
Ngaank Yira	Sunrise
Noongar	Aboriginal people and traditional owners of the South-West corner of Western Australia
Nyitting	Cold time / The cold / The Dreaming
Wagyl	Rainbow Serpent
Whadjuk Noongar	Aboriginal people and traditional owners of the Perth Metropolitan region
Woordwart	Dragonfly

Yorga	Woman
Yornan	Bobtail lizard

The authors acknowledge the use of the terms Noongar, Aboriginal, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous and First Nations throughout this report. These terms are used respectfully and interchangeably, recognising the right of Aboriginal peoples to self - determine their preferred terminology.

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a case study examining how The Song Room's Deadly Arts Early Years program supports wellbeing literacy in early childhood education through engagement with Noongar culture, arts, and storytelling at Western Australia government primary schools. Conducted on Whadjuk Noongar Boodjar at Huntingdale Primary School and Orelia Primary School and co-designed with Indigenous and non-Indigenous teaching artists, school communities, and The Song Room, the research used creative arts-based methods, including draw and tell interviews, to explore how participation in a First Nations-led arts program builds young children's and teaching artists' wellbeing literacy. The Noongar people are the Traditional Custodians of the south-west of Western Australia, with a continuous living culture sustained across more than 45,000 years on Noongar Boodjar. Wellbeing literacy, the capability involving vocabulary, knowledge, and skills to communicate intentionally for the wellbeing of oneself and others, provided the theoretical framework for understanding program experiences and outcomes (Oades et al., 2021).

Key Themes

Noongar Culture and Arts

- Knowledge shared within the program encompassed cultural heritage, language, place, Country, kinship, and traditional ways of knowing and being, reflecting the rights affirmed in Article 31(1) of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- Language emerged as one of the most powerful dimensions of children's engagement, with children hearing, speaking, and singing in Noongar language as an experience of Country and a living form of cultural transmission.
- Children engaged with Noongar stories through song, dance, visual art, and movement, encountering narratives about totems, seasons, waterways, and ancestral beings in holistic and relational ways.
- Multimodal arts practices functioned as living carriers of cultural knowledge, with the Deadly Arts program understood as an act of cultural sovereignty in which Noongar teaching artists shared *katitijin (knowledge)* on their own terms.

Storytelling

- Storytelling was understood by Indigenous teaching artists as a profound cultural responsibility, an obligation to receive and pass on knowledge across generations.

- Children began to position themselves as storytellers in their own right, developing a sense of custodianship over cultural knowledge shared with them.
- The program created conditions for intergenerational story transmission, with children carrying Noongar stories and language home to families and communities.

Community

- Participation in the program strengthened children's sense of belonging — to their school, to each other, and to Noongar Country.
- Relationships to Country were expressed by children in their artwork and interviews, demonstrating an emerging understanding of place, connection, and reciprocal care.
- Sharing emerged as a core cultural and wellbeing practice, with children and teaching artists describing acts of sharing knowledge, stories, and creative work as central to feeling well.

Healing

- For Indigenous teaching artists, the program carried healing significance — an opportunity to reclaim and revitalise cultural practices shaped by the ongoing impacts of colonisation and intergenerational trauma.
- Children in both schools showed increased cultural pride, self-expression, and emotional confidence over the course of the program.
- Reconciliation emerged as a lived, relational practice enacted through everyday interactions between Noongar teaching artists, non-Indigenous teaching artists, children, and families, rather than as a formal or abstract aspiration.

Wellbeing Literacy

- Across the student cohort, children demonstrated observable development in wellbeing literacy capabilities, including the ability to name emotions, describe cultural connections, express a sense of belonging, and articulate what it means to live and learn well.
- Indigenous teaching artists demonstrated sophisticated wellbeing literacy grounded in cultural knowledge, with storytelling, language, and arts practice functioning as their primary modes of communicating for wellbeing.
- Non-Indigenous teaching artists reported increased confidence in delivering culturally responsive pedagogy and a deepened understanding of their own role in creating conditions for children's cultural and emotional flourishing.
- Across all participant groups, wellbeing literacy was most visible not as an individual skill but as a relational and cultural capability that was enacted in community, deepened through story, and sustained through connection to Country.

Implications and Recommendations

- First Nations culture and arts represent a pathway to children's wellbeing, operating through relational, ecological, and cultural mechanisms that generic wellbeing programs cannot replicate, with songlines offering a more comprehensive framework for understanding children's flourishing than Western psychological models alone.
- Children as young as pre-school age demonstrate sophisticated multimodal wellbeing literacy when given the cultural framework and creative permission to do so, with embodied, sensory cultural experiences generating the deepest and most lasting wellbeing responses.
- Indigenous teaching artists must be recognised as knowledge holders whose role is pedagogically, culturally, and epistemologically distinct, and whose own wellbeing must be supported as a condition of program effectiveness.
- Non-Indigenous practitioners can develop genuine wellbeing literacy through sustained, respectful proximity to Indigenous cultural practice, with the most powerful pedagogical moments occurring when practitioners followed the child's lead and held space for children's voices and creative expression.
- Noongar cultural arts programs should be funded at a level commensurate with their demonstrated impact, with Indigenous teaching artists embedded in schools as permanent and appropriately remunerated members of the educational community, and with multimodal assessment approaches adopted that recognise drawing, dance, song, and spoken word as valid forms of knowledge-making.

Author Positionality

In keeping with Indigenous research protocols and anti-colonial methodologies, we the authors begin by positioning ourselves in relation to this work. Indigenous research paradigms recognise that knowledge is never neutral — knowledge is always situated within relationships, lived experiences, responsibilities and connections that shape how we understand, interpret and share what we learn (Wilson, 2008).

Dr Jason Goopy is a non-Indigenous man who was raised on the traditional Country of the Jagera and Turrbal peoples in Brisbane, Queensland, and since 2022 has lived and worked on Whadjuk Noongar Boodjar in Boorloo (Perth, Western Australia). Jason is a Senior Lecturer at Edith Cowan University, and his research at the intersection of arts, education, and wellbeing science uses narrative, creative arts-based, and mixed-methods to examine how arts learning can positively transform lives. Jason draws upon over two decades of experience in Australian school, community, and university settings, and national leadership experience in music and arts teacher associations. During the course of the project, he completed a Fulbright Scholarship at Teachers College, Columbia University, investigating how learning music in New York City supports the wellbeing of young people.

Professor Narelle Lemon is a non-Indigenous woman who was raised on the traditional Country of the Gunaikurnai people in West Gippsland, Victoria, lived for two decades on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation in Naarm (Melbourne), and since 2023 has lived and worked on Noongar Boodjar in Boorloo (Perth). She is a Vice Chancellor Professorial Research Fellow and Professor of Education at Edith Cowan University, where her research sits at the intersection of positive psychology, arts and education, with a focus on the relationality of caring for self and each other. As a researcher, educator, coach and mentor, she draws on over two decades of experience across school, community and university settings.

Dr Megan McPherson is a non-Indigenous artist, educator, and researcher in the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, The University of Melbourne. Based on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Bunurong peoples, from 2018-2025, Megan was based at the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Art and Cultural Development involved in intercultural research and learning and teaching. Megan is currently the Deputy Associate Dean (Academic) for the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music and teaches Printmaking and Drawing. Megan's overarching creative practice research emphasis is in printmaking, textiles and installations. She publishes in the areas of the Indigenous knowledges and pedagogies, academic identity, social media use, and student success in the creative arts. She explores her focus in the intersections of

pedagogical and material engagements in artistic, social and cultural productions using ethnographic, sociological, and creative practice methodologies to explore identity, subjectivities, affect and agency.

Dr Libby Jackson-Barrett is a Whadjuk Yorga who is the Associate Dean Teaching and Learning for Kurongkurl Katitjin, Indigenous Education and Research Centre at Edith Cowan University. An experienced educator, she has taught in primary schools situated on Noongar Boodjar and has worked extensively across the tertiary sector in Aboriginal and Initial Teacher Education.

Jacqueline West is an Indigenous woman from Djaku-nde and Jangerie Jangerie people, was raised on Gurambilbarra Country, and has been residing on Whadjuk Boodjar since 2018. She has worked in music education for over a decade, specialising in vocal pedagogy, singing, and performance. Her work is driven by a commitment to the arts, performance, and a strong passion for the preservation of Indigenous languages and culture. She is currently working in research and curriculum development focused on Noongar language revitalisation, with an emphasis on supporting family and children's wellbeing. Alongside research pursuits, she is also lecturing singing and performance at Edith Cowan University.

As members of this research team, we all bring different perspectives and relationships to the research, shaped by our connections to Country, community and culture. Each author contributes unique insights while sharing a commitment to educational transformation, one that ensures authentic representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities and supports Aboriginal students' right to see their diverse cultural identities and knowledges reflected and honoured in their schooling.

This commitment is at the heart of this research. In documenting how Noongar culture, arts, and storytelling support the wellbeing of young children on Whadjuk Boodjar, they write not only as researchers but as people with living relationships to the communities, Country and cultural practices this report describes.

The Song Room

The Song Room works in partnership with primary schools, communities and online throughout regional, remote and metropolitan Australia to create sustainable outcomes for children to flourish in and through arts education.

They deliver curriculum-aligned education programs in all art forms: music, drama, visuals arts, media arts and dance. Programs support student learning across subject areas and we engage parents, school leaders and the school community through rich arts experiences.

Students develop their knowledge and understanding of creative processes, while learning communication, collaboration and intercultural skills. As their confidence grows their wellbeing improves, and they develop a sense of belonging at school. This impacts students' openness to learning, helping to improve their outcomes.

Teachers are supported with mentoring and professional development to confidently deliver the arts, and to use these skills across the curriculum to help students engage in learning more broadly.

School leaders are encouraged to develop and promote a sustainable, whole school approach to arts learning to ensure the benefits of the arts continues at the school beyond our programs.

When the arts become an integral part of a school community, schools access an ongoing source of pride and connection, building a strong school culture and creating a thriving community.

the SONG ROOM

CREATIVE KIDS
BRIGHTER KIDS

Whadjuk Noongar Boodja

Indigenous peoples are the first Australians and have lived on the continent for more than 65,000 years. The Country of the Noongar people is one of the largest Aboriginal cultural blocs in Australia, and a vast territory in the south-west of Western Australia stretching from Geraldton on the west coast to Esperance on the south coast. Boorloo (Perth), the capital of Western Australia, sits on Whadjuk Boodja, the Country of the Noongar nation. The Noongar nation comprises fourteen distinct language and dialectal groups, each associated with specific geographic areas. The greater metropolitan area of Perth falls primarily within Whadjuk country. The Whadjuk are the Noongar people of the Swan Coastal Plain, whose Boodja (Country) encompasses the Swan River and its tributaries, extending inland to the Darling Scarp and southward toward Pinjarra. Whadjuk Noongar people have maintained a deep and enduring spiritual, cultural, and custodial relationship with this land, expressed through song, dance, ceremony, and intimate knowledge of seasonal ecological cycles across six distinct Noongar seasons.

Country, People and Spirituality

For Noongar people, land and family are inseparable — you cannot speak of one without the other. Country is understood as living and sentient: old trees may be regarded as ancestors, animals as spiritual kin, and the land itself as a mother whose body must be treated with care (Buchanan et al., 2016). The *Nyitting* or the creation period, known as the "cold time," is when ancestral spirits shaped the landscape, establishing the foundations of law, story and responsibility that Noongar people carry to this day. Particular places — granite outcrops, wetlands, rocks — serve as repositories of knowledge and cultural identity (Knapp et al., 2024; Lullfitz et al., 2020).

Long Occupation and Environmental Relationships

Archaeological and oral evidence places Noongar presence in this region at 45,000 to 48,000 years, making this one of the longest continuous relationships between a people and their country anywhere on earth (Villiers, 2019; Lullfitz et al., 2020). Noongar land management practices reflect this deep knowledge: activities such as burning, camping and hunting were concentrated in younger, more fertile areas, while older and more fragile landscapes were deliberately left undisturbed — an approach that aligns closely with contemporary biodiversity conservation principles (Lullfitz et al., 2020).

Colonisation, Dispossession and Resilience

From the early 1800s, colonisers rapidly dispossessed Noongar people from their lands, particularly around the Swan River, and subjected Noongars to restrictive and often violent colonial controls (Cox et al., 2016; Bracknell, 2020). Despite this, Noongar people maintained their physical, emotional and spiritual connections to key sites — demonstrated most visibly through high-profile land occupations at Goonininup (Old Swan Brewery) and Matagarup (Heirisson Island) in 1988–89 and again in 2012 (Cox et al., 2016). A 2006 Federal Court judgment formally recognised the continuation of Noongar native title, acknowledging the preservation of Noongar knowledge and culture under sustained colonial pressure as a "monumental" act of resilience (Buchanan et al., 2016).

Language, Song and Cultural Revitalisation

Noongar language is critically endangered, with fewer than approximately 2% of Noongar people reporting it as a home language, yet it remains central to identity and connection to country (Bracknell, 2020). Language and song are deeply intertwined with land-based knowledge — historical songs carried grief, protest and attachment to country during dispossession, while contemporary revitalisation projects are actively rebuilding song repertoires and creating spaces where Noongar is spoken and sung (Bracknell, 2020). Digital initiatives such as Noongarpedia (2016) seek to make ancient Noongar knowledge accessible to both Noongar and non-Noongar audiences, bridging traditional knowledge systems and modern platforms (Buchanan et al., 2016).

Governance, Land Rights and the Noongar Nation

From the 1990s, Noongar people lodged native title claims over the south-west, culminating in the Single Noongar Claim and a negotiated settlement with Western Australia (Villiers, 2019). Through this process, Noongar leaders articulated a vision of a Noongar nation — asserting collective identity and internal sovereignty across the region. The resulting Noongar Settlement established corporations with significant self-governance powers over cultural heritage, land management and community programs, representing a distinctive model of non-territorial autonomy that has drawn international attention (De Villiers, 2020; Villiers, 2019).

Noongar Country Today

Noongar people constitute Australia's largest single Aboriginal cultural group in terms of both population and geographic spread, living across urban Perth and throughout regional and rural areas of their homelands (Bracknell, 2020; Villiers, 2019). Today, Noongar Boodjar (Country) is at once a richly storied landscape of ancestral tracks and sacred places, a site of ongoing assertion of cultural authority and land rights, and a space of active renewal — through language classes, song revival, cultural tourism, digital knowledge platforms, and co-management of conservation reserves (Bracknell, 2020; Lullfitz et al., 2020; Buchanan et

al., 2016). In Noongar worldview and understanding, Country is not simply territory — it is a living network of law, story, kin and responsibility that binds people and place across time.

Storytelling

Storytelling as an Indigenous research methodology has seven principles: respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy (Archibald et al, 2019). These principles are an ethical guide for researchers when working with Indigenous knowledges, communities and stories (Archibald et al, 2019). Archibald et al suggest the principles are a way of positioning for the researcher to become "story-ready" (Archibald et al, 2019). Storytelling guides the notion of holism, interrelatedness, and synergy as a way to consider the story as knowledge and lived experience, and meaning making (Archibald et al, 2019). Much in the same way as the children and artists shared, built belonging and relational communities of storytelling through drawing in the research project, their story-readiness directs the researchers to tell the narratives of the Deadly Arts project.

The Deadly Arts Early Years Program

With the support of LotteryWest, The Song Room delivered Deadly Arts Early Years programs in four Perth government primary schools and co-located kindergartens. Local communities represented at all schools experience high levels of disadvantage, high levels of migrant populations and greater than usual number of First Nations families. The aim of the program was to address significant wellbeing, developmental, equity and community-involvement challenges felt by vulnerable children and their families in Boorloo (Perth).

Project Co-Design

Play-based in-class workshops were co-designed and delivered by Indigenous and non-Indigenous teaching artists utilising play-based arts approaches centred on Noongar history and culture for children aged 4-7 in early years educational settings. Noongar culture and arts were primarily led by Indigenous teaching artists. Community consultation meetings were held throughout the delivery of the program and included The Song Room staff, Indigenous and non-Indigenous teaching artists, school leaders, generalist teachers, and Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEO) to provide insights into the co-design of programs to tailor culturally responsive resources, workshops, and community engagement events based on the unique needs, strengths, and context of each Early Years site. They provided rich, genuine and courageous feedback, helping to balance self-determination and educational outcomes at each site in a supportive environment. Noongar community members, including Elders, were vital and actively engaged in these discussions. The lead author participated in community consultation sessions as part of the research design and engagement.

The Use of "Deadly" in Indigenous Program Naming

Within Australian Aboriginal English, the word deadly carries a meaning distinct from its standard English usage. Across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, deadly functions as a term of high praise, broadly understood to mean excellent, outstanding, or admirable. Its use in the naming of Indigenous programs, initiatives, and awards reflects a deliberate and meaningful linguistic choice rooted in cultural identity, community pride, and self-determination.

When Indigenous programs adopt this term, they signal that the initiative is designed for and by community. The word operates as an immediate marker of belonging, communicating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants that their language, expression, and ways of knowing are centred rather than marginalised. This is particularly significant in health,

education, and youth-focused programs, where the cultivation of cultural pride and positive identity is itself a core outcome alongside the program's primary objectives.

The use of deadly also reflects a broader act of linguistic reclamation. Given the historical suppression of Aboriginal languages and cultural expression across Australia, the presence of Aboriginal English in formal program titles carries political and cultural weight. It represents a quiet assertion of sovereignty — a refusal to adopt deficit-framing in favour of language that is affirmative, community-owned, and celebratory of achievement.

Program developers and government partners working with Indigenous communities are encouraged to recognise the intentionality behind such naming conventions. Far from being informal or incidental, the use of deadly communicates excellence on community terms and should be understood as consistent with, not in tension with, the professional and aspirational goals of the programs it describes.

Program Delivery

The program was delivered in four schools, across 32 classes of students aged 3-7 years. Each program was team-taught by a Noongar and non-Noongar teaching artist. Program delivery ran for 30 weeks - from the beginning of Term 4 2024 until the end Term 2 2025. Huntingdale Primary School and one other school had 2 full delivery days per week. Orelia Primary School and one other school had 1 full delivery day per week.

The sessions with teaching artists included a range of sequential play-based activities that celebrate Noongar culture, language, dance, art and song. Students learned Noongar words for colours, body parts, animals and landscapes; they sang iconic Australian songs in Noongar; created artworks that respond to the six Noongar seasons; and learned *kworlak (bullshark)* and *woordwort (dragonfly)* dances. The program was quickly adopted and integrated into the school's communities to support inclusive, thriving communities. Program meetings were conducted with the schools and Teaching Artist teams throughout the program to monitor and adjust outcomes and impact as required.

Community Engagement Projects

Culturally responsive Community Engagement Events (CEPs) were delivered at all four schools. Families welcomed these opportunities to see what their children were learning and participate in their educational life.

The Song Room delivered 10 CEPs, with a couple of these combined. These included:

- Orelia Primary School. A Song Room performance at the end-of-term school assembly. The pre-primary students played their animal freeze game, the Year 1s and Pre-Primary classes performed the Noongar chant by Honey Webb, and the Year 2s performed Peace Like a River in Noongar language. The school's AEIOs painted the students' faces and played clapsticks during the performances.

- Huntingdale Primary School. 1. Students performed the *kworlak (bullshark)* and *woordwort (dragonfly)* dances at the end-of-term school assembly. Notably, students who were part of the Song Room program in Term 4 but not the following year, were sitting in the audience mimicking all the dance moves. 2. An exhibition of dolphin and shark drawings completed by students during the term were also on display for the teachers and families to enjoy.
- Huntingdale Primary School. (NAIDOC Week Assembly). 1. Students performed the three dances, *dwerdawarent (dolphin), baamba (stingray),* and *yornan (bobtail lizard),* at the school's NAIDOC Week assembly. 2. An exhibition of artworks created by students during term two, inspired by the distinctive patterns and marks of the Makaru season and various sea animals, was on display outside the assembly hall.
- Orelia Primary School (NAIDOC Week Assembly). Song Room students sang I Am Australian in Noongar at the school's NAIDOC Week assembly.

Reach

Data collected by The Song Room estimates the program had a total reach of 2,636 people, including:

- 660 total students for the Deadly Arts program in Term 1 & Term 2 2025.
- 198 students who participated in the program in Term 4 2024
- 280 additional students, staff, and parents/carers at the first Orelia Primary School CEP
- 280 additional students, staff, and parents/carers at first Huntingdale Primary School CEP
- 228 total number of additional parents/carers who attended second CEPs at the four schools

Wellbeing Literacy

This study adopts a positive psychology perspective to wellbeing, which is broadly understood as "feeling good and functioning effectively" (Huppert & So, 2013, p. 838). Relevant to this research project is that arts participation and engagement are increasingly recognised for their contributions to children's wellbeing experiences and outcomes (e.g., Goopy & MacArthur, 2026). Understanding how to improve the wellbeing of children is a global priority, with wellbeing literacy emerging as an educational process and outcome to achieve flourishing.

Wellbeing literacy is defined as the capability to understand and intentionally use language about and for wellbeing, across contexts, to maintain or improve the wellbeing of oneself, others, or the world (Oades et al., 2020, 2021). Framed within a capabilities approach, it foregrounds what people are able to be and do with language in service of wellbeing, rather than reducing wellbeing to a set of fixed competencies or program outcomes (Oades et al., 2021).

Five interrelated components characterise this capability: vocabulary and knowledge, comprehension, composition, context sensitivity, and intentionality (see Table 1; Hou et al., 2021; Oades et al., 2021, 2022). Together, these components describe a dynamic and situated practice — one in which language is used deliberately to construct, sustain, and share wellbeing meaning across diverse social and cultural contexts. Importantly, wellbeing literacy is distinguished from adjacent constructs such as health literacy or mental health literacy, which tend to focus on illness and health-system navigation. Wellbeing literacy, by contrast, orients toward the flourishing end of the continuum, encompassing positive functioning and human potential (Oades et al., 2021, 2022).

Table 1: Wellbeing literacy capabilities

Capability	Description
Vocabulary	Having words and evidence-based knowledge about wellbeing (e.g., values, emotions, strengths)
Comprehend	Understanding wellbeing-related communication (reading, listening, viewing)
Compose	Creating wellbeing-related texts (speaking, writing, creating)
Contextualise	Adapting wellbeing language to audience, culture, and situation
Intentional	Using language deliberately to support wellbeing (not just talking about it)

Empirically, wellbeing literacy has been associated with higher wellbeing and lower illbeing across student, parent, and school staff populations, with effects observed beyond those attributable to resilience or emotion regulation alone (Hou et al., 2021). In higher education, Lemon et al. (2024) demonstrated its role in cultivating belonging and sustaining wellbeing-oriented pedagogical practice. More broadly, scholars have positioned wellbeing literacy as a mediating capability that helps explain how and why wellbeing interventions produce lasting effects (Oades et al., 2020, 2022).

For the present study, wellbeing literacy offers a productive framework for examining how Indigenous teaching artists understand, articulate, and enact wellbeing through the particular languages — verbal, embodied, and artistic — of their practice.

Arts as and for Wellbeing Literacy

Scholarship at the intersection of arts and wellbeing has grown considerably over the past decade, with researchers consistently identifying artistic practice as a site of emotional meaning-making that extends beyond traditional verbal communication. Zarobe and Bungay (2017) established foundational ground in their rapid review of arts activities and youth wellbeing, demonstrating that participation in creative group practice builds resilience, fosters emotional expression, and generates the kind of shared relational language central to wellbeing literacy. This body of work has since been elaborated through more contextualised studies. Atkinson and Robson (2012) examined arts-and-health programs in primary schools, finding that creative group sessions created liminal spaces in which children developed confidence, emotional vocabulary, and new capacities for self-expression — particularly among those who actively disengaged from formal literacy instruction. Goopy and MacArthur (2026) positioned learning music as a wellbeing strategy and found individual, social, and educational wellbeing benefits. The implications for wellbeing literacy are significant: these were spaces where composition and comprehension of wellbeing were occurring through art rather than text.

More recent scholarship has deepened this connection by positioning the arts explicitly within wellbeing literacy frameworks. Barton and Fanshawe (2024) examined the intersection of literacy, arts, and wellbeing in a rural early years classroom, finding that co-designed arts-based literacy cycles produced measurable gains in both language outcomes and student and teacher wellbeing. Baker (2025) similarly demonstrated how creative imagination, illustration, and storytelling support social and emotional wellbeing in educational settings, arguing that arts-rich pedagogies generate distinctive literacies in which students learn to externalise inner experience through image, metaphor, and narrative. Clarke and McLellan (2021) extended this argument to curriculum design, making the case that embedding arts within school environments creates conditions for sustained wellbeing practice rather than discrete, disconnected interventions.

Lemon et al. (2026) synthesise and extend these threads by theorising the arts as multimodal wellbeing literacy in practice. Drawing on music education with disengaged youth, citizen wellbeing science through photography, and printmaking workshops with First Peoples

artists in the Kimberley, they argue that artistic processes — when culturally responsive and relationally embedded — enact all five components of wellbeing literacy simultaneously, affirming self-determination and enabling flourishing across individual, community, and Place. Building on these ideas, Goopy (2026a) further conceptualised the multimodality of music as a wellbeing language and outlined music-wellbeing literacy capabilities that enable people to communicate about and for their wellbeing experiences and outcomes using music.

Noongar Culture, Arts and Living Well

Recent research with Noongar Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs) identifies four concentric circles of Aboriginal worldview as foundational to ways of working in schools: connections to kin, Country, customs and culture, threaded through by trust (Kickett-Tucker et al., 2025). Yarning, deep listening, respectful negotiation of difference, and reciprocity are identified as everyday practices that build this trust and underpin more effective teaching and learning for Aboriginal children.

For urban Aboriginal young people more broadly, culture is experienced as connection. Opportunities to connect with Elders, Country and other Aboriginal youth are described in the literature as a critical lifeline for social and emotional wellbeing (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021; Vance et al., 2024).

Indigenous arts are described in the scholarly literature as inseparable from culture and as acts of survivance and decolonisation — sustaining ways of knowing, being, doing and healing in the face of colonisation (Tabor et al., 2023; Brown et al., 2023). Culturally-rooted arts in schools have been shown to:

- foster healing, emotional regulation and spiritual wellbeing among Indigenous youth (Tabor et al., 2023; Brown et al., 2023)
- strengthen identity, voice and resistance to deficit narratives (Tabor et al., 2023; Brown et al., 2023; Black et al., 2023; Rowley & Munday, 2022)
- support educational engagement and enjoyment, offering culturally resonant alternatives to lecture-style pedagogy (Tabor et al., 2023; Buser et al., 2023; Moar et al., 2024; Clarke & McLellan, 2021).

Noongar performance specifically — encompassing language, song and dance — is framed in the literature as a means of restoring on-Country relationships and developing deeper relational literacies with water, land and people (Bracknell et al., 2021).

A Noongar-specific program for early years and primary settings is most effectively structured around the following design elements. Table 2 summarises the key components, associated Noongar-informed practices, and supporting evidence.

Table 2: Key components of a Noongar arts and wellbeing school initiative

Design Element	Noongar-Informed Practice	Key References
Governance	Elder and Noongar educator-led design; schools and teaching artists in support roles	Kickett-Tucker et al., 2025; Vance et al., 2024; Dudgeon et al., 2024; Rowley & Munday, 2022
Pedagogy	Yarning circles, story, song, dance, doll-making, and visual arts grounded in Noongar language, kin, and Country	Kickett-Tucker et al., 2025; Dudgeon et al., 2024; Palmer, 2013; Bracknell et al., 2021
Space	Safe, culturally familiar spaces — on-Country where possible; school spaces reshaped by Noongar protocols	Kickett-Tucker et al., 2025; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021; Vance et al., 2024; Dudgeon et al., 2024
Aims for children	Stronger cultural identity, belonging, agency, and emotional expression as protective factors for wellbeing	Brown et al., 2023; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021; Van Der Graaf et al., 2024; Black et al., 2023; Birrell et al., 2024; Rowley & Munday, 2022
Aims for teaching artists	Culturally respectful practice, long-term relationships, co-teaching with Elders and AIEOs	Tabor et al., 2023; Kickett-Tucker et al., 2025; Dudgeon et al., 2024; Rowley & Munday, 2022; Bracknell et al., 2021
Aims for schoolteachers	Deepened understanding of Noongar ways of working; capacity to embed culture across the curriculum, not as a bolt-on addition	Kickett-Tucker et al., 2025; Brown et al., 2023; Van Der Graaf et al., 2024; Rowley & Munday, 2022

Perth Primary Schools

Government primary schools across the Perth metropolitan region serve a socially and culturally diverse student population. Many schools are located in communities where Noongar children and families continue to reside, making cultural responsiveness and First Nations perspectives integral to quality schooling. The Western Australian Department of Education has increasingly prioritised Aboriginal cultural inclusion, with schools expected to acknowledge Country, infuse Noongar perspectives across the curriculum, and foster respectful, community-grounded approaches to learning. Arts-based programs, including those delivered by organisations such as The Song Room, play a meaningful role in these settings, providing culturally resonant pathways for student engagement, identity development, and wellbeing. For Noongar students in particular, access to culturally affirming creative arts experiences can strengthen connections to community, language, and Country, while supporting the broader social and emotional dimensions of learning.

This report focuses on the delivery of the Deadly Arts Early Years program at Huntingdale and Orelia Primary Schools. Principals from the two schools were approached to participate in the study and provided formal gatekeeper consent. Upon receiving gatekeeper consent, principals and teachers assisted in the recruitment of student participants.

Huntingdale Primary School

Huntingdale Primary School's motto is 'I Care'. The school enrols approximately 440 students across Kindergarten to Year 6, supported by around 33 teaching staff and 32 non-teaching staff. The gender distribution is approximately 54% male and 46% female. The school has an ICSEA value of 956, below the national average of 1,000. 13% of the student population identify as Indigenous. Approximately 36% of students speak a language other than English at home. The school is located in the City of Gosnells, where a significant proportion of families work in trades, manufacturing, and service industries. The school employs an Aboriginal Education Officer.

Orelia Primary School

Orelia Primary School aims to create a consistent and positive influence in every child's life by providing an engaging and supportive learning environment. The school serves approximately 300 students across Kindergarten to Year 6 within the City of Kwinana. There are approximately 54% male and 46% female students. Schools in the Kwinana area consistently report ICSEA values below the national average of 1,000, with Orelia's ICSEA being 919. The school has 20 teaching staff and 20 non-teaching staff. 20% of students identify as Indigenous, and 27% have a language background other than English. The school employs an Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer (AIEO) and offers a dedicated Noongar specialist program, reflecting the presence of Noongar students and families within the school community.

The Approach to Research

This case study aimed to generate new knowledge on how the Deadly Arts Early Years program offered by The Song Room in Western Australia government primary schools builds wellbeing literacy in early childhood education using Noongar culture, arts, and storytelling. The Deadly Arts Early Years program is an intrinsic case providing a distinctive and contextualised First Nations educational initiative holding instrumental value by providing an exemplar model that could be adapted to other school and community settings (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 2005).

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research.

1. What are the Noongar culture and creative arts wellbeing literacy capabilities experienced by children and teaching artists in the Deadly Arts Early Years program?
2. How do young children and teaching artists benefit from the Noongar culture and creative arts wellbeing literacy capabilities nurtured in this program?

Ethics and Informed Consent

This project received the approval of Edith Cowan University's Human Research Ethics Committee in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2023). The approval number is 2024-06106-GOOPY. A Human Ethics Registration was also submitted to the University of Melbourne (2025-33837-70882-4), and this study met the policy requirements of the Department of Education WA. Gatekeeper consent was provided by The Song Room and Principals of Huntingdale and Orelia Primary Schools. An online information session was prepared for parents and caregivers, introducing the research project. School teachers were provided with a recruitment script to read to their students, and a paper and digital copy of the participant information letter and consent form were sent home, which also included a parent and caregiver script. Parents and caregivers provided written consent, and young children provided verbal assent at the beginning of interviews. Schools assisted in facilitating the return of consent forms. Working with The Song Room, the research team contacted teaching artists with a digital information letter and consent form. All participants are de-identified and reported using pseudonyms. The Song Room and the Principals provided feedback on a draft report and approval for publication.

Creative Arts-Based Methods

This study utilised creative arts-based research methods. Creative arts-based methods centre participant experience, voice, and meaning-making rather than extracting data from a distance (Leavy, 2015). In contexts involving young children, they are particularly well suited because they work with children's natural modes of expression, including drawing, movement, storytelling, and play, rather than imposing adult-centred verbal or textual forms that may constrain what children are able to communicate (Dockett & Perry, 2011). For young children, a drawing is not a supplementary data source but a primary language through which complex feelings and understandings can be expressed with a fluency that interview talk alone rarely achieves. Creative arts-based methods also hold deep alignment with Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, in which knowledge has always been held and transmitted through song, story, visual art, dance, and ceremony (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2021). In Noongar culture, arts practices are not separate from knowledge but are knowledge, carrying *katitjin (knowledge)* about Country, kinship, and community across generations. For the Deadly Arts program, which sat at the intersection of arts education, Noongar cultural practice, and the wellbeing of young children, creative arts-based methods were not a methodological convenience but a principled commitment to research that respected the integrity of the experiences it sought to understand.

Draw and Tell Interviews

Draw and tell interviews were the primary data generation method, drawing on their established use as a participatory, child-centred approach that invites young people to create a drawing and then narrate its meaning in their own words (Angell et al., 2015; Eldén, 2013; Coyne et al., 2021). This method externalises thought and experience into a tangible artefact that becomes a shared object of conversation, reducing the asymmetry of power between researcher and child and opening space for meaning that spoken language alone may not readily access. Draw and tell interviews have been used productively in music education research with young people, enabling rich accounts of musical identity, psychological needs, and wellbeing (Goopy, 2022; 2024; 2026a; 2026b). The current study complements other emerging research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children drawing and yarning about wellbeing (Anderson et al., 2026), while also revealing the wellbeing perspectives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous children learning together in school about Noongar culture and arts.

Group interviews with children and individual interviews with teaching artists were held in Term 4 2025 and conducted by a member of the research team. A 20-minute group interview with five students from Kindergarten to Year 2 (ages 5-7 years) was conducted at each of the two schools. There were five male (Koby, Liam, Jarrah, Mason, and Dillon) and five female (Amira, Sharna, Indie, Keely, and Zara) student participants. The students were a combination of Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. Three Indigenous (Kylie, Wade, and Jodie) and two non-Indigenous (Claire and Megan) teaching artists completed two 30-minute interviews.

Each interview was structured with an introduction, a draw and tell task, and a close. In the introductory phase, an understanding of the conversation was created, and wellbeing was defined to participants as simply, "feeling good and doing well". For the draw and tell task, all participants were invited to respond to the question: "How do Noongar culture and arts support your wellbeing?" Participants were provided time and space to complete their drawing using a paper template and pastels, with some starting numerous drawings. The research team interviewer also drew at the same time. Sometimes participants explained their perspective while drawing or waited until they were finished. Follow-up questions included "What does your drawing represent?", "Why is this important to you?", and "How does this benefit you?" In the second interview for teaching artists, they were asked the drawing question, "How is children's wellbeing supported by Noongar culture and arts?", recognising their unique positionality as both cultural practitioners and pedagogical witnesses to children's experiences. The drawing process was understood as a form of wellbeing communication, an act of composing and expressing knowledge about what it means to live and flourish well (Oades et al., 2021), and holds meaningful alignment with Indigenous storytelling traditions in which visual, oral, and embodied practices work together as integrated modes of knowledge-making and transmission (Iseke, 2013).

To close, participants were asked whether there was anything else they would like to say, and they were thanked for their time. Teaching artists were provided with a gift card in recognition of their time contribution to the research. A distress protocol (Whitney & Evered, 2022) was embedded in the interview design to allow participants to indicate if some activities or questions were stressful or upsetting, ensuring that the relational and ethical obligations of the research were maintained throughout. All interviews were audio- and video-recorded, and drawings generated during the group interviews were collected, digitally scanned, and uploaded to a secure university data storage site.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and drawings were analysed using a combination of reflexive thematic analysis and visual narratives. The six phases of inductive reflexive analysis were used (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Braun et al., 2019; Byrne, 2022; Terry et al., 2017). These involved researchers familiarising themselves with the data and repeated readings of the transcripts. Codes were identified, data organised, and themes generated. Themes were then defined, described, evidenced with data, and then interrogated against the literature.

Visual Narratives

Visual narratives are presented throughout the findings as portraits to evidence and elaborate on the themes. Drawings and participant descriptions were read using the Ways of Meaning framework. The Ways of Meaning framework is grounded in visual methods and social semiotics (Rose, 2007) — the study of how meaning is made and communicated through signs and symbols in social contexts. It recognises that visual images are not neutral or decorative but are complex meaning-making systems through which individuals construct and communicate knowledge, relationships, perspectives, and experiences. In the context

of this research, the framework provided a structured approach to treating children's drawings and Indigenous artists and non-Indigenous artists artworks as legitimate and sophisticated forms of data — worthy of the same careful analytical attention accorded to interview transcripts or survey responses.

The framework is particularly well-suited to research involving young children and diverse cultural contexts, as it does not privilege verbal or written language as the primary mode of meaning-making. Instead, it acknowledges that people — and particularly young people — communicate through multiple modes simultaneously, and that the full meaning of any artwork resides in the relationship between what is shown, what is said, how it is organised spatially, and how it is received by an audience.

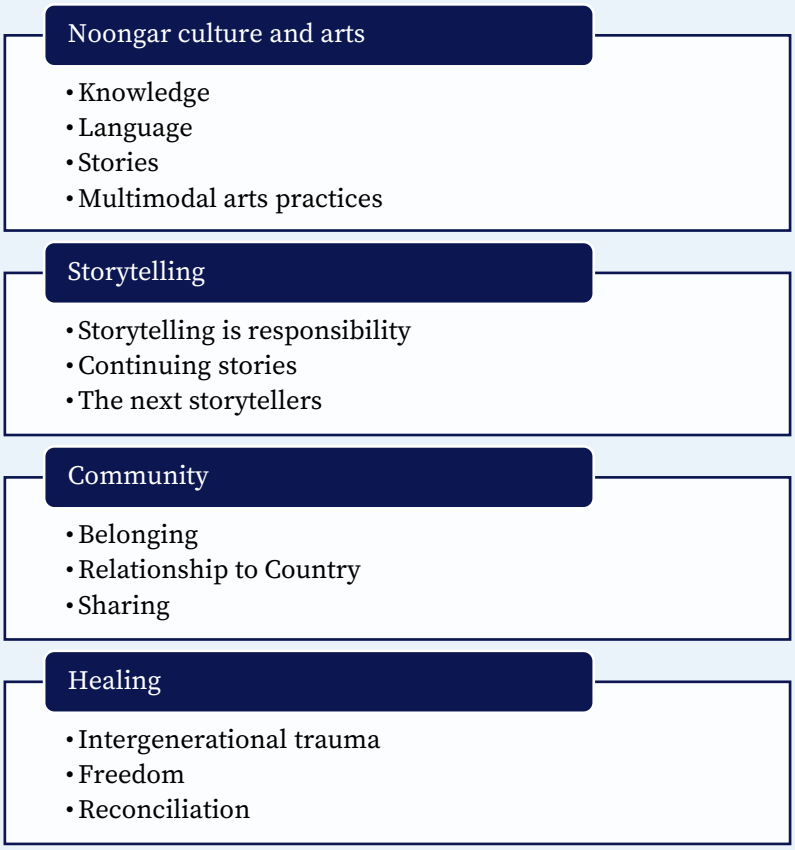
The Ways of Meaning framework organises visual analysis across two interconnected branches: a) Image Itself and b) Audiencing. Each branch contains a series of analytical questions that guide the researcher toward a comprehensive interpretation of the artwork. Image Itself addresses the internal properties of the image — what it shows, what knowledge it draws upon, what relationships it constructs, and what perspective it communicates. This branch is organised around the central question *How does the image look?* and generates four lines of inquiry: What is being shown? What knowledge is being employed? What relationships are being established? What perspective is being given or told? Together these questions direct the analyst toward the content, the cultural and personal knowledge embedded in that content, the relational meanings constructed between the elements depicted, and the point of view from which the image speaks.

Audiencing addresses the conditions under which the image is seen and received — how technology mediates its presentation, how its spatial organisation generates meaning, and how the relationship between visual and textual elements produces a complete communicative act. This branch is organised around the central question *How is the image seen?* and generates three lines of inquiry: How is the image seen through technology? What is the spatial organisation? What is the intertextual relationship between visual and text elements? Together these questions direct the analyst toward the material and contextual conditions of the image's reception, the compositional choices that generate meaning spatially, and the ways in which words and images work together — or in productive tension — to produce meaning that neither could achieve alone.

Following the presentation of themes and visual narratives, the findings are discussed in relation to advancing our understanding of wellbeing literacy capabilities of young children and Indigenous and non-Indigenous teaching artists using Noongar culture, arts, and storytelling. The report concludes with implications and recommendations for policy, practice, and research.

Findings

Findings from this case study reveal that Noongar culture and arts function as an interconnected system of knowledge, language, story, and multimodal practice through which wellbeing literacy is transmitted, enacted, and renewed across generations. Storytelling emerged as the connective thread running through every dimension of this system — understood not as a peripheral activity but as a profound cultural responsibility, one that binds Elders, teaching artists, children, and community in a shared obligation to receive stories faithfully, continue them respectfully, and one day pass them on. This responsibility is inseparable from community: participants described belonging, relationship to Country, and the act of sharing as mutually reinforcing foundations of flourishing, each deepened through engagement with arts-based cultural learning. Most strikingly, the data points to the healing potential of this work — not as an incidental outcome but as a structurally embedded dimension of Noongar cultural practice, one that holds intergenerational trauma alongside hard-won freedoms and orients young people toward a vision of reconciliation grounded in cultural pride, relational accountability, and the living knowledge of who they are and where they come from.



Noongar Culture and Arts

For Noongar people, art is not simply creative expression — it is a living practice through which culture, language and connection to Country are maintained, taught and passed between generations. Song, dance, performance, theatre and storytelling each serve as pathways back to ancestral knowledge, helping communities process the grief of colonisation while affirming the enduring strength of Noongar identity (Bracknell, 2020; Quayle & Sonn, 2019). Projects such as Noongar-language theatre productions and immersive children's digital experiences demonstrate how artistic practice can simultaneously revive endangered languages and equip young people with a deep sense of who they are and where they belong (Kickett-Tucker et al., 2025). In this way, the arts function as both cultural archive and living ceremony — not a record of what was lost, but proof of what remains.

Knowledge

Knowledge sat at the heart of the Deadly Arts program, not as content to be delivered but as a living inheritance to be honoured and shared on Noongar terms. Article 31(1) of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirms that Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, including oral traditions, literatures, designs, and visual and performing arts (United Nations, n.d.). The knowledge shared within the Deadly Arts program with non-Indigenous teaching artists, children, teachers, and researchers encompassed many of these dimensions: cultural heritage, language, place, Country, kinship, and traditional ways of knowing and being. Identity, as expressed through children's drawings and teaching artists' reflections, was inseparable from this knowledge, manifested through representations of culture, kinship, and ancestral understanding that affirmed who participants are and where they come from. In this sense, the Deadly Arts program was an act of cultural sovereignty in which Noongar teaching artists exercised their right to share *katadjin (knowledge)* on their own terms, strengthening the cultural identity and wellbeing of every participant (Collard et al., 2004; Smith, 2021).

Loving Yourself, Others, and Caring for Country

Wade (Indigenous teaching artist)

Wade reflected on how Noongar cultural practices carry deep teachings about identity, self-acceptance, and connection to the natural world. Central to his description was the role of totem stories, which he explained are told not only to celebrate strengths but to honestly reckon with shadow and complexity, creating a foundation for young people to understand and accept themselves fully:

"Through song, through dance, through story, where we tell the stories of all the totems . . . we talk about the negative sides that come with the strengths . . . and understanding that from a place of unconditional love and allowing people to be authentically them . . . it's a lot better to just play to your strengths and be authentically you. And then you can be a person that unconditionally loves yourself. And then you can begin to unconditionally love other people too. And then extending even further . . . looking at the birds, looking at the bees, looking at the trees, looking at the waterways as something that you should care about and feel obligated to do the right thing by."

For Wade, this movement — from cultural story, to self-knowledge, to unconditional self-love, to love of others, and finally to responsibility toward Country — was not incidental to Noongar arts practice but constitutive of it. Culture, in this account, does not simply support wellbeing as an external resource; it teaches the very disposition from which flourishing becomes possible.

Language

Language is recognised as a vital dimension of Indigenous life, wellbeing, identity, autonomy, and sovereignty (Sivak et al., 2019), with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirming the right of Indigenous peoples, including children, to access culture and education in their own language (United Nations, n.d.). In the Deadly Arts program, language emerged as one of the most powerful dimensions of children's engagement with Noongar culture. For Noongar people, language is not simply a communication system but a living carrier of *katadjin (knowledge)*, encompassing knowledge about Country, kinship, identity, and ways of living well (Collard et al., 2004). When children heard, spoke, and sang in Noongar language, they were not acquiring vocabulary but being introduced to a different way of knowing and relating to the world. Teaching artists described hearing children use Noongar words in greetings, acknowledgement songs, and in naming the seasons as deeply moving, a sign that something essential was being passed on. Murrup-Stewart et al. (2021) found that cultural knowledge, including language, was among the most significant factors shaping Aboriginal young people's sense of connection and social and emotional wellbeing, while Smith (2021) has argued that language is central to decolonising processes, carrying within it Indigenous epistemologies and ways of being that affirm the continuity of living cultures.

Wagyl (Rainbow Snakes)

Sharna (child)

Sharna has drawn a lush, expansive landscape — a vivid green field stretching across the full width of the page, framed by two large trees, a bright yellow sun, and a blue sky rendered in energetic diagonal strokes. Wagyl (rainbow snakes) appear to rest low in the grass, almost tucked into the earth. It is notably a land scene rather than an underwater one, and the season she names is spring — suggesting this image is as much about Country and place as it is about individual experience.

Sharna demonstrates impressive Noongar language knowledge — perhaps the most fluent of the three children so far. She confidently recalls dwerdawarent (dolphin) and kworlak (bull shark) in conversation, and the researcher responds with genuine admiration: "Your Noongar is incredible." She references the yornan (bobtail lizard), making art from natural materials, and is actively curious — asking "How do I spell water flow in Noongar?" This is a child not just receiving cultural knowledge but reaching further into it.

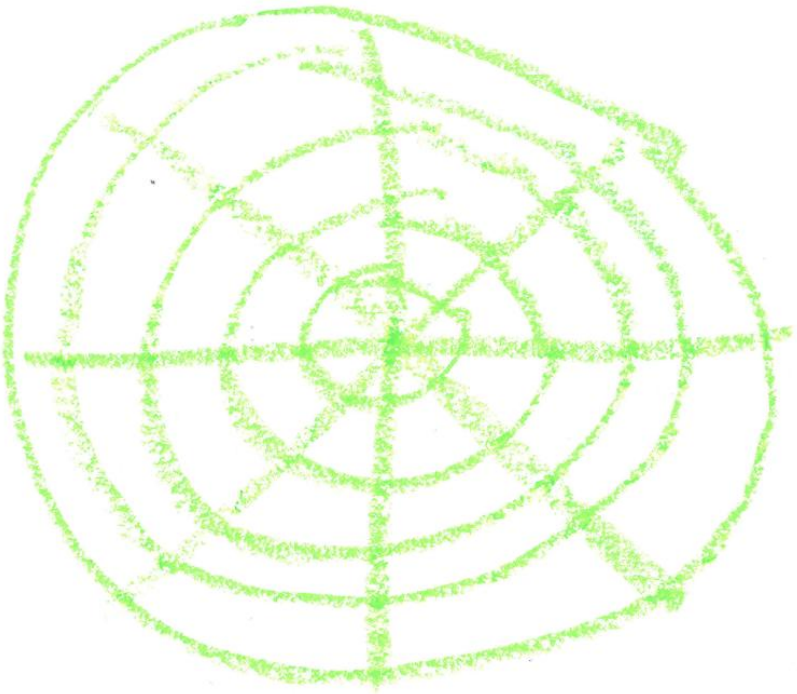
Sharna's work is distinguished by its linguistic confidence and ecological orientation. Her drawing is not a self-portrait or a performance — it is an act of place-making. She draws Country in spring, and then reaches for the Noongar words to fully inhabit it.

Stories

Stories emerged in the Deadly Arts program as the connective web of the entire cultural experience — the medium through which knowledge, identity, Country, and community were simultaneously transmitted and renewed. The right for Indigenous peoples to revitalise, use, develop and transmit their histories, languages, and traditions is laid out in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, n.d.). For Noongar people, stories are living knowledge, carrying the teachings of ancestral beings, the contours of Country, and the obligations of kinship across generations (Collard et al., 2004). Teaching artists described stories as responsibility — something to be received with care, held faithfully, and passed on with integrity — and children engaged with Noongar stories through song, dance, visual art, and movement in ways that were holistic, embodied, and relational. Iseke (2013) observed that Indigenous storytelling sustains communities, validates experiences, and nurtures relationships — a characterisation that resonated throughout the Deadly Arts program, where stories created the conditions for belonging, cultural pride, and cross-cultural understanding. For Indigenous teaching artists, sharing stories in schools carried healing dimensions, affirming the vitality of a culture that colonisation sought to silence, and reflecting what Quayle and Sonn (2019) describe as storytelling as a site of resistance, reclamation, and healing.

Zooming Out

Wade (Indigenous teaching artist)



Wade drew on a series of expanding spatial metaphors — from the eagle's view, to the moon, to the Milky Way — to describe the deep interconnection of all living things, Country, and ancestral beings:

"That's just about zooming out . . . how the eagle looks at the landscape, zooming out . . . how the moon looks at the landscape, zooming out . . . way out when you look at the Milky Way and seeing that there are threads that connect everything and that everything that we do affects everything else. And so those 800 countries across Australia, the 500 nations that lived on those countries — they understood how they connected. And it wasn't something that was made up. It was a deep, profound, intimate understanding of the energy that lies under the land. And that's the songlines. The songlines are like webs that connect up . . . within our community, within our local [songlines]. Those are the totems that walk the land and the ancestral beings that left their impressions in the land. And they're the ancestral beings that have human reincarnations that represent them, and represent those totems, represent those stories. And each of those threads are just as important as the next — each node within that web just as important as the next. And as soon as one of those is weak, the whole web is weak."

Bip-Mart-Mokiny (The Milky Way)

Mason (child)

Mason's drawing is the most cosmically scaled response in the cohort — where others drew forests, oceans, fields, and dances, Mason drew bip-mart-mokiny (the Milky Way). That the Deadly Arts program has opened a child's awareness upward, to Country's night sky, and that seeing those colours produces happiness so strong it needs saying twice — "very happy, very happy," says Mason in the group interview — is a remarkable testament to the program's reach. Across the cohort, Mason gives us sky as Country, wonder as wellbeing, and the profound simplicity of a child who looked up and felt held by what they saw.

Mason draws on a specific sensory memory — looking up at the night sky and seeing the Milky Way, with all its colours. That a young child has both seen the Milky Way and chosen to represent it speaks to an attentiveness to Country and sky that the Deadly Arts program has cultivated. The use of every available colour to render what might seem like a dark night sky is a deeply intuitive and accurate choice — the Milky Way is not black, it is abundant with colour. Mason knows this from looking.

The relationship between the Milky Way mass and the floating face is the heart of this image — the vast, colourful cosmos on one side, the small, happy self on the other. They share the same space without touching, yet clearly belong together. Mason has placed themselves in relationship with something enormous and beautiful, and the feeling that results is simple and total: very happy.

Multimodal Arts Practices

People make meaning and express how they are feeling not just through words, but through images, music, movement, art, and digital media — this is what researchers call multimodality. When applied to wellbeing, this means that living well involves both *understanding* and *creating* these varied forms of expression: listening to music that lifts the mood, writing to connect with others, or making art to process life's joys and difficulties (Oades et al., 2021). Designing learning and community environments that draw on multiple modes — visual, auditory, physical, digital — has been shown to increase engagement, build emotional vocabulary, and support resilience across diverse populations (Morton et al., 2020). In short, wellbeing is not a single conversation; it is a chorus of languages, and the more fluently people can use them, the richer their capacity to thrive.

Drawing Language

Indie (child)

Indie has drawn a dynamic, layered scene featuring a bold blue stingray as the central figure, set against a yellow landscape with what appears to be a red creature (possibly a crab or the woordwart/dragonfly in progress), blue sky elements at the top, and handwritten text embedded directly into the image — "Wordu Wor" and "bum b" — suggesting she is writing Noongar language words as part of the artwork itself. She has also noted her intention to add a woordwart (dragonfly) in the sky.

Indie is drawing on significantly rich cultural knowledge from the Deadly Arts program. She uses Noongar language terminology — woordwart (dragonfly) and yornan (bobtail lizard) — demonstrating that she has not just participated in activities but has absorbed and retained specific Indigenous language and ecological knowledge. She also references the baamba (stingray) dance, linking movement, culture, and animal knowledge together. Her comment, "We also learned how to make art pieces out of nature", points to hands-on, Country-based art-making.

Indie's work is striking for its depth of cultural retention. Indie's centres on knowledge and language — she has taken specific Noongar words, animals, and practices and woven them directly into her artwork. The embedded text in the drawing is particularly powerful: it suggests Indie sees language and image as inseparable, which is deeply aligned with how Noongar culture integrates Country, story, and visual representation. Her image is also notably in process — a live, thinking document rather than a finished reflection.

Swimming Freely

Amira (child)

Amira has drawn herself as a mermaid — a figure with a vivid blue tail, flowing pink-red hair, and outstretched arms — swimming freely in an underwater world with golden sand, green seaweed, and a stingray.

Amira draws on her embodied experience of the Deadly Arts program — particularly dance. The mermaid is a powerful choice: mermaids are free-moving, fluid, and exist between worlds (water and air), which mirrors how Amira may have experienced movement through dance. She also shows environmental awareness, depicting an underwater ecosystem with multiple elements. Notably, she self-critiques — "My body's too big. Maybe we could do texture for the like scale" — revealing emerging metacognitive awareness of artistic representation.

The central relationship in this image is between Amira-as-mermaid and the stingray — they share the water, swimming together in what feels like harmony rather than encounter. This mirrors the relational quality of the baamba (stingray) dance itself, where the dancer takes on the movement and spirit of the animal. Amira is not observing the stingray; she is with it, which speaks to a Noongar understanding of Country where humans and animals are in relationship rather than hierarchy. The surrounding environment — sand, seaweed, water — further frames this as a place of belonging.

She has translated an abstract concept — cultural wellbeing — into a vivid, embodied metaphor. The mermaid represents the freedom, movement, and joy she experienced through dance in the Deadly Arts program, with the Stingray, she is placing herself alongside and with Noongar culture.

Storytelling

For Noongar people, storytelling and wellbeing are interwoven expressions of a living culture sustained across thousands of years on Noongar Boodjar. Stories carry *katitjin (knowledge)* about Country, kinship, seasons, and the moral fabric of community life. Noongar stories are one of the oldest and most sophisticated forms of wellbeing literacy the world has known. Story is a practice in Indigenous cultures that sustains communities, validates experiences and epistemologies, expresses experiences of Indigenous peoples, and nurtures relationships and the sharing of knowledge (Iseke, 2013). Wellbeing literacy in Noongar culture is not an individual acquisition, but a collective inheritance, held in stories transmitted through relationships and renewed in each generation. The Deadly Art's program demonstrates storytelling in educational practice by connecting children and their school communities with Noongar culture through rich arts experiences that promote learning, community connection and pride. To engage with Noongar storytelling traditions means to live well, not only grounded in individual capability, but in responsibility to others, to Country, and to those who came before and those yet to come.

Embodied

Dillon (child)

Dillon's three drawings form an arc — not a single statement but an unfolding, each image adding a new dimension to what the previous one began.

The first drawing is immediate and physical. Dillon climbs a tree, writes the words directly into the image, and offers perhaps the most bodily answer in the entire cohort to the question of how Noongar culture and arts help you. There is no distance between child and Country — the answer is in the hands, the feet, the upward reach of a body in motion through a living tree. Wellbeing, for Dillon, begins in physical contact with the world.

The second drawing deepens this. The body that climbed now rests, and in its place a large blue heart sits at the centre of a landscape — flanked by tree and bush, anchored by a small golden form below. Country is still present, still surrounding, but now it is holding something interior: love. Dillon has moved from the outside of experience to the inside, from action to feeling, without leaving the natural world. The heart does not float in abstract space — it belongs among the trees, as naturally as anything else that grows there.

The third drawing opens the widest. A smiling, open-armed figure stands amid an abundance of colourful oval forms — seeds, pods, living things in every colour — alongside a bold red form suggesting a cultural or made space. The self is present, warm, receptive, surrounded by proliferating richness. Dillon's world has grown with each drawing: from one tree, to a landscape holding love, to an entire field of abundant and varied living things.

Read together, Dillon's three images offer a complete and coherent response to the wellbeing question — one that unfolds progressively across image, feeling, and belonging. First the body finds Country. Then the heart finds its place within it. Then the self discovers it is surrounded by abundance. This is not a child who has learned about Noongar culture at arm's length — this is a child who has moved through it, felt it, and arrived somewhere richer than where they began.

Storytelling is Responsibility

In Noongar culture, storytelling is a cultural obligation inseparable from the responsibilities of belonging to Country, kin, and community. *Katitjin (knowledge)* belongs to the Noongar people, and all lore and customs, including the stories that carry knowledge, are considered sacred and have been transmitted over thousands of years (Kaartdijin Noongar, 2014). Noongar people are bound to a kinship system and unwritten lore passed down through Elders which guides every aspect of culture. Knowledge sharing is a cornerstone of Noongar culture, with ancient wisdom flowing from Elders to younger generations. The right and responsibility of who can tell a given story is governed by cultural protocol (Collard, 2004), including how wellbeing knowledge is passed on. Culture is experienced as connection, and perceived connection or disconnection has an essential influence on the wellbeing of young people, with cultural knowledge, relationships, and community support shaping what it means to flourish (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021). This is reflected in the design of the Deadly Arts program, which is conceived and led by First Nations artists, placing local First Nations artists in schools alongside experienced educators so that First Nations cultural learning can take place in safe, authentic and inclusive ways in classrooms. The Deadly Arts program centred Indigenous teaching artists as custodians of knowledge, sharing Noongar stories with non-Indigenous teaching artists, children, their teachers, and the broader school community. Storytelling functioned as a form of wellbeing literacy to sustain flourishing across generations and community.

Continuing Stories

The continuation of Noongar stories across generations is an act of cultural practice. Its continuation is essential for cultural survival, and its interruption carries costs to community wellbeing. To be Noongar is to belong, and storytelling is the thread that holds together connection to *boodja (country)*, *moort (family)*, and *katitjin (knowledge)* across time (Collard et al., 2004). Intergenerational transmission through yarning, on-Country learning, and Elder-led gatherings is both a cultural and wellbeing practice providing literacy capabilities to understand who they are, where they come from, and how to live well within their community (Iseke, 2013). The Deadly Arts program operates in a similar spirit with stories, traditions, and practices of Indigenous teaching artists shared with students, teachers, and school communities.

Hearts in My Tummy

Koby (child)

Koby has drawn two distinct but inseparable elements: a large, solemnly rendered self-portrait head at the top — dark blue, wide-eyed, with a striking red mouth — and below it, a framed rectangle filled with an abundance of hearts in blue, orange, and red. The interview transcription anchors the image's meaning entirely: "I think about love hearts in his tummy." The prompt was "How do Noongar culture and arts help you?" "It relaxed me", he goes on to say.

Koby draws on somatic, body-based knowledge — he locates his response to the question inside his body. At this age, this is a remarkable and developmentally sophisticated act of introspection. The heart is the universal symbol of feeling, but Koby has multiplied it — there is not one feeling, there is a whole field of them, overflowing. He also understands the body as having an inside and an outside, and that something important is happening on the inside that the outside face does not fully show.

The relationship here is between the visible self (the face, watchful and still) and the interior self (the tummy, full of love hearts). This is a deeply felt image of inner emotional life. There is also a relationship between Koby and the Deadly Arts experience — the hearts in his tummy are the answer to the question, meaning the program has generated something warm and abundant within him, even if he cannot yet articulate it in words.

The Next Storytellers

The Deadly Arts program illustrates how storytelling, wellbeing, and education converge to shape the next generation of cultural custodians. At the centre are Indigenous teaching artists whose presence and authority in the learning environment embody what it means to carry stories with care. When children learn alongside these artists, they are not simply receiving cultural content; they are being inducted into a living practice, learning that stories belong to people, to Country, and to community, and that one day the responsibility of carrying them will pass to them. The Deadly Arts program provided a platform for schools and their communities to learn about, engage with, and participate in Indigenous culture and heritage in safe, authentic, and inclusive ways through the arts. When children grow up in schools where the story is honoured, and culture is central, they become young people who know who they are, where they come from, and what they carry. This is wellbeing literacy in its most profound form; not as an individual skill, but a living inheritance to be received, tended, and one day passed on (Riley et al, 2024).

Window of Colour

Jarrah (child)

Jarrah approached the draw and tell interview with infectious enthusiasm, picking up his pencil and beginning to draw almost before the question had finished. "I like colouring in!" he exclaimed, his energy filling the room. His first image was a sun, drawn with confident strokes. "This is when we were taught how to say sun in Noongar," he said, before adding a smiling face beside it. "This is a smiley face because it made me feel happy." He moved quickly to his next drawing, capturing the experience of learning to count to four in Noongar, the numbers given shape and colour on the page. Almost immediately, he added a large, beaming grin with teeth showing — a face so full of delight it seemed to laugh from the page.

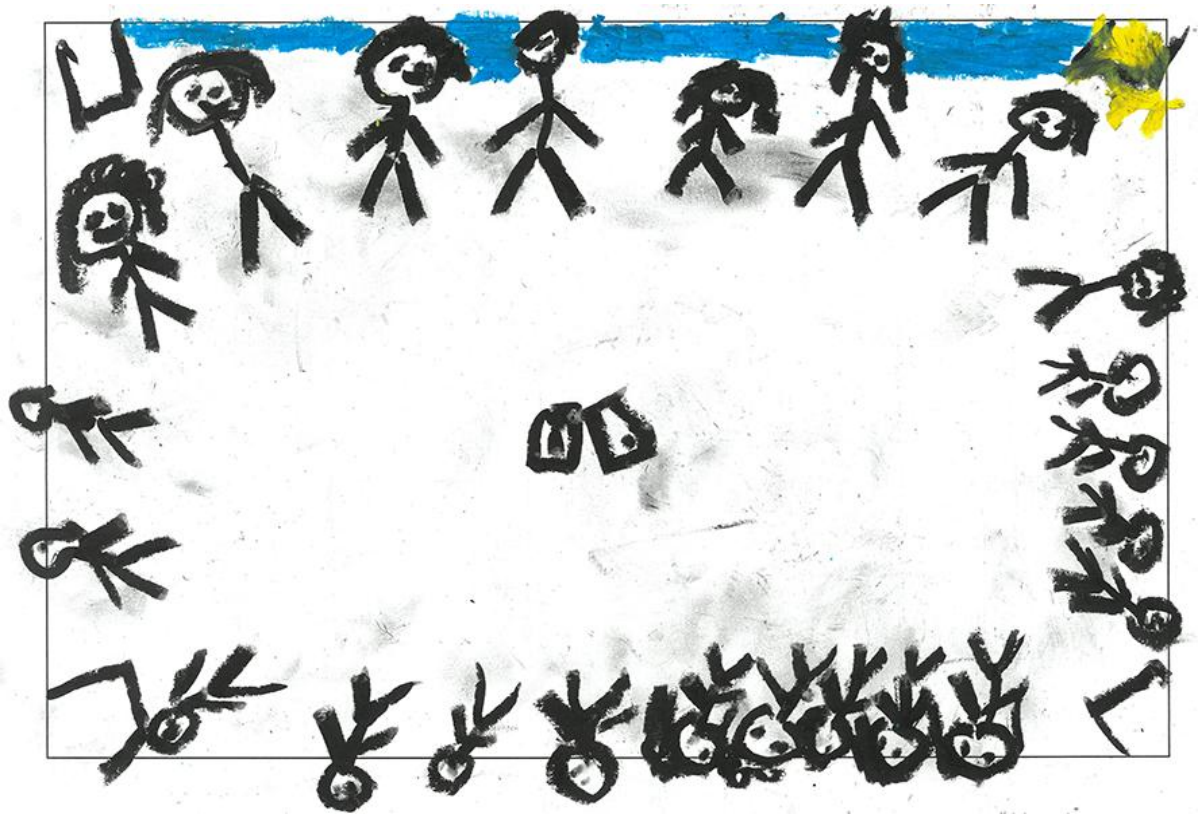
The featured drawing is a window of colour, divided into vibrant quadrants, each section holding a different memory of cultural learning, yet together forming a single, coherent image of joy. Jarrah's use of colour is not incidental but expressive, each hue carrying its own warmth and intensity, the whole composition radiating the energy of a child fully engaged in something that matters to him. What is most striking is not any individual element but the cumulative effect: a child who has been seen, included, and given something meaningful to carry. For Jarrah, Noongar culture and arts did not simply support his wellbeing — they lit it up.

Community

In Noongar culture, *moort (family)*, extends far beyond the household to encompass wide networks of relatives, Elders and kin whose relationships carry real obligations of care, reciprocity and shared responsibility (Robertson et al., 2024). Kinship is not peripheral to Noongar community life; it is the organising principle at its centre, shaping how children are raised, how cultural knowledge is passed down, and how people relate to one another and to Country (Kickett-Tucker et al., 2025). This web of connection means that community wellbeing is inherently collective — when kin networks are strong, so too is the transmission of language, story, values and cultural practice across generations (Crowe, 2018). For government programs and services to be effective with Noongar communities, recognising and working with — rather than around — these kinship structures is not optional; it is foundational.

Community and Ceremony

Keely (child)



Keely has drawn a large ensemble scene — stick figures populate the entire border of the page, arranged around the perimeter in what strongly suggests a circle or gathering formation. The central space is filled with dense, branching plant forms — native vegetation rendered in energetic mark-making. A thin blue sky strip runs across the top with a small yellow sun. This is a community image, a picture of people and Country together.

Keely's drawing is the most communal and ceremonial response in the cohort. While other children drew personal experiences of the program — a mermaid dancing with a stingray, a forest of gems, a spring landscape — Keely drew the gathering itself: people in a circle around Country. Her image functions almost as a map of belonging. What she has actually drawn is the essential shape of what was learned: that Noongar culture holds people and Country together, in circle, in community. Across the cohort, Keely gives us community and ceremony, completing a remarkably rich spectrum of meaning.

Belonging

In Noongar culture, belonging is not something felt in isolation — it is experienced through being held in relationship with *moort (family)*, community, *Boodjar (Country)* and shared culture, in spaces where Noongar ways of working are respected and upheld (Kickett-Tucker et al., 2025). Research with Noongar Elders found that culturally grounded programs built genuine belonging through trust, yarning together, shared laughter and the simple act of being with mob in a way that felt right — with participants describing finding themselves again through that connection to *koolunger (the younger generation)* and *deman (old people)* alike (Gidgup et al., 2022). For Aboriginal young people more broadly, culture functions as a lifeline: connection to *moort (family), Boodjar (Country),* language and story is directly linked to stronger identity, social and emotional wellbeing, and resilience (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021). This evidence is unambiguous in its implication for government — belonging cannot be delivered through a program; it must be grown through culturally safe, community-led spaces where Noongar people are not recipients of a service, but the authors of their own gathering on *Boodjar (Country)*.

We are a Part of Something Bigger Than Just One

Megan (non-Indigenous teaching artist)

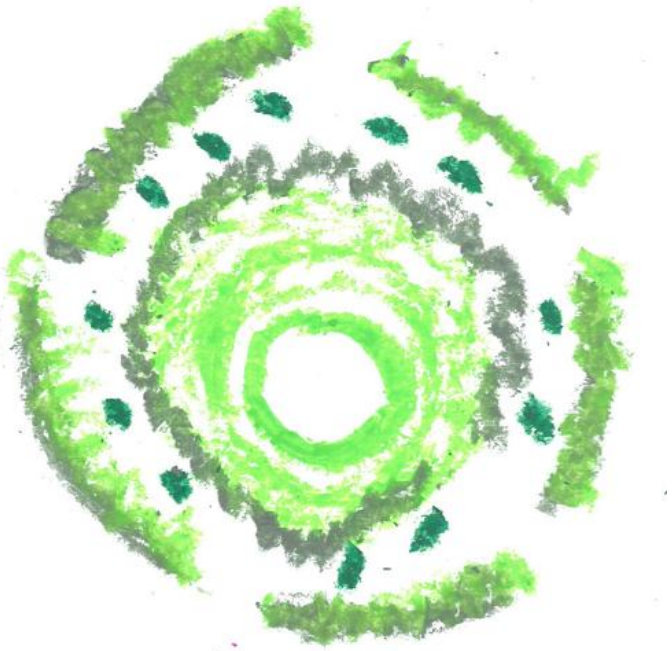
Megan reflected on how the arts create conditions for equality, connection, and belonging — drawing on the image of the heart as an open space of play, and the circle as a symbol of community:

"I feel like the heart is like that kind of open space of play . . . being connected, not so much in the intellect. You are using the body and you're relating in a different way where the kids aren't below you, you are just equals. And the circle is like all of us together. We use circles a lot — in circus, but then also in the dances we were doing — having that circle formation where we're all joined together. It's circular so it's not linear . . . it's got that sense that you're a part of that community. I like to bring that into teaching and sometimes let the kids lead. And then I put these animals in because they were probably from a lot of the games I remember learning with the kids."

For Megan, the body, the circle, and the animal — rather than the intellect or hierarchy — were the primary sites of connection, belonging, and shared wellbeing.

We've Exchanged Energy

Claire (non-Indigenous teaching artist)



Claire reflected on the holistic quality of Wade's practice (her Indigenous teaching artist partner), describing how the colour green in her drawing represented a sense of wholeness, inner flow, and self-acceptance — and how these qualities were embodied in the way Wade gathered children together:

"Green basically means . . . a representation of when you feel whole. When you feel like you're reflecting in your inner self, when you feel like there's a flow of energy and when you feel like you are enough in yourself and you're one big whole being. And when I made these round green abstract works . . . it was basically how Wade would bring everyone together in a round circle, in a dance circle, and they would sit together — and it was not an ordinary mat time session or just sitting together. It was a really holistic experience, especially with the younger kids. We would sit together, we would get the peppermint leaves, we would rub them, we would smell them, and then we would start off saying how we're feeling about our day . . . we would talk about the stories, we would dance, and then we would come back and sit again. And then we would talk about how we are feeling now and how we've exchanged the energy."

Central to Claire's reflection was Wade's way of honouring each child's contribution — creating a space where participation was never compelled and every offering was received as enough:

"He would reflect on every child's interest or whatever they wanted to add or subtract from the experience . . . building connections with each child and giving that idea that you're enough and whatever you're bringing to the table is enough. And if someone would say that

they don't want to participate… he would always create that space that this is okay. So I think that's why the children felt so safe with Wade and started building those connections with him."

For Claire, this practice pointed toward a deeper vision of what teaching is ultimately for — the cultivation of confident, grounded young people who carry a positive sense of self into the world:

"At the core of teaching, I really feel like we want children to become adults where they have a good self-esteem and a positive self-image of themselves . . . and they can only contribute to society as they grow up with confidence and with grace if they're confident about themselves. It starts off from this age where you give them that support, that environment, of just letting them become themselves. And Wade was practising that a lot within his program, even when he wasn't saying this out loud . . . his actions and his body language were such that . . . just be your true self. And there was less restriction, less friction in our classes, and there was more going with the flow and going with the energy."

Relationship to Country

For Noongar people, *Boodjar (Country),* is not simply land to be owned or managed; it is a living, relational presence, more akin to a mother than a resource, whose health and the health of her people are inseparable (Dudgeon & Bray, 2019; Buchanan et al., 2016). Connection to Country carries active responsibilities: caring for particular places, waterways and ecosystems, maintaining stories and protocols, and ensuring that knowledge of the land passes from Elders to younger generations. Research consistently places Country alongside kin, body and culture as a foundational pillar of Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing — meaning that disconnection from Country is not simply a cultural loss, but a health issue (Dudgeon et al., 2017; Fatima et al., 2022). For government programs and policy to genuinely support Noongar wellbeing, they must recognise that caring for Country and caring for people are, in Noongar understanding, the same act. This understanding of the interaction between Country and wellbeing was evident in the Deadly Arts program.

I Know When It's Morning

Liam (child)

Liam's drawing is a quietly luminous contribution to the cohort. In depicting ngaank yira (sunrise) he has done something few young children could articulate: he has shown that Noongar culture has given him a new way to understand time itself, and that being able to name a moment on Country in language brings happiness. The warm palette of red and gold, the grounded figure, the overflowing landscape — all speak to a child who has absorbed something real and lasting from the Deadly Arts program. Across the growing cohort, Liam gives us language as belonging in time — knowing where you are, and having the words for it.

Liam has learned and retained a specific Noongar word — ngaank yira (sunrise) and has not only remembered it but drawn it. He can name the time of day in Noongar language, and the image enacts that knowledge visually: this is ngaank yira, painted in red and gold. His words confirm the depth of this learning: "I know when it's morning and I know how Aboriginals say it now." This is a child who has gained a new relationship with time, Country, and language simultaneously — knowing when you are on Country, and having the words to say it.

Country as Shelter, Beauty and Hidden Richness

Zara (child)

Zara has drawn a dense forest scene — tall, thick-trunked trees in deep brown dominate the composition, their canopies merging into a rich green and blue upper field. The ground is layered in greens, and small elements at the base of the trees are identified by Zara herself as gems (small red shapes). There are no human figures, no animals, and no text embedded in the image. It is the first drawing in this cohort that is entirely a landscape — pure Country.

Zara's drawing is the most contemplative and least explicitly cultural in its surface features — no Noongar language, no named dances, no animal companions. And yet it may be the most deeply rooted response to the wellbeing question of all. She draws Country as shelter, beauty, and hidden richness. The gems are a quietly radical detail: in a program that taught children to make art from natural materials and to see Country as alive and meaningful, Zara has internalised this most completely — she looks at the ground of a forest and sees treasure.

Sharing

Sharing emerged across the Deadly Arts program as a foundational cultural and wellbeing practice — not a pedagogical strategy or a program outcome but a way of being that Noongar teaching artists modelled, enacted, and passed on. In Noongar culture, sharing is inseparable from the obligations of kinship, reciprocity, and community; to share knowledge, story, song, and cultural practice is to fulfil one's responsibilities to others and to Country (Collard et al., 2004). Within the program, sharing took many forms: teaching artists sharing cultural knowledge, language, and personal stories with children and non-Indigenous colleagues; children sharing their drawings, ideas, and emerging cultural understandings with peers and families; and school communities sharing in celebrations of cultural learning that extended beyond the classroom into family and community life. This relational sharing was not one-directional but reciprocal — children brought their own knowledge, experiences, and curiosity to the circle, and teaching artists consistently described being nourished and affirmed by what children brought back to them. Iseke (2013) has noted that Indigenous storytelling practices are fundamentally oriented toward sharing — sustaining communities, validating experiences, and nurturing relationships through the exchange of knowledge. In the Deadly Arts program, this spirit of sharing created what Murrup-Stewart et al. (2021) describe as connection — the essential condition through which culture and wellbeing are simultaneously experienced and strengthened.

Healing

As a theme, healing contextualises and is in direct connection with the histories of colonisation here in Australia and further afield. Healing relations, Country, and Communities speaks to Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing (Martin-Booran Mirraboopa, 2003) sharing the practices and knowledges of this country's history of colonisation and assimilation. Indigenous practices of storytelling, sharing culture and the arts are a call to action towards healing. Sharing of story and knowledges of place, country and relations are considered healing practices by the Australian Human Rights Commission (2025), positively influencing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health and wellbeing through cultural expression, language, connection to Country and knowledge, family and kinship. Healing as wellbeing emerged as the sharing of stories, language, and cultural creative practices through the Deadly Arts program.

Intergenerational Trauma

The ongoing effects of trauma from colonisation are recognised by the Australian Human Rights Commission (2025) and its work in combatting systematic racism. The commission recognises that "intergenerational trauma of colonisation continues to disadvantage First Nations communities" (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2025). Intergenerational trauma effects travel through time and are a complex response to colonisation (Dudgen & Bray, 2018). This theme emerged through interviews with the Indigenous teaching artists considering their responses to the ongoing sharing of culture and creative practices. Indigenous teaching artists positioned the of sharing knowledges, culture and creative practices as a response to intergenerational trauma, and as a strength, informing how wellbeing practices are considered.

Freedom

Freedom was mentioned by Kylie, an Indigenous teaching artist, in response to their drawing of a blue balloon. For this Indigenous teaching artist, the relationships between sharing of culture and knowledge and the acts of reconciliation through education were an important aspect of their wellbeing. Indigenous freedoms as a concept are addressed by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), recognised by Australia in 2009. However, it is yet to be used by the government to implement these freedoms into law, policy, or practice (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

Being Seen and Seeing Others

Megan (non-Indigenous teaching artist)

Megan's drawing pulses with yellow energy growing from the centre of the page, reaching outward in every direction, warm and expansive. Music notes pour from this luminous core, accompanied by dots of red, purple, green, and blue that scatter across the page like a constellation of individual voices held within a shared space.

Megan described how performance among peers became a vehicle for building confidence, reciprocal attention, and ownership of learning:

"I get them [kids] to perform for one another so they get used to being seen, and then also to observe and make space for their peers . . . to recalibrate their knowledge because they're taking autonomy over what they're learning."

The coloured dots are telling — each a different hue, each holding its place in the composition, none more important than the next. For Megan, the arts created a space where every child learned what it means to stand in the light and, just as importantly, to hold that light for someone else.

It's Just Free for Me

Kylie (Indigenous teaching artist)

Kylie's drawing opens onto a clear sunny day, blue sky stretching wide above a healthy green tree whose branches reach upward with the ease of something well rooted and flourishing. Beside the tree stands a figure — Kylie herself — smiling, grounded, and holding a blue balloon on a long piece of string that stretches far up into the sky. Next to the balloon, in Kylie's own handwriting, is a single word: "Free".

Kylie reflected on the freedom she experienced in sharing her culture through the Deadly Arts program, describing her drawing as an expression of what it feels like to teach from a place of love and cultural authenticity:

"I feel that it gives me freedom . . . blue, because it supports my wellbeing — me expressing and teaching what I know and what I love . . . it's like to be free, to let go of that balloon . . . because I'm doing something that I love from my culture . . . it's just free for me."

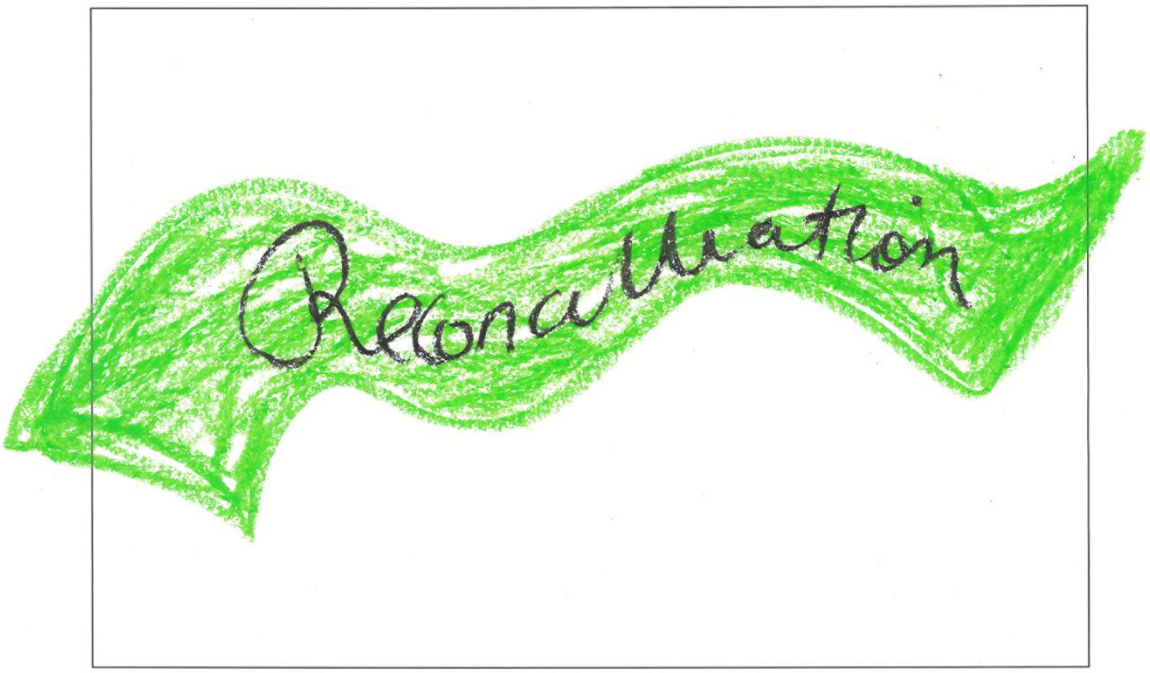
The string is as telling as the balloon itself — long, reaching, disappearing into open sky, connecting the person standing on the ground to something vast and uncontained above. The handwritten word "Free" beside it needs no elaboration; it is both caption and declaration. The tree beside Kylie is no accident either: deeply rooted, vibrantly green, alive. For Kylie, freedom was not simply an emotional state, but a wellbeing experience rooted in cultural expression, the capacity to bring who she is and what she loves into the learning space, and in doing so, to flourish.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation emerged in the Deadly Arts program not as a political abstraction or a distant national aspiration but as a lived, relational practice enacted in the day-to-day interactions of the program. For the Indigenous and non-Indigenous teaching artists, children, and school communities involved, the Deadly Arts program created conditions in which reconciliation could be experienced rather than simply discussed — through shared cultural practice, mutual respect, and the building of genuine relationships across difference. This understanding aligns with Dudgeon et al.'s (2014) recognition that healing and reconciliation for Aboriginal peoples are deeply interconnected processes, inseparable from cultural continuity, community connection, and the restoration of dignity and self-determination. It also reflects the position advanced by Riley et al. (2024) that infusing Indigenous content in schools through Indigenous consultation and leadership is inherently a reconciliatory act — one of reverence, reclamation, and reflexivity. In the Deadly Arts program, reconciliation was most visible not in formal acknowledgements but in the texture of practice: in non-Indigenous teaching artists learning from Noongar teaching artists, in children carrying Noongar stories and language home to their families, and in schools becoming spaces where Aboriginal culture was not a supplement to the curriculum but its living centre. These encounters are consistent with what Quayle and Sonn (2019) describe as the decolonial potential of community arts practice — creating platforms through which Aboriginal voices, knowledge, and experiences are centred and through which new relational possibilities between communities can be imagined and enacted.

Reconciliation is the Colour Green

Kylie (Indigenous teaching artist)



Kylie picked up a black pastel with decisive intention to the question, "How do children benefit from Noongar culture and arts?". Across the centre of her page, she wrote the word "Reconciliation" in sweeping cursive script, the letters arching and flowing across a swirled green banner. "Reconciliation is the colour green," she said simply, as if this required no further explanation.

For Kylie, reconciliation was not a policy or a ceremony but a living process, and one that begins with children. "That's where it starts. It starts with the next generation, learning from a young age." She described what she hoped children would carry from the Deadly Arts program into their lives: an understanding that people were here on this land long before them, an expanding sense of empathy, and a capacity to think bigger than the world immediately around them. "Understanding, I think," she offered, as though the word itself was the thing she most wanted to give.

Then she did something unexpected. She read a reconciliation poem she had written, her voice steady and clear. "Because I am a poet. I write poems." She also writes and shares songs. In Kylie's hands, reconciliation was not taught so much as it was sung, written, and felt.

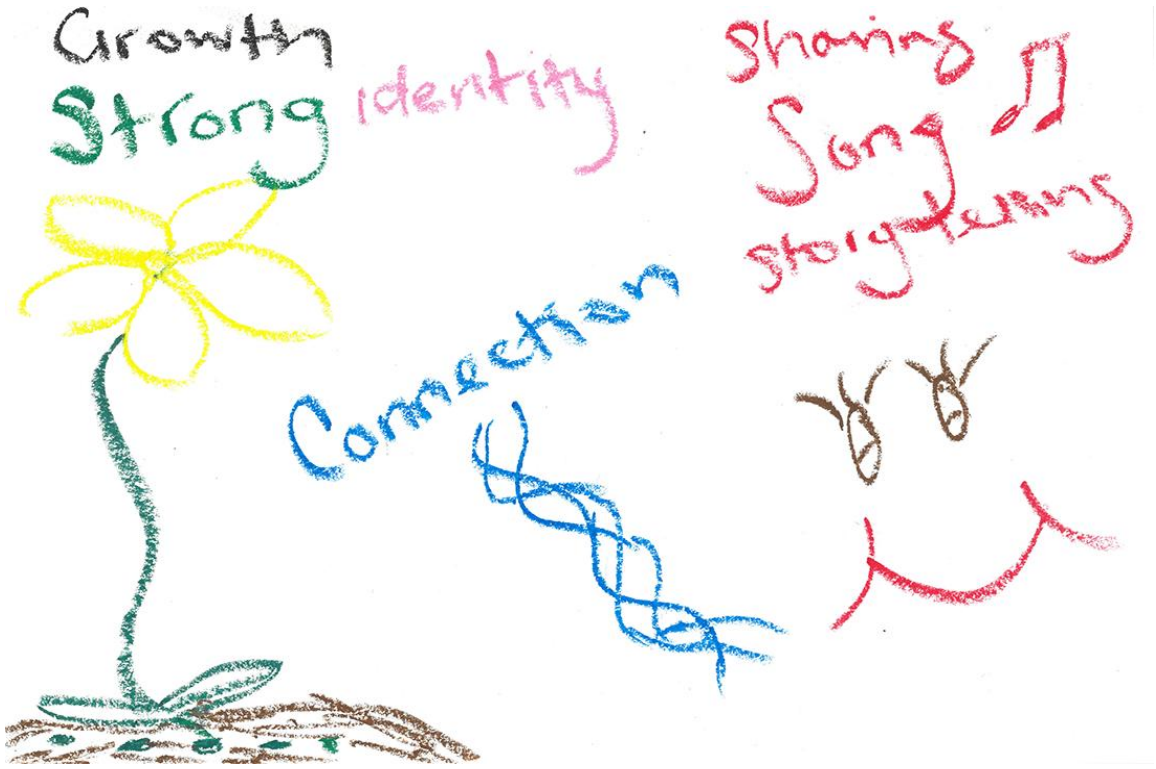
Fluidity

Claire (non-Indigenous teaching artist)

Claire draws explicitly on the knowledge of their own creative process — the flow state, the doodle, the felt sense of energy moving through the hand onto the page. This is practitioner self-knowledge of a particular kind: the knowledge of what making feels like from the inside, and the trust that this felt experience is itself meaningful and communicable. Claire also draws on colour instinctively — warm, saturated, alive — without attaching fixed symbolic meaning. The knowledge here is somatic and processual rather than cultural or conceptual: "this is just my energy reflection through my patterns."

The Joy of Being a Singer

Jodie (Indigenous teaching artist)



Jodie's drawing is populated with words and images that sit together on the page like a personal map of flourishing. A tall flower stands beside the word "Growth", and nearby the words "Strong" and "Identity" anchor the composition. Besides the words "Sharing Song" and "Storytelling", music notes mark the significance of arts practice to her sense of self. To the side, a smiling face looks over all of these ideas, as though gently presiding over the whole.

Jodie described her drawing as a reflection of personal growth, strong identity, and the joy of sharing culture through song and story:

"What I put down here is growth for myself and strong identity — having that growth, also being connected to family, community, your culture and people. That's supposed to be a rope tree . . . also happy, you know, the joy it brings me — being a singer, being an artist — being able to share that and impart that to other people . . . song, storytelling with music."

The rope tree, rendered through intertwining lines, gives visual form to "Connection" that Jodie describes in words — family, community, culture, and people wound together into something that holds.

Permission to Shine

Jodie (Indigenous teaching artist)

Jodie described her drawing as centred on leading with love, kindness, and courage — and the importance of creating a space where children, particularly Aboriginal children, feel no shame in expressing themselves:

"Mine has got a heart . . . and the Aboriginal flag. Really it's just for me leading with love and kindness . . . lead by example with courage. And I think when you lead with confidence and courage, you also give kids permission to be the same and have no shame. And then they can shine in that area."

She reflected on how shame and fear — particularly around performing in front of others — can be a barrier for Aboriginal children, and how the Deadly Arts space worked to dissolve that barrier through collective belonging:

"Particularly for Aboriginal kids . . . we've all felt a certain amount of shame and fear, especially being up in front of people performing. And even non-Aboriginal kids have an element of that. So it's important for me as an artist, as a musician, to let the kids know that there's no shame — that we're all in this together, there's a place for everyone, it's safe for everyone, we're all doing it together. So that they can just be free in that space."

For Jodie, this freedom had far-reaching consequences for children's development — extending beyond the arts session into confidence, identity, relationships, and learning:

"That's good for their confidence and their strength, their identity, learning and growing, and also interacting — relationships so much. There's so much that comes into that for little people. Because sometimes when you're just sitting in class all day, you don't have those types of interactions . . . in that Deadly Arts space, it creates those opportunities for the kids to connect with each other."

Wellbeing Literacy Capabilities

Wellbeing Literacy Across Children

What emerges across this cohort of children's draw and tell responses is something both remarkable and theoretically significant: evidence that wellbeing literacy, as Oades et al. (2025) describe it, is not waiting to be developed in these children — it is already active, multimodal, and deeply culturally situated. The Deadly Arts program has not simply taught children about Noongar culture; it has expanded the language available to them for understanding and expressing their own wellbeing, in ways that span every mode the framework names.

Vocabulary

The most visible dimension of wellbeing literacy across the cohort is the emergence of Noongar language as wellbeing vocabulary. Indie writes *woordwart (dragonfly)* and y*ornan (bobtail)* directly into her drawing. Sharna supplies *dwerdawanart (dolphin)* and *kworlak (bullshark)* fluently in conversation, earning the response *"Your Noongar is incredible."* Liam names *ngaank yira (sunrise)* and in doing so gains not just a word but a new way of knowing time on Country. These children are not using Noongar language decoratively; they are using it to name experiences, creatures, and moments that matter to their sense of belonging and wellbeing. The vocabulary of wellbeing, for this cohort, has been meaningfully expanded beyond English — and with it, the capacity to perceive and articulate wellbeing in richer, more place-specific ways.

Comprehension

Comprehension in wellbeing literacy means understanding one's own wellbeing experience — being able to read it, make sense of it, locate it. Across the cohort, this comprehension is demonstrated with striking sophistication. Amira comprehends that the *baamba (stingray)* dance gave her a felt experience of freedom. Zara comprehends that Country's hidden gems — small, precious, close to the ground — are what make her feel the way she does. Koby, most powerfully, comprehends that he carries both love and anger in his body, and that both are part of his wellbeing story. That a pre-school-aged child can draw his tummy full of love hearts and later draw his anger with equal clarity — and name the difference — speaks to a comprehension of inner life that the program has created space to develop.

Composition

Composition in the wellbeing literacy framework refers to the purposeful construction of meaning — the choices made in putting language, image, and expression together. Every child in this cohort makes compositional choices that are deliberate and meaningful. Dillon writes words into the drawing itself, fusing image and text in a single gesture. Keely arranges figures around the entire border of the page, composing a ceremonial circle through spatial organisation alone. Mason places a smiley face beside *bip-mart-mokiny (the Milky Way)*, composing the relationship between self and cosmos without a single written word. Koby's visual narrative composes an emotional sequence — love, presence, emergence, anger — that reads as a coherent narrative across time. These are children who, through the Deadly Arts program, have been given materials, permission, and cultural context sufficient to compose meaning about their own wellbeing in ways that are genuinely expressive rather than formulaic.

Contextual Awareness

Perhaps the most distinctive contribution of the Deadly Arts program to wellbeing literacy is the deepening of contextual awareness — the understanding that wellbeing is situated, relational, and place-specific. For every child in this cohort, wellbeing is not an abstract internal state; it is always located somewhere. Amira's wellbeing is in the water, with the stingray. Sharna's is in a spring landscape, reaching for the Noongar word for water flow. Liam's is at *ngaank yira (sunrise)*, on Country, in the morning light. Mason's is in the night sky, looking up at *bip-mart-mokiny* (*the Milky Way)*. Dillon's is in the tree, in the soil, in the seeds. Noongar culture has given these children a framework in which wellbeing is inseparable from Country, from season, from the living world — and this is a contextual awareness that enriches their capacity to understand and pursue wellbeing in ways that are deeply, specifically their own.

Intentionality

Intentionality — the purposeful use of language to support one's own and others' wellbeing — is the most advanced dimension of wellbeing literacy, and yet it is visible even here. Indie's declaration *"I'm gonna draw a woordwart in the sky"* is an act of intentional meaning-making: she knows what she wants to express and is actively planning how to do it. Koby's disclosure of anger — *"this is when I was getting angry"* — is a purposeful act of bringing an interior experience into shared space, a form of intentionality that required considerable courage in a young child. Liam's *"I feel happy"* is deceptively simple but precisely intentional — a direct statement linking cultural learning to personal wellbeing. And Keely's drawing of the circle, even as they feel they have forgotten, is an intentional act of cultural recovery and preservation.

Multimodality as the Heart of the Finding

What this cohort demonstrates most powerfully is that wellbeing literacy, for young children — and perhaps especially for young children engaging with Noongar culture and arts — is

irreducibly multimodal. It lives in image and in word, in spoken conversation and in the spatial organisation of a drawing, in the texture of orange crayon on paper and in the repetition of *"very happy, very happy."* No single mode is sufficient alone; it is in the relationship between modes — between what is drawn and what is said, between what is felt and what is named — that wellbeing literacy becomes visible and legible.

The Deadly Arts program has created the conditions for this multimodal wellbeing literacy to emerge by offering children a cultural framework — Noongar language, dance, art-making from nature, knowledge of Country — that is itself deeply multimodal, relational, and place-based. The children in this cohort have not been taught to speak about wellbeing. They have been given a richer world to inhabit — and in inhabiting it, they have found more ways to say what it means to be well.

Wellbeing Literacy Across Indigenous Teaching Artists

The three Indigenous teaching artists — Kylie, Wade, and Jodie — each responded to two distinct questions through drawing: one about their own wellbeing, and one about children's wellbeing. Read together, their images and words reveal a wellbeing literacy that is simultaneously personal, pedagogical, cultural, and cosmological — a practitioner knowledge that operates at a scale and depth that illuminates everything the children's drawings expressed.

Vocabulary

The wellbeing vocabulary of the three Indigenous teaching artists is expansive, precise, and culturally grounded in ways that extend well beyond everyday language. Jodie names the conditions of wellbeing with extraordinary economy — *"knowledge," "permission to shine," "no shame," "lead by example with courage"* — each phrase a complete pedagogical principle compressed into a few words. Kylie reaches for *"free"* and *"letting go"*, finding in the balloon metaphor a vocabulary for a felt experience of cultural expression that resists more clinical description. Wade draws on the deepest vocabulary of all — *"songlines", "totems", "ancestral beings", "unconditional love", "shadow and strength"* — a language that has been developed over thousands of years to describe the relationships between self, community, and Country that constitute Aboriginal wellbeing. Together, the three artists demonstrate that wellbeing vocabulary in this context is not borrowed from positive psychology frameworks but generated from within living cultural knowledge — and that this vocabulary is richer, more relational, and more ecologically grounded than any generic wellbeing lexicon could be.

Comprehension

Each Indigenous teaching artist demonstrates a sophisticated and differentiated comprehension of wellbeing — their own and the children's — that is specific, embodied, and culturally situated. Jodie comprehends that their own wellbeing as a practitioner is inseparable from their cultural identity: leading with love, modelling courage, and creating

shame-free space is not a professional strategy but a personal practice of being. Kylie comprehends that their wellbeing is located in the act of cultural expression itself — teaching what you know and love, from your own culture, freely — and that this freedom is both the means and the measure of wellbeing. Wade comprehends wellbeing at the most expansive scale: as a relational and ecological condition, made possible by understanding one's place within the songlines, loving oneself authentically, and extending that love outward to community and Country. What is striking across all three is that their comprehension of children's wellbeing is not separate from their comprehension of their own — the conditions that support their wellbeing as artists and cultural practitioners are precisely the conditions they create for children.

Composition

The compositional choices of the three indigenous teaching artists are as deliberate and meaningful as any in the children's cohort. Jodie places the Aboriginal flag inside a heart — a choice that fuses cultural identity with love as the foundational structure of pedagogy, and then orbits it with three carefully chosen phrases in three distinct colours and scripts, each representing a different dimension of their practice. Kylie composes a landscape of grounded figure and floating balloon, connected by a single thread, with the word *Free* placed at the image's most open point — a composition that enacts the very experience it describes. Wade's compositional range across two drawings is remarkable: the first, a web radiating equally in all directions with no hierarchy, enacts the philosophy of radical interconnection spatially; the second, a four-quadrant landscape of equal presences — bird, tree, watcher, waterway — demonstrates the same principle through living Country rather than abstract structure. These are not illustrations of ideas; they are ideas, composed.

Contextual Awareness

The teaching artists demonstrate a contextual awareness of wellbeing that is layered, historically informed, and culturally accountable in ways that distinguish their responses from any non-Indigenous wellbeing framework. Jodie is acutely aware that shame is not an abstract barrier for Aboriginal children but a historically and culturally specific experience — *"we've all felt a certain amount of shame and fear"* — and that the context of the Deadly Arts program must be actively designed to counter it. Kylie is aware that the context of cultural expression — doing something from your own culture, freely — is irreplaceable in its effect on wellbeing, and that this context cannot be replicated through generic arts programming. Wade's contextual awareness is the most expansive of all: the Deadly Arts program is understood not as an isolated intervention but as an expression of a living cultural system — songlines, totems, ancestral knowledge — that has sustained wellbeing across Country for thousands of years. The classroom, the circle, the dance are local expressions of that ancient context. Each teaching artist brings this awareness to bear on their practice, ensuring that what children experience is not a simulation of culture but an encounter with the real thing.

Intentionality

The intentionality of the teaching artists — their purposeful use of cultural knowledge and creative practice to support wellbeing in themselves and others — is perhaps the most distinctive and powerful dimension of their wellbeing literacy. Jodie is explicit: *"lead by example with courage"* is an intentional practice, not an incidental quality. The decision to place Aboriginal identity at the centre of the program, to create shame-free space, to model the very freedom they are offering children — these are deliberate acts of cultural pedagogy. Kylie's intentionality is located in the act of expression itself: *"expressing, and, teaching what I know and what I love"* is a purposeful use of cultural knowledge in service of their own and children's wellbeing simultaneously. Wade's intentionality is perhaps the most architecturally conceived: the decision to teach through story, song, and dance — to tell the stories of totems as heroes *and* villains, to acknowledge shadow alongside strength — reflects a profoundly intentional pedagogy of wholeness, one that refuses to simplify culture into its pleasant dimensions and insists on the full, unconditionally loved complexity of being.

Multimodality as Cultural Practice

What the teaching artists' drawings reveal, collectively, is that multimodal wellbeing literacy is not a pedagogical technique they have adopted — it is an expression of how Aboriginal cultural knowledge has always moved through the world. Song, dance, story, image, Country, language, relationship — these have never been separate in Noongar culture. The teaching artists do not *use* multimodal approaches to support wellbeing; they *are* multimodal, because their cultural knowledge is. When Jodie draws the Aboriginal flag inside a heart and writes principles around it, when Kylie paints a balloon and names it freedom, when Wade draws the web of songlines and then the living presences those lines connect — they are not translating their knowledge into a new medium. They are expressing it in the way it has always been expressed: through the full range of human meaning-making, all at once.

The Teaching Artists as the Architecture of Children's Wellbeing Literacy

The final and most significant insight of this synthesis is structural. The wellbeing literacy visible in the children's drawings — Amira's freedom, Keely's circle, Koby's safe disclosure, Liam's *ngaank yira (sunrise)*, Mason's *bip-mart-mokiny (Milky Way)* — did not emerge spontaneously. It emerged because three Indigenous teaching artists brought to those children a cultural framework of extraordinary depth and intentionality: Jodie's love without shame, Kylie's freedom through authentic expression, Wade's songlines of radical interconnection and unconditional love. The children's wellbeing literacy is the visible flowering of seeds planted by practitioners whose own wellbeing literacy runs deep, wide, and ancient. To understand how Noongar culture and arts support children's wellbeing, we must understand who is doing the teaching — and what they carry.

Wellbeing Literacy Across Non-Indigenous Teaching Artists

What the four drawings of Claire and Megan reveal — two personal, two about children — is a wellbeing literacy that has been genuinely shaped and deepened by working inside the Deadly Arts program alongside Indigenous teaching artists. These are not practitioners applying a pre-existing wellbeing framework; they are practitioners whose understanding of wellbeing has been transformed by close, embodied, respectful participation in a culturally specific practice. Their drawings show us what that transformation looks like from the inside — and what it makes possible for children.

Claire and Megan offer the research something distinct and important: the perspective of non-Indigenous practitioners whose wellbeing literacy has been shaped by sustained proximity to Indigenous cultural knowledge, practice, and pedagogy. Their four drawings reveal practitioners who have learned — through close, respectful, embodied observation — that wellbeing is not a program outcome but a relational condition: created in circles, sustained through energy and flow, activated through being seen and seeing others, and grounded always in the radical conviction that every child is already enough. They did not arrive at this understanding through professional development or policy frameworks. They arrived at it through the Deadly Arts program — through Wade's circle, through the peppermint leaves, through animal dances, through the music that radiates to every corner of the room. Their wellbeing literacy is, in this sense, a gift from the program to them — passed on, as all good cultural knowledge is, through presence, practice, and paying close attention. And through them, it was passed on to every child in the room.

Vocabulary

The wellbeing vocabulary of Claire and Megan is sensory, relational, and spatial — drawn not from theoretical frameworks but from felt experience of being in the program. Claire's vocabulary is processual and somatic: *"flow", "energy", "patterns", "wholeness", "enough", "becoming", "friction", "restriction"*. These are words that describe states and conditions of being rather than skills or achievements — a vocabulary of inner aliveness and its absence. Megan's vocabulary is relational and structural: *"play", "connected", "body", "equals", "circle", "community", "linear", "autonomy", "seen", "making space"*. These are words that describe the quality of relationships and the architecture of the spaces within which those relationships form. Together the two practitioners build a vocabulary of wellbeing — personal and children's — that holds both the interior dimension and the social dimension in productive relationship. What is striking is that both draw their vocabulary from the same source: the felt experience of being present in a body, in relationship with others, without hierarchy or restriction. This is a vocabulary learned by doing, not by reading.

Comprehension

Both practitioners demonstrate a comprehension of wellbeing — their own and the children's — that goes beneath content to the quality of conditions. Claire comprehends their own

wellbeing as something that happens in the act of making: not a state to be arrived at but a process to be entered, visible only in the moving, spiralling, flowing mark. And their comprehension of children's wellbeing is equally processual — they understand that what Wade was doing operated largely *below the level of explicit instruction*, in body language, in atmosphere, in the sustained and unconditional message that every child is already enough. *"Even when he wasn't saying this out loud, his actions and his body language was as such that — just be your true self."* Megan comprehends their own wellbeing as inseparable from the experience of being in circle with others — playing as equals, using the body, relating in a way that is non-hierarchical and non-linear. And their comprehension of children's wellbeing holds both the interior dimension (the safety to be oneself) and the social dimension (the capability developed through being seen and seeing others): *"they're taking autonomy over what they're learning."* Both practitioners comprehend the longitudinal stakes: *"at the core of teaching, I really feel like we want children to become adults where they have a good self-esteem and a positive self image."* Wellbeing in the present is understood as the foundation of a life well-lived.

Composition

The four drawings together form a remarkable compositional sequence that enacts the arc of both practitioners' understanding. Claire's personal drawing streams freely and asymmetrically — warm colour flowing off to one side of an open white page, uncontained and processual, the mark of someone in flow. Claire's drawing about children centres and stills — a symmetrical green spiral, balanced in all directions, luminous and open at its white heart. Megan's personal drawing encloses — a heart containing a circle containing animals, layers of belonging nested inside each other, warm and communal. Megan's drawing about children explodes outward — yellow light radiating equally to every edge, musical notes tumbling freely, coloured dots of individual children caught in the same expansive field. From flow, to stillness, to enclosure, to radiation: four compositional movements that describe the full arc of wellbeing as these two practitioners understand and embody it. None of these compositions is accidental — each enacts its meaning spatially, as the best visual thinking always does.

Contextual Awareness

Both practitioners demonstrate a contextual awareness that is honest, careful, and culturally accountable in ways that distinguish their responses from those of the Indigenous teaching artists — not in depth or quality, but in position. Claire consistently attributes the quality of children's experience to Wade, observing and naming what they witnessed with precision and generosity, without overclaiming cultural ownership. *"Wade was practicing that a lot within his program."* Megan describes the circle as something they recognise from circus — a form they carry in their own artform — and from the Noongar dances, finding genuine resonance between the two without collapsing the distinction. Both practitioners understand that the cultural content of the program is not theirs to carry; what they can carry — and do — is the quality of the space: the safety, the equality, the permission to be oneself, the invitation to lead. Their contextual awareness includes the awareness of their own limits,

which is itself a form of cultural respect and an important dimension of their wellbeing literacy.

Intentionality

The intentionality of both practitioners is grounded in what they have learned by being inside the program — not by applying principles from outside it. Claire's intentionality is to create conditions of no friction, no restriction: to trust, as they trust in their own drawing, that what emerges freely from a child is enough. This requires the practitioner to step back from the instinct to direct and shape — to hold the space without filling it. Megan's intentionality is more structurally explicit — designing the circle, using the body, letting the kids lead, building performance as a practice of mutual recognition — but the underlying intent is identical: to give children the experience of their own capability and worth, arrived at through genuine agency rather than directed instruction. Both practitioners are intentionally working in service of something larger than content delivery: the formation of children who know themselves, trust themselves, and can contribute to the world from that knowing. And crucially, both have arrived at this intentionality not through abstract conviction but through the specific, embodied experience of working inside the Deadly Arts program — learning, as the children did, by being present in the circle.

Multimodality as Learned Practice

Where the Indigenous teaching artists' multimodal wellbeing literacy flows from a cultural tradition in which image, story, song, dance, and Country have never been separate, Claire and Megan's multimodal wellbeing literacy has been cultivated through participation. Claire entered the program carrying a creative practice already oriented toward process, flow, and open meaning-making — and found in the Deadly Arts program a cultural framework that affirmed and deepened what they already knew. Megan entered carrying circus, circle, and embodied play — and found in the Noongar dances a resonant form that confirmed the non-linear, non-hierarchical quality of belonging they had long valued. Both practitioners responded to the research question through the same multimodal means offered to the children — drawing and speaking together — and in doing so demonstrated that multimodal wellbeing literacy is not reserved for the culturally initiated or the formally trained. It is available to anyone who is genuinely present, genuinely observant, and genuinely willing to learn from what they are part of.

Implications and Recommendations

Implications for Policy and Learning Design

- First Nations culture and arts are not supplementary to children's wellbeing — they are a **primary and distinctive pathway** to it, operating through mechanisms that generic wellbeing programs cannot replicate
- Wellbeing in this context is not an individual outcome but a **relational and ecological condition**, held by culture, community, Country, and the quality of the space created between people
- Children as young as pre-school age demonstrate **sophisticated multimodal wellbeing literacy** — the capacity to name, represent, and communicate complex inner and relational states — when given the cultural framework and creative permission to do so
- The **child's own voice is irreplaceable** in interpreting their artwork; without it, adult observers consistently misread or underread the depth of meaning present — this has direct implications for how children's creative work is assessed and valued in educational settings
- Shame is a **specific and documented barrier** to wellbeing for Aboriginal children, and programs that do not actively and intentionally dismantle it cannot claim to support wellbeing equitably
- Animal **dances** and other specific Noongar cultural practices emerged as shared touchstones across the cohort — evidence that particular cultural experiences, rather than arts activity in general, generate the deepest and most lasting wellbeing responses
- **Emotional safety and cultural safety are inseparable** — Koby's disclosure of anger and distress was only possible because the program had established both simultaneously; this has significant implications for child protection and trauma-informed practice in arts education
- The **non-linear, circular pedagogical form** — circle time, dance circles, gathering and returning — is not a stylistic preference but a structural expression of Noongar cultural values around equality, community, and shared belonging; its effects on children's wellbeing are measurable and specific
- **Songlines as a framework** offer a profoundly different, and arguably more comprehensive, understanding of children's wellbeing than Western psychological models, locating the child within a web of ecological, ancestral, and community

connection rather than as an individual unit of measurement. Songlines are a cultural framework on which children's wellbeing is connected. Songlines are integral and are the epicentre on which culture draws its stories and connections from

- The program demonstrates that **multimodal artistic expression** is not just a vehicle for wellbeing — it *is* a form of wellbeing literacy in itself, actively expanding children's capacity to understand and articulate their own flourishing

Implications for Teaching Practice

- **Indigenous teaching artists must be recognised as knowledge holders**, not cultural performers or enrichment providers — their role is pedagogically, culturally, and epistemologically distinct from that of classroom teachers or visiting artists
- **Non-Indigenous practitioners can develop genuine wellbeing literacy** through sustained, respectful proximity to Indigenous cultural practice — but this requires humility, attentiveness, and a willingness to be changed by what they participate in
- The most powerful pedagogical moments in this study occurred when practitioners **followed the child's lead** — when Wade reflected each child's interest back to them, when Megan let the kids lead, when Claire held space without filling it
- **Embodied, sensory experience** — rubbing peppermint leaves, dancing the stingray, climbing trees, looking at the Milky Way — is not preparation for learning; it *is* the learning, and its effects on wellbeing are profound and lasting
- Practitioners need **specific training in how to listen to and interpret children's multimodal expression**, including how to hold a child's own words as the primary interpretive key to their artwork
- The **before-and-after reflection structure** observed in Wade's sessions — asking children how they feel at the start and end, tracking the movement of energy through the group — is a replicable and powerful wellbeing literacy practice that other educators can adopt

Implications for Research

- **Arts-based research methodologies** — including asking participants to draw their responses to research questions — generate richer and more authentic wellbeing data than survey or interview methods alone, particularly with young children and with practitioners whose knowledge is embodied and processual
- The **Ways of Meaning framework** proves effective as an analytical tool for children's artwork, but its full power depends on treating the child's spoken words as essential interpretive data — visual analysis alone is insufficient
- This study demonstrates the value of **cross-cohort analysis** — reading children's drawings alongside practitioners' drawings reveals structural and thematic connections that neither group's data could generate alone
- **Longitudinal research** is needed to track the sustained effects of Noongar cultural arts programs on children's wellbeing literacy over time, particularly as children

move through schooling systems that may not sustain the conditions the program created

- The **distress protocol enacted during Koby's sharing** points to the need for dedicated research into how arts-based programs can function as early disclosure spaces, and what ethical and practical frameworks are needed to support this responsibly
- Further research is needed on **wellbeing literacy as a specifically multimodal competency** — how it develops, how it can be assessed without reducing it to measurable outcomes, and how it differs across cultural contexts

Recommendations

- **Embed Indigenous teaching artists** in schools as permanent, recognised, and appropriately remunerated members of the educational community — not as visiting contributors but as co-designers of the learning environment
- **Fund Noongar cultural arts programs** at a level commensurate with their demonstrated impact on children's wellbeing, identity, and cultural literacy — including Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children
- Develop **professional learning programs** for non-Indigenous educators and arts practitioners that prioritise sustained participation in Indigenous cultural practice over theoretical frameworks — learning by being in the circle, not learning about the circle
- Establish **ethical protocols for arts-based wellbeing research with children** that centre the child's voice, protect the child's right to non-participation, and include clear pathways for distress response
- Advocate for **multimodal assessment approaches** in early childhood and primary education that recognise drawing, dance, song, and spoken word as valid and rigorous forms of knowledge-making — not as add-ons to literacy and numeracy
- Create **documented spaces within schools** for children to represent their emotional and cultural lives through art, with trained adults who know how to receive what children make without over-interpreting or under-valuing it
- Ensure that **Noongar language** is treated as living educational content with wellbeing value — not as historical artifact — and that children who learn it are given ongoing contexts in which to use, deepen, and celebrate that knowledge
- Support **teaching artists' own wellbeing** as a condition of the program's effectiveness — Jodie's pedagogy of leading with love and courage, Kylie's freedom of cultural expression, Wade's cosmological vision of interconnection — these are not infinitely renewable without institutional recognition and care
- **Share this research with the children and families** who participated — their drawings are significant, their voices are powerful, and they deserve to know that what they made and said has meaning beyond the classroom

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