

## Chapter 3

# Knowing Kulai Through Participatory Action Research

### Introduction

This chapter traces the Kulai journey, where protocols for Indigenous research and participatory action research techniques were integrated to examine the complexities of organisational learning. The journeylines draw heavily on daily journal notes, supplemented by interviews with key staff, QIAS documentation, correspondence, and notes recorded at the debriefing day for the NSW QIAS pilot study.

Kulai requested that I collaborate with them in their part of the NSW QIAS pilot project conducted by the Australian Early Childhood Association [AECA]. The pilot study examined the implementation of QIAS in twenty five services (preschools, mobiles and occasional care centres) spread across rural and urban NSW. Four of the services, were primarily operated by Aboriginal staff, providing culturally appropriate programs for children drawn from local communities.

The course of the journey has been schematically depicted as a stream, which is described in detail in Chapter 4. The chapter begins with a description of a typical week at the preschool, plus an introduction to the families who use the service and the key people who make it operational.

The data highlights the levels of engagement of key people and activities over the preschool year in which the project operated. Where quotes are included from key people, these are indented and single spaced. The information is largely presented in chronological order. At times the sequence is interrupted, when data relating to a particular theme is presented. The source of the data occasionally changes to include information from early childhood educators who were part of the larger NSW pilot study. This data is indented and single spaced, but differentiated by use of initials and a san serif font.

## **Typical preschool week**

Two groups of preschool children attend Kulai for full days. Each group comes for two days per week. The preschool bus collects most children and delivers them home again each day. Morning tea and lunch are integral parts of the health, nutrition and education program. Tuesday is a special day for families with children under three, as a playgroup is conducted in conjunction with the preschool program. A range of people come with the playgroup children, Mum, Dad, Grandma or Grandpa, Aunty, Uncle, Cousin, foster parents or any combination of these. It is a time for yarning amongst the adults while the children become familiar and comfortable in the preschool environment.

On Fridays the teaching staff plan the program forward and prepare materials for the coming week. This is the routine most weeks and it is only changed on account of major occasions such as funerals. Some Fridays are staff training days and if relevant, everyone will attend. Most special events are also held on a Friday, such as National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Celebration (NAIDOC) and family barbeques. Special events are always well attended. Often one or more Elders will come along with a range of family and community members.

## **Research project**

When the project began, Kulai had three full time staff: Julie (Director); Leanne (Teacher Assistant); Michael (Teacher Assistant). There were also five part time staff: Melissa (Administrative Assistant); Diane (Nutrition Educator); Katrina (Bus Supervisor); Sid (Bus Driver); Georgina (Cleaner), plus casual relief workers. A number of other people had a significant input into the preschool: NSW Accreditation Project Officer; Children's Service's Adviser; Building Site Manager (who concurrently administered two local long day care services); Rod (the director's husband). Together all these people played a part in the complex and convoluted journey that represented the process of quality improvement, which is explained in detail in the narrative that follows and analysed in Chapter 4.

The participatory action research process was built from an initial telephone conversation I had with Leanne and Julie, which led to several trips from the University of New England to Coffs Harbour, to explore plans. I met the rest of the team briefly, but they were absent from the discussions. Yarning over cake and coffee with Julie, Leanne and Michael was an integral part of these visits, with a particular focus on children and place belonging.

It had been some four or five years since Leanne, Michael and I had talked about our offspring. I knew Michael's younger children and they knew my daughter, from child development observations at TAFE. I had not met Leanne or Julie's children. There was some discussion of where we belonged, with Leanne saying she was Bundjalung, Michael was Gumbaingirr and Julie was also Bundjalung with strong links to the Gumbaingirr people. Michael commented: "You were born at Wollomombi weren't you. I checked that up, that's in Gumbaingirr land".

Several days after my second visit Julie made contact with an indication of interest in my research plans. However, she proposed a change in direction so I might work with the preschool on a pilot review of the Quality Improvement Accreditation System (QIAS). Julie was looking for a partner to operate in the dual roles of researcher and project facilitator with the preschool. She had heard about some early childhood studies, which had indicated if quality ideals were adopted and sustained there could be long term benefits to the community (Helburn et al 1995; Peisner-Feinberg et al 1999).

I carried into the workplace a stigma of being from a different culture and my offer to do research came from a base in a university dominated by Anglo-Australians. My culture marked me as a non-Aboriginal, where the 'non' had the potential to be read to indicate non-person. Whilst not articulated, a question probably arose of: 'What's in it for us?' Members of the Aboriginal community could be expected to be guarded in their response to the proposal, as Anglo-Australians have a long history of imposing the ideas of the dominant

culture (Boughton 2001; Henry et al 2002; McConaghy 2000; NHMRC 2002; Worbey & Rigney 2002).

There was also the challenge of collaboration between two disparate organizations, the preschool and the university. Hanft and Anzalone (2001: 72) pinpoint 'role release' and 'role extension' as important skills to use in the early childhood field: "This means learning to appreciate and respect differences in perspective and priorities, practising effective negotiation and conflict resolution, identifying appropriate strategies to help children and families meet their outcomes." This definition seemed to encapsulate a range of useful positions for me to operate from with the Kulai team of Indigenous researchers.

In the literature, Sandfort (1999) identifies a gap in the data about inter-organisational partnerships. In particular, her study exposes how such partnerships can be generated and/or undermined by the individuals central to day-to-day operations. Whyte et al 2001 also indicate the need for further research on participation in the workplace to extend the theory of organisational behaviour. At Kulai there were organisational and cultural borders to negotiate in order for us to achieve research practices that were congruent with the values of the preschool and the university, and relevant to the needs of both. The formation of authentic partnerships would be crucial to successful engagement in this environment.

For me, conducting participatory action research would mean operating within the workplace and watching with what could be perceived as critical eyes (Hubbard 1996). I thought journal notes, written at the end of the day, would be the least obtrusive way to record data. Non-participant observers take a place on the edge of the program, not contributing to the community of practice -- this could be a frustrating role for observer and observed in a busy worksite. My professional experience had been in 'doing' and teaching roles, so there was a need to sharpen my skills in listening to learn (Hanft & Anzalone 2001). The label of 'intruder' or 'spy' for Julie or visiting bureaucrat could have been applied to me also. These were important aspects relating to performance as

researcher I must reflect on to improve my practice (Moore 2002). I first needed to take time to gain acceptance within the preschool community.

Ochiltree (2000) identifies positive staff performance in early childhood centres as being a prerequisite for good quality. Fler and Kennedy (2002: para 17), in their deconstruction of early childhood quality assurance, signal the need to hear the voice of practitioners in the development of “multiple ... more culturally inclusive... benchmarks of quality”. Peter Senge in an interview with Schultz (1999: 2) highlights the importance in any organisational research, of looking at “relevance” – how people can connect any kind of significant change initiative to their day-to-day job”. These studies seemed to open up possibilities for me to examine my collaborative performance further as a part of the research.

I thought the participatory action research project could be documented as a journey, describing significant aspects in the change process as Kulai moved through the project (Coghlan 2001). In the implementation of QIAS Julie and I expected that staff would embrace collaboration and change as opposed to maintaining the status quo (Schultz 1999). My role in the research would be a challenge, as my knowledge of QIAS was limited and I had no experience of applying quality systems in early childhood settings.

The project involved us working together towards the preschool gaining credentials as a quality service via the framework QIAS offered. Whilst conscious of an obligation to fulfil that agreement, I had another agenda, to unwrap the deeper underlying processes of participation the partnership(s) generated (Johnstone 2000; Whyte et al 2001) and to examine the meaning making process in organisational change (Dahlberg et al 1999). These seemed to be significant pointers for my research, as explained in Chapter 1.

I did not construct research questions in the initial phases of the study, based on the suggestion if they were made too early they could inhibit or force the research in a particular direction (Kemmis & McTaggart 2000; Merriam & Simpson 1995). Where Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations combine

resources, the methodology needs to be flexible enough for “respectful understanding” of others’ knowledge and the impact of “power issues such as appropriation and colonization” (Haig-Brown & Archibald 1996: 254). At Kulai we followed Boughton’s (1998) direction that education and research should be driven by the Indigenous researchers and positioned within the development goals of local Aboriginal communities.

When doing action research Wadsworth (1997) suggests the starting point should be to question: *Why do we want to evaluate our service?* A comprehensive response to this question emerged at Kulai as Julie talked enthusiastically about the potential benefits of Kulai being involved in the project and what it had to offer her. Many aspects might have influenced her to be part of this particular research.

Julie is an executive member of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Sector Advisory Group [ATSIECSAG], a peak lobby group in New South Wales for family and children’s services. The Chief Executive of ATSIECSAG, a well respected Aboriginal Early Childhood Educator, had nominated Kulai to participate in the pilot accreditation project being undertaken in services under the sponsorship of the New South Wales Government. Julie had affirmed Kulai’s interest and asked if she could count on my support to assist them with the implementation of the quality improvement system and in preparation for the external review for accreditation.

The Chief Executive of ATSIECSAG, along with Department of Community Services (DoCs) Officers at the local level in the person of the Children’s Service’s Adviser and at the state level as represented by the Head of the Office of Child Care, talked up the value of Kulai’s involvement to improve the quality of service offered. This could have been interpreted by Julie to mean, that the current program did not meet the level of quality expected.

It was logical for Julie to follow their advice, through respect for their positions within DoCs which is also the state regulatory body responsible for licensing

preschools. The Chief Executive of ATSIECSAG served as an adviser, particularly on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander matters, to the NSW Office of Child Care, within DoCs, which as mentioned above, is the overarching regulatory body of all Early Childhood Services. The Head of this office was also a prominent member of the early childhood profession. It seems there could be a hidden agenda in selecting a disproportionate number of Aboriginal preschools in the pilot, as sixteen per cent of the study participants were Aboriginal services in a state where Aboriginal people make up approximately two per cent of the population.

The political issue of accountability is ever present for Aboriginal services (Wadsworth 1997), who may have felt targeted as having a greater need for quality review. A QIAS review may have been seen, particularly by Anglo-Australian bureaucrats, as a legitimate manner of identifying deficits or shortcomings in Aboriginal preschools. Data to this effect gathered from a pilot study could be used positively to lobby for extra funds to meet the additional needs in an equitable way (Partington 2002). Such action, however, could be (mis)interpreted as Anglo-Australians identifying and resolving issues without appropriate consultation with Aboriginal preschools (Synott & Whatman 2002). An alternative use for the data, could be to limit or threaten cuts to funding if the review presented a negative report (Cataldi & Partington 2002).

Julie was conscious of the importance of her preschool being perceived as a quality service by the local community and the bureaucrats. The early childhood literature affirms concepts of quality with reports of longitudinal studies which indicate that quality prior to school experiences have a powerful influence on children's later development (Helburn et al 1995; Ochiltree 2000; Peisner-Feinberg et al 1999). The importance of local Aboriginal educational organisations being measured positively in quality terms and "pushing boundaries" is also reported by Schwab (2001a: 46-47) in relation to Booroongen Djugun College about an hour south of Coffs Harbour. Julie's sister further confirmed this with stories from five years' experience on the performance appraisals panel for the NSW Aboriginal Legal Service.

Kulai, the first Aboriginal preschool in NSW, like many others throughout the state, was established by a group of non-Aboriginal philanthropists, known as the Save the Children Fund. When ownership was transferred to the local Aboriginal community, Save the Children Fund no longer had any control over the service or the program. The outcomes of the pilot project had the potential to justify Aboriginal control of the preschool through demonstrating its quality of service.

Julie, as a community member and early childhood professional, is a strong advocate for the highest quality of service being available to all Aboriginal people, whatever their age throughout the local community, across Australia and internationally. At meetings of early childhood professionals she had listened to negative views and criticism expressed about government funds received by Aboriginal services and the relative cost/benefit of the programs. She saw participation in QIAS as an opportunity to counter these ideas by demonstrating that Kulai was equal to, or better than, any of the mainstream culture's early childhood programs.

Kulai had recently received substantial government funds to increase the available teaching and administrative space for the program. These physical changes were in progress. This provided Julie with a window of opportunity to move the education program in a new direction to fit the image being created by the built environment. She had recognised deficits and shortcomings in the program, which she had attempted to change in subtle ways with limited success. An example, of the changes she desired to implement were regular observation by staff of changes to individual children's development and planning the preschool program around activities of particular interest to the children. QIAS could give her more power and leverage to move staff out of "habitual bonds that inhibit learning" into a different pattern of operating (Duignan 1995: 56).

Julie was in the process of enrolling in a university course to upgrade her own qualifications in early childhood education. There was a compulsory unit of study, which required students to conduct and write up an action research



project to enhance the quality of their service and thus could be seen as a beneficial adjunct to her practice.

However, in the early stages of the research the same motivating forces were not in operation for the other staff at Kulai. Julie relayed how she perceived their point of view at that time: *It was me and them. And we're not doing this for her because it is all for her* [benefit]. The staff resisted QIAS being used to push through the changes Julie wanted. They interpreted her attempts to change practices as self-centred, with nothing in it for them. This reinforces Thompson & McHugh's (2002) idea that the director has the greatest link to the change plans and consequently feels the potential impact of the outcomes most strongly.

This was the undercurrent in the workplace when the project started. Questions remained of what would I be able to contribute as an outsider. This research loomed as an immensely complex project that would continue to challenge me right through to the point of completion. In recent research, Espinosa (2002: 451) recognises that analysis of quality improvement projects is “forbidding and daunting especially to novice researchers”. However, parallels with Pence's experience working with the First Nations People of Northern Saskatchewan, suggested to me that a lack of knowledge was potentially positive:

What appealed was not the knowledge of the way forward (for we did not know what that would be) but the absence of that knowledge and the opportunity it provided to explore together a way forward, to merge the different experiences and different bases of knowledge of our respective communities and see what would be generated out of a new dynamic, a new combination of ideas (Dahlberg et al 1999:173).

Not having a fixed position ultimately benefited my ability to think and operate with a more open mind, to listen and absorb the local scene at Kulai. This absence of knowledge used constructively could help to counter my fear of not knowing. This conceptualisation also fits with the tenets of participatory

action research, in evolving procedures during the life of the project, rather than working to a prescribed methodological formula (Kemmis & McTaggart 2000; Merriam & Simpson 1995).

### **Bridging the divide**

I continued to make day trips to Kulai on a regular basis to gain further insights into the preschool program. These visits gave me the opportunity to get to know the Kulai people a little better and build on relationships as we shared food and yarned together (Germov & Williams 2001a & b; Ikeda 2001). The Adult Education literature indicates it is important to establish local learning needs (Cowne 2003; Merriam & Simpson 1995). The first workshop was planned with Julie's support.

Julie greeted me warmly when I appeared with my boxed tools-of-trade. We moved an oval table out to the sunny northern verandah of the preschool. Diane and Katrina pulled their chairs up to the table. They had been paid to come in on their day off to attend staff training. Leanne and Michael were doing program preparation as usual when I arrived. They brought their chairs outside near to the group, cutting out materials, listening with half an ear to the discussion and contributing occasionally. Melissa was in the office, far enough away not to be distracted by the performance. A life-like poster of a large tree and butchers' paper clung to the expanse of glass on the sliding door behind me. We talked through what they might want to learn more about and wrote things like 'nutrition' and 'food preparation' up on the paper.

We then turned to the tree poster, which I used to talk about the similarity between the preschool and what a tree could symbolise. In selecting the tree metaphor and building a story around it, I was conscious of communicating with a group from quite diverse cultures and experiences. Their level of education was also quite disparate, from the cook who said she was illiterate, to the director and one other staff member enrolled in the Bachelor of Teaching degree at the UNE. I hoped the tree as preschool metaphor would create the sense of belonging in place that Kulai filled in its community. The metaphor

also provided for me a picture of the links between staff and other stakeholders with an interest in the preschool. I read aloud the information from the back of the poster:

Trees can't talk, but they can give you a lot of information! You can learn a tree's age - and some of its stories-by looking at its rings! ... During a good growing season, a wide ring is laid down. During a poor season (drought, cold winter, a spring frost), the ring is narrower, showing that the tree grew only a little. Other things besides weather affect a tree's growth.

A discussion of the good and bad seasons and influences on development was a useful beginning point to talk about quality improvement. To aid the linkage of familiar to unfamiliar, I labelled each section of the tree with cardboard overlays. I described the roots of the tree as anchors of the preschool to the surrounding landscape. The roots of Kulai were the Elders and those who had been there before, who established the centre, who provided the knowledges on which it was developed and was maintained. The soil that held the roots provided nutrients, moisture and support. The preschool got its nutrients, moisture and support from both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures that surrounded it and set standards, rules, formulas, and conventions that must be met if sustenance was to be maintained.

I suggested the trunk was what happened in the centre: the actions, the program, the building, equipment etc. The staff were named on the limbs attached to the tree. The children and families were at the top of the tree, as without them there would be no reason to be there. The trunk also needed the branches to function and the branches could not exist if they did not have the trunk to draw them together as a team. With the need to know my position within the picture I asked where volunteers would fit. Katrina suggested: *As branches on the limbs*, so I put the volunteer branch on the edge.

There was a sense that the Kulai people were happy for me to be part of the process with them, which was a significant moment for me, in advancing from

my position as outsider. The term ‘volunteer’ felt awkward, whereas ‘researcher’, ‘facilitator’, ‘mentor’ would have been more accurate labels. The use of ‘volunteer’ as a descriptor was an attempt to find a congruent place for staff to fit me into the preschool community. It was the first and last time ‘volunteer’ was used at Kulai to describe my role. It expressed little of the complexity surrounding my role, however, if ‘researcher’, ‘facilitator’ or ‘mentor’ were used there would have been more explaining for me to do. The picture was complete and generated the following message for me: *When all the parts work together as a unit we have a healthy living tree and a quality preschool service, such as would be expected by an Accreditation Reviewer.*

After the exploration with the tree it was a good time to pause for food. I needed to think further on how to effectively introduce several specimens of fresh banksia flowers that lay on the table. As one of the most common local trees, the banksia, this provided a conduit to lead into a discussion of the banksia flower’s life cycle. Using local elements as tools for educational engagement and meaning making has been emphasised in reports of Australian research in Aboriginal contexts (Christie 1995; de Vere 1999a, b & c; Marika 1999; Schwab 2001a; b; c; Schwab 1998).

I stumbled through my presentation fairly quickly and handled with diffidence each flower sample. I explained that each branch of the banksia could produce flowers. The flowers started as a bud (of ideas), these buds developed into flowers (through action and learning), then soft cores emerged (new ideas) and ultimately became hard cores (the ideas which continue to be used). Could this diffidence have arisen from altering my teaching style? I was attempting to talk meaning into a complex process using the flowers as visual aids; a combination of visual and oral forms of literacy to “unmask and uncover hidden” meanings (Kemmis & McTaggart 2000: 573). My language use was altered, by my uncertainty in this new social and cultural context (Jones Diaz et al 2001). My struggle centred primarily on communication issues based on a lack of experience and confidence in code-switching (Kiriakou 2001).

The code-switching skill is very much a part of every day life for the Kulai people as they frequently move between cultures (Dunn 2001; Malcolm 2002; Power 2002b). To an outsider, it felt like treading water out of my depth, grappling to understand unfamiliar nuances (Fasoli & Ford 2001). I felt the need to put more time into building relationships, if learning was to be a shared experience for all (Eastment & White 1998). We finished up with a discussion exploring and clarifying why the staff thought I had come to the preschool. The following responses came forward:

*Katrina:* help with accreditation; write a report to share with others.

*Leanne:* protect the rainforest, by the look of the poster; bring cakes - don't forget Diane's birthday is coming up soon.

*Michael:* learn how things are run at Kulai; keep everyone connected with Kulai up to date; see how staff work with the children.

All these roles seemed positive for potential partnerships and produced leads for me to build on. I wondered however, if Michael and Katrina were saying the words they thought I would like to hear in an attempt to talk me up or to curry favour with the teacher. Leanne's skill and confidence in voicing her ideas and humour was evident.

Not so for Diane, who was responsible for the nutrition program. She seemed to drop her head as Leanne singled her out and talked her into the performance. Diane sat in silence throughout much of the workshop. Possibly she was overwhelmed and confused by the whole performance. Maybe her behaviour demonstrated a respectful way to relate to a strange Anglo-Australian teacher as described by Eades (1993). Her prior experiences of learning may have caused feelings of disempowerment and cultural conflict (Partington 2002) leading to her absence of voice (Dunn 2001). Perhaps she used the time to reflect or just to participate non-verbally, again as described by Eades (1993).

Everyone engaged differently with the materials and in our interactions. The session was fairly regularly interrupted by the telephone. This was the only time we heard from Melissa, whose messages drew Julie away from the discussion. I just 'ploughed on' without forcing too much information with the

energy that built during the day; trying to take things slowly. The source of this energy was perhaps similar to what Pence, writing in Dahlberg et al (1999: 172) described as

suspended in the space between – the void, the space that is not filled and is thereby charged with potential. A space where dissimilar ideas might meet, mingle and mutate.

I was conscious of such a movement between my background and the range of cultures that existed at Kulai. During the workshop some linkages had emerged, but much that was different and unknown was still readily apparent. There was a fear of not knowing and not having answers, perhaps amongst all participants. The space between, however, allowed us to appreciate the differences. It facilitated knowledge-sharing rather than ownership of ideas. Our experience interacting and exploring could be attributed to the skilled code-switching orality of the Kulai people, with differences in our thought patterns, ways of learning (Eckermann, 1994) and meaning making (Dahlberg et al 1999).

I bundled up my things and left Kulai with mixed emotions to reflect on what the day's performance had meant (Moore 2002). I seemed to float back up the mountain to UNE, rejoicing in what the tree as preschool metaphor had exposed, but feeling guarded about use of the banksia as QIAS. The steps in the flower's life cycle required more details and additional phases to be an effective link with the steps described in the QIAS workbook (NCAC 1994). An analysis of the banksia as QIAS metaphor, as a significant bridge between cultural, organisational and literacy issues is expanded in Chapter 4.

### **Orientation: stimulus to action**

As an impetus for services to commence preparation for the accreditation review, the Project Officer for the pilot study arranged an orientation day. Representatives from the twenty-five participating early childhood centres attended. Four of the Kulai staff (Julie, Leanne, Michael and Katrina) travelled

down to Sydney by car and shared accommodation. Julie perceived this would be a good opportunity for team building, whereas some other staff saw it as time out from family and work, a chance to get away. Quite different agendas were prominent in their responses to the experience, which ranged from keen attention to disinterest.

Attendance at the orientation and travelling together had the potential to develop a shared 'mental model' amongst these staff. Cannon and Edmondson (2001: 162) suggest that where a common model exists, it can have a positive impact on a work group's ability to cope with conflict. However, research by Meyers, Riccucci and Lurie (2001) indicates a lack of understanding of the organisation's goals can lead staff to pursue their own interests, rather than participate actively in workshop activities.

Directions were given at the orientation about how to obtain copies of the QIAS Handbook and Workbook. Their use as tools in the quality improvement and accreditation process was explained and the possible implications of change to the work environment were highlighted. Participants were warned to expect a range of reactions from excitement through to open conflict. Statements made by Directors from other preschools in NSW at the project debriefing, corroborate these predictions, as shown in the example below:

*B: I observed an interesting trend amongst my staff members, some of whom have been there for five to six years and I've been trying to find strategies to change them. I had tried to slip ideas in subtly so they were not taken as personal criticism ... For me the accreditation documents allowed the change to start.*

For B, like many other managers, the QIAS provided an instrument with the potential to overturn past resistance and induce staff to produce quality outcomes. It was seized as a powerful management tool to lever staff into accepting the universal standards that had been set (Moss 2001).

Julie said the orientation day provided the opportunity to meet other pilot participants, who talked enthusiastically about the challenges ahead, whilst at

least one seemed convinced his service would fail. Each preschool was encouraged to appoint a centre quality improvement and accreditation committee to introduce QIAS to their community as a vital starting point and to meet regularly throughout the life of the project to guide the preschool through the changes.

Katrina, who supervised the children on the bus to and from preschool, expressed interest in occupying the position of staff representative on the Kulai quality improvement and accreditation committee. This was a position she took on unopposed. She was very enthusiastic and diligent in her efforts to encourage all staff and parents to complete self-study reports immediately. Her conversations reflected her reading of both the Handbook and Workbook. She knew far more than anyone else about the prescribed way to embrace the quality improvement system. She assumed her new role with something of an authoritarian zeal, taking on the persona of controller of operations.

Perhaps she accepted the position of staff representative with a desire to change her position of power or give her a stronger voice in the organisation. Perhaps she perceived it would improve her status and increase her influence in the day-to-day running of the preschool. She could also have believed through identifying with QIAS she would be given a more responsible or secure position at the preschool (Thompson & McHugh 2002).

By way of contrast, Diane's knowledge of QIAS was very limited. She had been unable to attend the orientation day as it clashed with a specialist appointment at the Children's Hospital for her young son. The impact of Diane not attending the workshop was described

*Julie:* I think if she was to hear some of the comments and to get the feedback on other centres how they felt when they were experiencing the change; I think that would have made a big difference, because they talked about different feelings that people would have over the process.

This highlighted what Diane, and others, missed hearing first-hand, and consequently had not formed a 'mental model' (Cannon and Edmondson 2001)



of how Kulai people should respond to the quality improvement process. Melissa, Georgina, Sid and I also did not attend the orientation. In hindsight our understanding of the process and specifics of what was expected, could have been quite different if we had all been in Sydney as part of the Kulai team.

Limited literacy skills, or a disinterest in reading, discouraged some staff from gaining information directly from the Handbook or Workbook. The presence of copies of these printed texts merely re-emphasised the barrier lack of reading can create (Dunn 2001; Groome 1998), and was likely to have further diminished their feelings of self-worth and ability to operate in a positive fashion (Cannon & Edmondson 2001).

Throughout the journey towards review day, Julie did much strategising in an attempt to understand the complex dynamics behind internal and external stakeholders' ways of operating at Kulai (Percy 1999). For example, Diane's lack of QIAS training appeared to be focused on and used amongst staff as leverage to excuse or cover aspects of team conflict:

*Julie:* If she (Diane) had had a better understanding of that those sorts of things were normal and being able to recognise that: *Oh well that's normal, they talked about that at the accreditation workshop.* On a couple of occasions I probably had to remind a couple of the staff that they talked about those sorts of things and how it was all to do with the changes.

The organisational culture, practices and program, interactions and communications with families and the wider community, all impacted in unique ways on individual staff members' feelings of self-worth and dedication to the job. Whilst some staff were prepared to commit themselves assiduously, others were reluctant to move from the status quo. A picture emerged of an organisation fractured by a process touted as producing a quality service (Percy 1999). It was difficult to visualise the hoped for common mental model amongst staff (Cannon & Edmondson 2001). The need to provide leadership to a group with such disparate views continued to be a challenge as expressed below:

*Julie:* When we first found out about it we said we'd start it early and make the changes. But it was really hard to get that start going ... we were talking about it and talking about it, but not doing anything ... there was a time when things did go backwards ... and I guess I took it for granted that they would, that they were okay to do it and maybe they thought they couldn't do it unless she give us the okay and there were mixed messages.

It seemed from our discussions that some staff had a clear picture of QIAS, its meaning and where it could lead Kulai. Others seemed quite disinterested, or at least confused, to the point of avoidance of the tasks expected in the process. Resistance to the scrutiny implicit in such an instrument could also have frozen them into inaction (Wadsworth, 1997; Whyte et al 2001).

A framework has been developed by Silcox, Cacioppe & Souter (1996) to look at staff responses to change. This suggests a pendulum style continuum exists between 'cynical' and 'exuberant adherent' states. In relation to the change associated with QIAS, one teacher, Leanne, appeared to sit comfortably at the 'cynical' end, content with the power that could be achieved through avoidance. Katrina's response was that of an 'adherent' who talked up the ideals of quality improvement. Melissa, as administrative assistant, seemed to support her leader, but also was a sounding board for everyone else's complaints.

Sid, as bus driver, seemed fairly 'average' or relaxed in midstream of the continuum. Michael, the other teacher, positioned himself in the middle much of the time to observe which way the pendulum would swing and followed these lead(s) in a furtive bid to keep everyone happy, whilst pleasing no one. Diane, from her position in the kitchen, was generally cooperative, but resisted and obstructed the 'cynic' and 'adherent' in subtle ways. Georgina's voice in the change was silent and only encountered after hours when she came in to clean the preschool.

Meanwhile, I continued to search for a way to operate meaningfully at the preschool. Principle 50 of the QIAS document: "The centre provides regular learning and training opportunities for staff" (NCAC 1993: 104-105), seemed

to spell out an obligation for the preschool to transform QIAS into a more coherent process for us all. I needed also to consider the tension between my roles of researcher and facilitator. I expanded the metaphors introduced in the initial workshop as I worked to uncover and unmask the multiple meanings of quality improvement in my own mind, and present an accessible form for the broader preschool community. A significant aspect in adopting the tree as preschool and banksia as QIAS metaphors, lay in their place in nature as living breathing organisms. This ideas would hopefully be shared in dialogue during a metaphorical transformation process, to achieve an understanding in the group. Perhaps the metaphors would enable us to see QIAS as a complex, evolving and flexible process.

Just prior to Easter a community barbecue was organised at the preschool and the families responded positively to the invitation. Julie gave a general overview of QIAS and assistance was offered to family members to respond in writing to the prescribed Family Questionnaire. The aroma from Sid's barbecue, along with Aunty Gloria's damper and Diane's salads encouraged people to rapidly complete the form- filling exercise. When the responses to the Family Questionnaire were reviewed, Katrina indicated her concern regarding the time people had to think about their responses. In hindsight, more useful information might have been obtained if the questionnaire had been administered verbally and responses recorded. Such an approach had proved productive in the Aboriginal Community-Controlled Adult Education study (Boughton & Durnan 1997).

A number of the services involved in the NSW pilot project raised the difficulties surrounding the involvement of families in QIAS as a challenging issue. Many communities were troubled and confused by the convoluted wording of some items in the Family Questionnaire. It was difficult, particularly for mobile preschools and in services where children came by bus, to meet the requirement to communicate regularly with and demonstrate family involvement.

## Observation of models

The part-time building site manager overseeing Kulai's extensions, was also the administrator of two local long day care centres. During his contact with Julie he detailed the benefits these centres gained through their involvement in QIAS as both had achieved accreditation at the maximum level. He recommended Kulai's primary contact staff visit his centres to view quality services in operation. Julie described what was observed when *Centre One* was visited:

*Julie:* We saw how the cleaning products were stored and documentation of chemicals ... how they managed meals ... how they did their programming ... The way they displayed the children's work was particularly impressive.

When Julie and I were alone several days later, she painted a different picture of the Centre One visit. She explained her disappointment in the response Leanne, Katrina and Diane had to the learning opportunities provided. They had stood around in a huddle and primarily talked to each other, rather than joining into the program. Julie stated: *I won't do that again. I'll send them off singly and then they'll be forced to join in.* In frustration Julie moved from a laissez-faire style to top-down management in an effort to gain the responses she wanted from her staff.

Centre One was staffed by Anglo-Australians and catered primarily for children from the dominant culture. Just going into a different organisation where they were not known would have created tension for Leanne, Katrina and Diane, without the added challenges from a cross-cultural exchange. The huddle was probably aimed at cushioning the effects of this cultural border-crossing. Leanne identified the positive aspects of observing the operation of other centres:

*Leanne:* Visiting the other centres that have been through it, that was good ... you get to see how they work ... sitting watching the staff, how and like how the kids are relaxed ... and you bring that idea back about the food.

Her reflections seemed to indicate the value of observing concepts in practice to (re)evaluate Kulai's procedures. The use of shared print materials, consultation with and observation of other services, with previous QIAS experience, was supported by many of the preschools who participated in the NSW pilot, as explained by one director:

*D: It was very helpful to have a mentor. You can ask questions. This made a huge difference – I don't know how anyone got through it without a mentor to help.*

It was interesting to learn of the significant part mentors had played in this pilot study as about half of the services indicated they had such support. The Project Officer travelled across the state as a mentor to each pilot service and checking their progress towards the QIAS goals. This seemed to act as a wake up call at Kulai. Julie mentioned that she thought the staff understood the Project Officer was there to do the accreditation review. She had not changed their perception as she thought it would be useful to have a trial experience of being inspected. Julie appeared to use her power in imaginative and productive ways whilst also creating boundaries by releasing only partial information to staff (Thompson & McHugh 2002). This approach is countered by some research, which suggests that greater motivation could be achieved from staff when the purpose is made clear (Meyers et al 2001).

The Project Officer watched what was happening and took notes for much of the morning. During this period she calculated less than half the program time was spent in play and the remainder consumed by routines and down-time, waiting for everyone to be ready before proceeding to the next activity. After lunch she shared her analysis: *You're all working too hard, wearing yourselves out setting up and clearing away activities.* She explored ways of letting the program flow and how to introduce flexibility to routines. *You may find the preschool a lot calmer place if the children are allowed to self-select activities and foods.* In dialogue with Leanne, Katrina, one parent and I, she drafted an alternate daily activity schedule. She also recommended that a visual timeline of QIAS events be displayed.

Following the Project Officer's visit, Julie and I reflected on the progress made towards accreditation and included a discussion of Katrina's responses. She was behaving as though she was a step above the other staff in her knowledge of quality improvement; keeping to the timeline and being aware of what changes need to be made. Katrina had rung me in the previous week and asked that I tell staff to do their self-study questionnaires; an approach I felt was neither appropriate, nor would have the intended affect. Katrina continued to strongly encourage staff, which appeared to further inflame resistant responses.

Melissa, Katrina's older sister and the administrative assistant, worked quietly through a minefield of administrative activities that occurred during the research project. Her input in constructing and printing up the Parents' Information Booklet was particularly useful. Julie explained some of the complex issues Melissa was attempting to deal with, whilst balancing her responsibilities as a staff member with family pressures:

*Julie:* She did flow really well. She had a few, well probably just a couple of days, where it was a bit much ... the other staff were saying and wanting. Like Michael was wanting more wages ... Leanne was saying things like: *Oh, I'm not coming tomorrow* to Katrina and that sort of threats and being away and when it was days when it was pretty important ... I mean it really made me sort of angry to think that those sort of tactics were being used.

Everyone had responded to the stress of change in her/his own way. Melissa continued to play her role in the background. Her position was made more complex through an obligation of loyalty to her sister, Katrina, and extended family member and employer, Julie (Eades 1993). She was used as a conduit for communication of information to Julie, particularly when it was subversive. The staff were accustomed to acting this way in the knowledge that what they said would be transmitted. Melissa was potentially in quite a powerful position, in control of finances, and hearing and reading communications on their way to and from Julie to a whole range of people.

## Opening up nutrition

From time to time throughout the project the Kulai team got together for training sessions, such as the nutrition workshop. Preparing for and enacting this event seemed to me like directing a play. I did all the planning to work up a script of the workshop, organised all the materials (bought the groceries, gathered the cooking equipment and books), then sat in the wings and gave the occasional prompt as the performance unfolded.

The preparation to meet Kulai's expressed need to develop further skills in the Nutrition area presented a dilemma. A character, who I shall call Academe, visited Kulai with me. At the time she was my co-supervisor. She had just published a book on nutrition in early childhood and talked as an expert in the area. There was a tension here, as some of the staff did not relate well to experts (Nakata 1998).

An illustration of examples from the five food groups and a schematic apple which encapsulated the food learning cycle, provided key points for planning the workshop. We evolved a shopping list of foods to provide the elements for morning tea and lunch. I generated a further list of tools and equipment. These provided layers of text, juxtaposed with concrete materials.

Academe had a mass of books on Nutrition, from children's story books on food to theoretical tomes. Together we went through these and about 50 were identified as important to share with Kulai. In one layer they were collapsed into several pages of text as a bibliography; in another they were packed into several large boxes for the journey from UNE into the worksite. During the workshop the books formed an island of text, in the middle of the playroom. The island added an aesthetic backdrop to the session but maybe little else, in an environment where print literacy had little currency (Malcolm 2002). It also provided a symbol of the presence of Academe – where multiple books can serve to back expert knowledge.

There seemed to be a lot riding on the outcome of this workshop for the inter-organisational connections between UNE and this community. It was the first time I had brought someone onto the worksite from university to teach and I wondered if the two groups would relate. They shared interests in early childhood education and food, which were useful starting points. There appeared to be few other commonalities, but many differences. Reality surrounded Academe – she was there and had agreed to run a workshop. We must make the most of her food experiences and the knowledge she had to share.

Much of my tension was unnecessary, as in many ways the food took over. Academe began with a discussion of the five food groups and the importance of including elements of each when planning food for children. The groceries were translated into proteins, vitamins, carbohydrates, minerals and fats. The soup pot boiled up several ham bones to create stock and emit aromas as a backdrop to the workshop. We sliced, heated and dipped the five food groups to transform them into tucker as we constructed and consumed the products of our learning.

Most of the staff participated actively and enthusiastically in this experience, except for Leanne and Melissa. They said: *We have a cold and don't want to spread our germs*, as they stood to the side. In stark contrast Sid and Diane spontaneously became involved and seemed to be interested in whatever was happening. An excitement surrounded the discovery of new healthy food that was nice to eat: *I didn't know you could eat cauliflower and broccoli raw. It's quite nice isn't it!*

Leanne and Melissa's response to the experiential activities presented as disinterest, even resistant. It was not clear if the resistance was their way of questioning the legitimacy of the expert or if it was directed more broadly at QIAS and the associated changes happening in the preschool (Achinstein 2002).



Academe reflected to me, on the way home, that maybe she had spoken too much. However she always seemed to have an interested group around her when she was talking. I thought that occasionally her language could have been a little complex. The following week Julie called to say she had tried setting up a food table for the children to prepare and taste dipped vegetables prior to morning tea. She used carrot, mushrooms, celery, ricotta cheese and peanut butter. She started with three children, but most children wanted to be part of it. The theory of the workshop had been translated across to performance with the children. Their response seemed to affirm further the value of the new knowledge learnt.

The outcomes of the nutrition workshop seemed to be positive, but still there was the barrier to progress of the Staff Observation Record (NCAC 1994). When the questionnaires were distributed amongst staff it had led to a deal of divisiveness and avoidance. It was unclear how much of this was an interpersonal resistance to Katrina's advocacy of Staff Observation Record or other factors, such as dialectic differences and the literacy levels required, a general resistance to form filling and the wider implications of committing your judgements on organisational performance to paper. Leanne appeared to be concerned about how her answers would be read. She seemed fearful of inducing antagonism, if her words were not interpreted as constructive criticism by her colleagues (Achinstein 2002).

The writers of the document described it as "practical, good-looking, accessible ... Anyone interested in quality care can follow it" (Bryce 1996:33-34). I read this and wondered, had the writers overlooked a segment of the population or was there something wrong with Kulai that so few seemed motivated by the so-called user-friendly materials? A study by Jackson (1996) of fifty Sydney long day care centres reports difficulties understanding many of the fifty-two principles as a major challenge to staff.

Leanne's response to the QIAS self-study questionnaire was to resist it as an instrument alien to the local Aboriginal culture (Dahlberg et al 1999). Part of Leanne's resistance to the QIAS process possibly stemmed from a deep level

of ambivalence about the value of the system, directed towards the Staff Observation Record. When we talked about it she reflected on the range of ways the Staff Observation Record could be completed and the ramifications of each. This led her to direct several rhetorical questions into the discussion, along the lines of: *What's the point of me doing it, we can't say what really happens can we?*

I reassured her that it was important to be open and honest in her responses, as that would give the Kulai quality improvement committee information to act and build on. I drew on the relationship of trust we had built up over some years in an effort to convince Leanne to complete the questionnaire. Without an authentic representation of her ideas, it seemed like a pointless exercise to record anything, but there were personal risks involved if she was openly critical. *But what's the use of that, nothing will happen?*

The Staff Observation Record placed staff in a vulnerable position with no guarantee of positive outcomes as a consequence. Leanne was not alone in her troubled response to the Staff Observation Record. A section in the Workbook tried to reassure all staff: *you should find the process of completing this document a rewarding professional experience* (NCAC 1994). A person can feel proud of her/his professional advocacy, but maybe this does not weigh sufficiently against the cost of one's relationship with others (Rappolt et al 2002). Most services in the pilot study were small enough that the identity of each person completing the Staff Observation Record was known at least to the Director, so any concept of confidentiality was a joke. This was recognised by a pilot participant in the following view:

**E:** One of our staff members was very concerned about confidentiality. She was concerned her responses would sabotage her relationship with the Director ... In fact it brought things out into the open. The Director said, I was really shocked when I read what she had written, but I took it and got moving with dealing with the issues it brought up.

The centre involved ultimately gained from the openness of this staff member, but her troubled apprehensive voice came through in the story. She may have

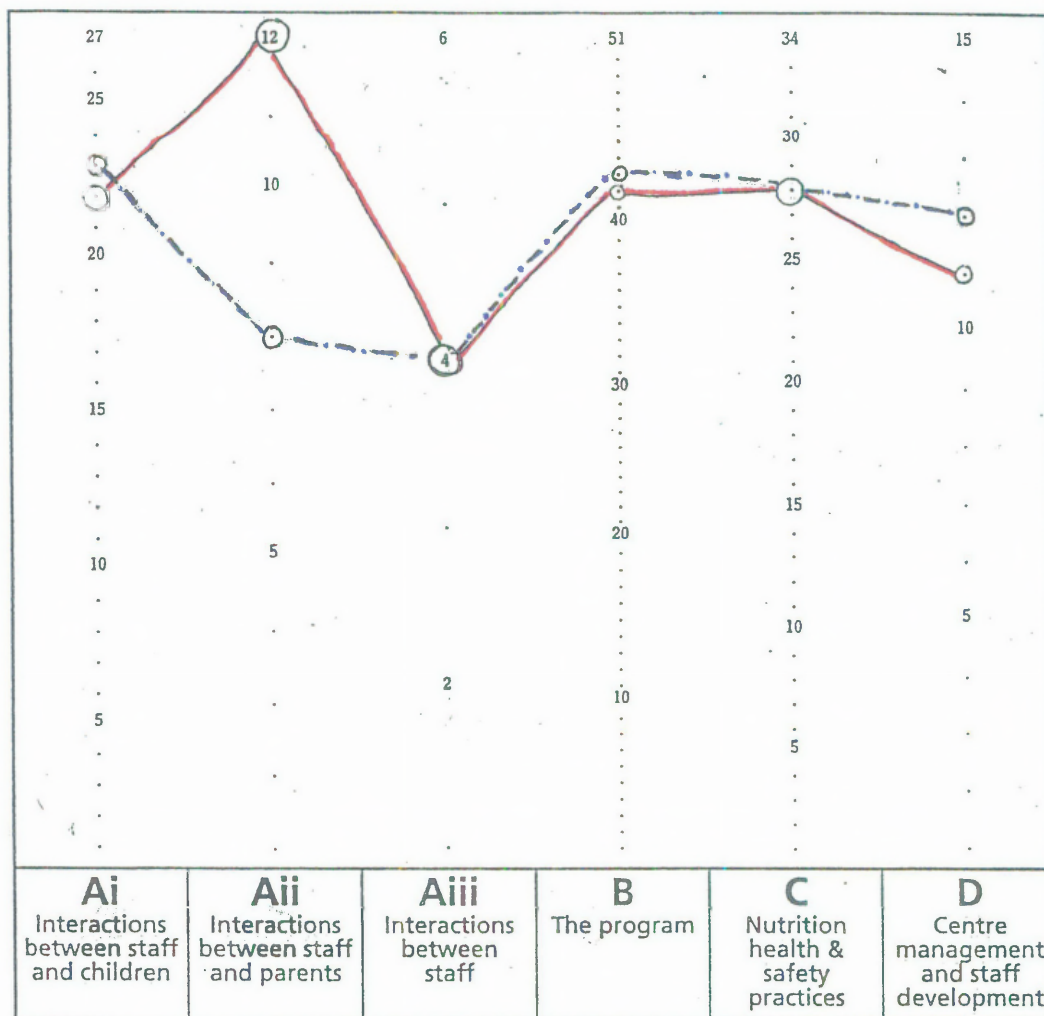
emerged from this episode feeling she had a professional experience as promised by the Workbook. For some staff it related to being a ‘technician’ who had lost her/his professional voice (Fleer and Kennedy 2002; Achinstein 2002).

After considerable discussion between us, Leanne finally completed the Staff Observation Record. A summary of her responses has been juxtaposed with the scores recorded in Julie’s Report as Director (see Figure 2 below). The lines in the figure suggest that Leanne rates staff and children’s interactions, the program, and centre management and staff development, slightly ahead of Julie. These aspects of the preschool’s operation are an intimate part of Leanne’s day-to-day role; whereas for Julie they are important, but a more limited part of her role. As Director, she observes, rather than participating in, much of the performance. They agree on interactions between staff, and the nutrition, hygiene and safety practices. The most significant area of difference between their scores lies in interactions between staff and parents, where all Julie’s scores rate this area as ‘highly satisfactory’. As Julie spends much of her time in the office or community she possibly has a much greater opportunity to make contact with the families at work than Leanne.

Julie, Leanne and Diane’s responses to the questionnaire were affirmed by stories shared at the debriefing day by pilot participants from across the state, such as follows:

*F: I think the fact that it [Staff Observation Record] was voluntary had a bearing on how staff responded. It was constructive, yet divisive. Some staff said: *Why do I have to put myself through this?* ... I would advocate for the questionnaire being mandatory, because we need to know what everyone is thinking.*

The response made by this director, indicated that she expected all staff would complete the questionnaire in a truthful manner. There was little recognition in her statement of the challenges and tensions completion of the tool could generate (Murray 1996).



**Figure 2: Responses to staff observation record\***

\* Note: Adapted from Centre Profile chart in QIAS Handbook (NCAC 1994: 35)

— = Julie's responses    - · - = Leanne's responses

The Kulai staff did not seem to be aware the Staff Observation Record was optional. It is likely that some of the responses given were influenced by the fear to criticise or a desire to say positive things, however what was written was treated as authentic and utilised constructively to develop an action plan aimed to change the preschool's functioning.

### **Building as motivating force**

The new building was ready for the move across at the commencement of the mid-year term. The movement between the sites had a strong impact. The old section was a poorly lit rectangular box constituting the western third of the overall structure. To the east was another world, heavily influenced in the planning by the local Aboriginal community. Gigantic wooden poles appeared like trees planted in the floor as mainstays to the dark iron roof, rising to a flat peak in the centre and arching out beyond the walls, to form a verandah to the north and east. Smaller wooden poles supported curved internal wooden fence panels to delineate the southern edge of a sweeping lagoon-like play area. At the far end a smaller pool shape was situated several steps above the main floor. Browns and oranges abounded on the floor and the walls, inside and out. Each wall followed part of a curve. Julie explained the significance of occupying the new building as much more than just a physical movement.

*Julie:* So it worked as one big thing. ... because we had a new start. We went from one building to another and we left a lot of stuff in the old building behind. [Said with feeling to express the movement as they flowed between buildings] ... we knew that we wanted to do it once we moved.

Perhaps there was a mind-set amongst the staff of holding off changes until the new building was completed. Maybe staff felt they were just as much in a holding pattern as the physical structures, in a transition phase leading up to the move. Changes to the program and other aspects of the preschool operation were delayed to await this critical event. On top of the preschool move, I had relocated my home and my daughter to Coffs Harbour for the school term, thus creating multiple disjunctures for us both.

The move to the new building appeared to harness the energy to move forward and complete tasks previously met with equivocation or reluctant engagement. Encounters with the Staff Observation Record had exemplified this well. Once the questionnaires were completed the next hurdle was to draw the responses together with the family questionnaires into one comprehensive report. Julie and I met and overviewed the combined results in a tabular form. We particularly focused on the eleven principles rated ‘unsatisfactory’ by one or more staff. These principles focused on staff interactions with families and each other, programs for children with special needs, food and hygiene, and understanding of management issues. In relation to the food and hygiene principles we were conscious that the responses had been given whilst the program was situated in the make-shift facilities of the old building.

We also looked for a pattern amongst the 28 principles that had received a ‘basic’ rating by one or more staff. These seemed to highlight problems in interactions between staff and parents; the program; nutrition, health and safety practices; staff information and organisational learning. The most encouraging pattern of responses emerged from the family and staff measures of ‘staff and children’s interactions’. The families were also very positive about their interactions with staff. We discussed building on these strengths, rather than focusing on the negatives. The support for change from the local Elders, families and wider community, along with enthusiasm surrounding the new building, provided elements to move forward.

The Director’s self-study report erred towards the most positive staff and family measures to score the director’s rating (see Figure 2 above), conscious that these levels would be utilised in the moderation process post-review day. The response followed the workbook’s directive: *The director/coordinator then decides on the rating that best reflects the current standard of the centre* (NCAC 1994: 27). The written section of the submission came together modelled on a copy of another centre’s self-study report that had been previously submitted for accreditation. This model of the expected content helped relieve some of the tension, through the power of knowing what was

expected and acceptable. It emphasised again how important literacy skills were to achieve success in this form of accountability.

Julie and I spent a lot of time together, analysing and strategising what was happening and second-guessing what might be next in an attempt to manage change from the top-down. Ovretveit (2001) reports similar findings in his analysis of quality improvement programs. We began to realise staff were not responding to our plans in the ways we anticipated (Percy 1999). This produced a high level of stress and little or no forward movement. Ovretveit (2001) also reports that managers involved in quality programs commonly pinpoint incorrect sources of challenge and waste time proceeding with these issues.

Utilising a top-down approach resulted in too few people operating at the core of the reflection process. We lacked awareness of the team's thoughts about the impact of planned changes on their day to day practice. We needed to capture their reflections and make this integral to the changes. Julie and I agreed to invert our power and spend more time working directly in the program, listening to everyone's input, and working from this base to change performance. This was an opportunity to use conflict purposefully.

Everyone's raised awareness, precipitated through conflict, may have led to these reflections and a re-examination of ways of working through and towards change in a productive way. The way individual staff members responded ranged from embracing of conflict through to preserving harmony at all costs (Percy 1999). The response patterns observed at Kulai fitted well with Achinstein's (2002: 2) 'conflict continuum'. If through processes of reflection, Julie and I developed a consciousness of the need to manage these diverse responses and consequently challenged the appropriateness of our own top-down style of management. Further analysis of our operational positions and management of conflict situations will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Now I lived in Coffs Harbour, I could be at Kulai every day. There was ample opportunity to work differently and to immerse myself much more in the day-

to-day operation of the program, working with and beside staff (Chupp 2001). Our level of engagement appeared to alter almost immediately. The staff got more affirmation and direct feedback on their performance, we developed stronger interpersonal relationships, with the consequence of increased motivation for all of us to be a part of a team building towards change.

Initially Julie and I had trusted and assumed that the staff would accept each change discussed. We expected the teachers to work independently as trained professionals. At staff meetings everyone had the opportunity to reflect on what needed to be done and to agree on procedures to be implemented. These ideas were recorded in the minutes and formed the base for our expectations. In such situations Thompson & McHugh (2002: 122) recommend an examination of the forces of organizational power, including 'power over' as well as 'power to'.

Julie and I needed to recognise the multiple directions from which power operated and where different sources of power were cancelling each other out. We needed a timeline to chart progress towards review day. With some urgency I sketched the banksia flower life cycle and linked it to a plain English statement of the phases of the quality improvement and accreditation process. Ultimately this came together as a photographic booklet/timeline: *Banksia as quality assurance timeline*, shown in Chapter 4. When the Banksia photographic timeline was fixed to the staff room wall, it served as a reminder of progress made through the life of the project. Two bright yellow labels were attached:

*This is where we are now!*

and

*What else has to happen?*

With these signs a list was attached of recently completed learning activities. Another arrow: *Licensing 29 August and Review Day 30 August* was attached to the flower in full bloom. With the timeline in place and the clock ticking down towards review day, it was business as usual.



Shanisha was not ready to go to preschool when the bus called, so her mother brought her in. Both mother and daughter were distressed when they arrived. Julie noticed their anguish and chatted with Mum about problems at home. Mum attempted to leave on a number of occasions, which only seemed to heighten Shanisha's sadness and intensify her crying. Julie assured Mum that the staff would look after Shanisha, so she headed back home.

Julie took Shanisha to Michael in the playground but left immediately to attend a meeting. Shanisha stood near Michael and sobbed. As the children had gathered on the verandah for morning tea Shanisha slipped into the playroom. A little later Shanisha was on top of a large wooden doll's house with one foot on the timber railing [over a metre high]. It looked as though she was about to 'escape' over the railing. I called for Michael to come and he got Shanisha down. She resisted his encouragement to have morning tea and instead lay on the floor and sobbed.

When Julie returned we discussed what I had observed whilst she was away. We agreed that the Department of Community Services (DoCs) Risk Assessment and the QIAS Review tools would be hard-pressed to find elements of quality surrounding these experiences of this child. A meeting was called with the trained staff as soon as the children went home. In the meeting Julie, Michael, Leanne and I went systematically through the items linked to management of the preschool and the program in the Risk Assessment Tool (DoCs 1998). We explored what might need to be done to come up to satisfactory levels for licensing requirements. We then moved onto a discussion of Shanisha's crying and being left in the new playroom unattended. Michael and Julie got into a heated argument over what had happened. *Why did you just 'dump' Shanisha, on me? Couldn't you have spent five minutes comforting her?* Michael felt he was being "attacked" for not doing something for Shanisha, when there were other people around just as capable as him. Leanne seemed very conciliatory and initiated some suggestions, such as changes to break time.

Later Julie and I reflected on the meeting. I asked her if she thought I had “jumped in” too strongly when Michael started “attacking” her. Julie said: “No”. She commented that she was glad I was there to back her up, but disappointed she had ‘lost her cool’. This is an example of Julie and me operating from a starting point of long-term trust to use power over workers in subordinate roles. A primary point of the conflict centred on the levels of caregiving competence and practice we assumed trained staff would demonstrate and what had been observed. We failed to recognise the different levels of understanding of the change process Senge et al (1999: 245-246) identifies:

two primary contributors in developing capacity for openness:  
enhanced learning capabilities and psychological safety ... [skills in dealing with change] are invariably spread unevenly within the pilot group, especially in the early phases of change.

The importance of using critical self-reflection in a safe context, where the well-being of children and adults are at issue, has been highlighted by Cameron, Moss and Owen (1999). The meeting at Kulai seemed to put me firmly in place as someone Julie could rely on as a support and confidant. Leanne and I started to engage at a deeper personal basis and on a more professional level. This experience appeared to militate against the strong resistance she had shown to most things connected with QIAS to that stage. For Michael, the events seemed to reduce his trust in me and mine in him. He only worked there for a few more days and then transferred to a job in Sydney. The whole QIAS operation could have fallen in a heap at this point, but instead everyone appeared to realise their response and roles were now vital to Kulai’s functioning. A more determined effort was made to cooperate and support each other and the level of conflict seemed to lessen. Julie related the experience this way:

*Julie:* Its made a big difference, because we had to deal with Accreditation ... we had to do it, we had to do it now, right now [Her voice sped up as she talked this through].

The continual dialogue surrounding 'quality' had begun to permeate staff attitudes and values (Thompson and McHugh 2002: 206), as the gap between unfamiliar and familiar was narrowed. There was a new consciousness of the limited time available to make changes. Reporting to families on the children's progress, a requirement for principle 11, had been overlooked. Leanne and I finalised the half-year reports home and updated the children's developmental records. Leanne generated the information as I scribed it onto each report.

Leanne worked happily as we discussed the possible meanings of the children's drawings. We noted that very few bodies had arms. I suggested it could indicate the children needed more movement games/songs to develop a great awareness of self. Leanne came up with strategies to suit the children's needs and appeared to revel in feeling wanted and the professional recognition this attracted. She now had sufficient confidence and trust in our relationship that she could admit not knowing, but at the same time share details of her own approaches to programming. She seemed able to make meaning of these activities, and the quality improvement process in general, as enhancing her role and impact in the program. She proudly mounted and displayed the children's work around the preschool.

Leanne directed the set up of the outdoor environment to create challenges and opportunities for the children to select activities. The opportunity to make choices is identified as a feature of a quality preschool program by Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson (2001: 187), who state: "Pre-school should be one place in which children can participate and practice influence, and through participation, learn that their opinions and feelings are respected and valued."

An example of Leanne's confidence was shown when I gave assistance in setting up the outdoor activities one morning. She suggested I change to a different swing that would sit closer to the ground and to hang just two swings in a different order from that which was in place. Inwardly this response excited me, as Leanne was directing the program. She had particular goals and was prepared to articulate them assertively. She realised, or was at least willing

to take the risk, that I would support her questioning my judgement or lack of it.

Later Leanne asked me to suggest ways of recording the children's motor skills. This was the first time she had gone out of her way to move in my direction, to facilitate co-participation. We worked side-by-side scribing observations as she encouraged the children to perform. Experience at Kulai and the research literature alerted me to expect motor skills more advanced than the average Anglo-Australian child. I needed to be flexible to respond appropriately in this situation (Hanft and Anzalone 2001). Leanne requested several clipboards be purchased to anchor the observation sheets and program plans. Leanne's behaviour denoted the early childhood professional and more tools of the trade were required in this role.

When Julie was at Kulai, power was centred in her position as Director and the other staff interacted fairly equitably. The moment Julie was absent, Leanne officially became the authorised supervisor and had overall responsibility for operations. At these times Leanne appeared to change the way she related to staff – she seemed to challenge and order things according to her perspective. Diane in particular seemed to resist this subjugation, often ignoring the orders or replying negatively through her words and/or actions. This seemed to be Diane's attempt to (re)shape the power (Thompson & McHugh 2002). It also said much about the interpersonal relations between the education and nutrition sections of the preschool, with neither prepared to recognise each other's contribution to the whole (Garbutt 1996; Ovretveit 2001).

An example of the complex nature of communications was evident in the midst of the children's lunch one day. Leanne and Diane exchanged sharply spoken words about whether the children should be serving the food themselves. Diane said she thought that was the new way. Leanne told her that would only apply if the children wanted a second helping. Another staff member interjected with a question:

*Katrina:* Where are the sandwiches? For Accreditation, there must be another option if they won't eat the meal!

Two children refused the meal, so Katrina offered to go and make sandwiches, but she was interrupted by a sharp reply.

*Diane:* Nah! It's my job. I'll make 'em!

While this was happening Julie was away at a meeting. On her return Katrina reported there were no sandwiches at lunch and Leanne gave her version of dissatisfaction with the meal. Several days later, when Julie was absent, the apples came out of the kitchen cut in quarters for morning tea, with the cores left in. The cores seemed to be Diane's symbolic resistance against the teaching staff, aware of the power to frustrate and annoy. Some children refused to eat the apples and others bit the core and skin off and spat it onto their plates. Leanne said she had discussed the fruit with Diane on several occasions, only to be told there was not time to core apples. Tension around organisational changes in general and to the way food was presented to the children had built intermittently throughout the year, as shown below:

*Julie:* It started off being a trauma, but it has worked itself out. It took a bit of time and a bit of work with Diane and getting the other staff, that was hard, getting the other staff to understand how to approach Diane.

In this statement Julie has interrogated the occurrences on the upper or surface level, without unmasking the underlying power struggle going on in the team (Percy 1999). Her perception of the conflict appeared to be complicated by time lapses between the trauma and the opportunity to negotiate between the parties involved. She often had to rely on second-hand accounts of tense situations and then attempted to resolve the issues. This experience seemed to resonate with Senge's et al (1999: 241) description:

In most conventional work settings, harmony is maintained through a facade of harmony ... In fact, what passes for teamwork in most work settings is the "smooth surface", the apparent absence of problems ... As new learning capabilities develop, people start feeling the

confidence to raise challenging, potentially conflictual issues – the issues that must be addressed to make real changes.

In the week prior to the QIAS review, the way meals were handled came together in a positive fashion. A wider choice of food was offered. The children and staff served themselves and sat down to enjoy this time together. This new interdependence of the education and nutrition sectors suggested that a web of participation had spread across the preschool (Garbutt 1996; Ovretveit 2001). John Seely Brown describes webs of participation in his company, Xerox, to Senge et al (1999: 49) as “networks of people who rely on one another ... [with] a common sense of purpose and a real need to know what each other knows”. On a much smaller scale at Kulai, the early childhood team seemed to have gained a sense of shared learning, owning the decisions made and enacting new practices to accommodate the changes.

## **Aesthetics**

As a bare shell the new section of the preschool had an inherent beauty but was a little impersonal. In preparation for QIAS, everyone contributed to a make over which sustained a welcome message to visitors, across the environment (indoor and out) and illuminated the best aspects of Kulai. Leanne made two porcupines (echidnas), for the foyer. One was positioned between the boomerangs with ‘Giina agay mudji’ [Gumbaingirr] and ‘Jing-ella-woodja boon-ang’ [Bundjalung] written on them. Translated to English these signs read: “Welcome to Kulai”. The second porcupine graced the glass panel by the sign-on sheet.

We put a range of children’s paintings in the foyer around the boomerangs. At the entrance to the playroom, we erected everyone’s drawings from the previous week and pastings done by two focus children. Beside these I placed samples of other children’s paintings. In the spaces between the poles Leanne strung bird mobiles and cardboard creatures which appeared to climb the poles. The pride in being part of the team responsible for this transformation was evident throughout the preschool.

The families, staff spouses and children also played a part in preparing the outdoor environment which was an important prerequisite for achieving 'high quality' on core principle 21 of the QIAS ["The program fosters creative development and aesthetic awareness"]. The patch of garden just beyond the sandpit previously grew only weeds. Friends donated some herbs and vegetable seedlings and child-sized tools were purchased. Suddenly the area was filled with children digging and raking, discovering large worms and watering plants. The learning potential inherent in the garden and the children's interest was integrated into the program plan:

*Leanne:* Well you actually program for what the kids actually like, not what you want to plan for that week ... when you are planning like for specific children, they are all doing, they see someone doing and they'd come over and they'd want to do it. It's like with the gardening.

Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson (2001: 187) identified skills, such as Leanne demonstrated, as primary elements of a high quality preschool program. Leanne's plan incorporated the "voice of the child" and his/her interests to structure events which would extend that individual's activity to a higher level. During the QIAS build up, a thematic approach to programming was gradually supplanted by developmentally appropriate practices. Leanne clearly articulated this process when questioned by the Reviewer.

In the weeks just prior to Review the level of engagement between team members grew, leading to a sustained interactivity. It was particularly evident during one group time when Leanne did a brilliant session with the children on the mat. She used the big book, 'The little mouse, the red ripe strawberry and the big hungry bear' (Wood & Wood 1984/1996) and a bag of performance props. The activity was part of the scheduled program, with particular reference to Remella's needs.

Remella and Jarwin had been somewhat unsettled all day, but they were chosen to take the major roles as puppeteers in the big book story narrated by Leanne. Tallara, who had been unusually quiet all day, was selected for a minor role. The story came to life with Leanne's narration. All the children in the group

that day were fully engaged with the activity, most particularly the two boys in the lead roles. Julie captured the performance in a series of photographs of the playroom alive with exclamations of surprise and delight. The audience of remaining children and staff looking on are not in the photographs, but their presence is apparent. The space between the camera and the people energised this movement and allowed it to come alive (Walker 1999: 6).

Neither Leanne, nor the children, wanted the session to end. Having finished the big book drama the children talked enthusiastically about their drawings done earlier in the day. The telephone began to ring, as the parents were anxious to know why the bus had been delayed and the children were not home. What the group time session captured at Kulai seemed to match Ovretveit's (2001: 136) description of a quality service:

[it was] about combining heads and hearts – about getting the right balance between learning and using the new techniques and learning new ways of relating. It is about rediscovering and practicing the values and passion, which brought people to learn the profession in the first place.

This statement seems to encapsulate the way of operating the Kulai staff began to use. By this stage in the life of the project most aspects of the preschool's operation had been reviewed thoroughly in dialogue, changes negotiated and adopted as appropriate. However, the bus, possibly the element most integral for the families to access the service, had escaped direct observation by either Julie or me. On an average trip, approximately 25 kilometres are travelled between the first pick up and the preschool. This meant some children spend an hour on the bus, each way. When we collected Katrina from her home, she was asked to act as though I was not there (as if that would be possible), otherwise she may have felt obligated to talk to me for much of the trip rather than operating as usual.

I made notes along the way to act as stimulus for the feedback session planned at completion of the trip. When we returned to the preschool there was no one



there to greet the bus as staff were still doing activity preparation. With Katrina I explored what she thought she did well and what she could have done differently. By this method she communicated many of the things listed. Facilitating this reflection enabled Katrina to value her role and articulate her performance. This positioned me to affirm the positive aspects of her performance and build further on that base. She identified most problems, while several others needed to be prompted, and she willingly listened to suggestions. I pointed out her role was one of the most important to the success of accreditation as she would be the first person the Reviewer observed and thus had the chance to set the tone.

All staff met together to plan our actions for review day. There was a sense of excitement mixed with trepidation. The level of trust seemed to have built substantially and provided a firm base for the team's relationships, which helped "absorb(s) uncertainty and diffuse(s) complexity" (Bachmann 2001: 343). I led a discussion on communication and organisational priorities, which led naturally into each staff member's roles. I wrote up people's names and expected roles as this information was contributed, which filled a chart posted on the wall until the last moment on review day. Everyone was ascribed a fairly usual role, however I was asked to be 'a fly on the wall', who would act if the Reviewer appeared to misinterpret the local culture. In conclusion I shared some observations with the group:

*Helen:* There are times when you all do some superb things and there are others when you are less than helpful [changed tone to echo a touch of sarcasm]. On Wednesday (review day) it is important that everyone pull together. If you see something needs doing, jump in and do it. If someone needs a hand, be there for them. If you see something good happen, say so.

There were knowing smirks around the room, which seemed to agree with this Anglo-Australian way of viewing performance. I had taken a risk in expressing these observations so openly, but the level of trust evident suggested that was okay. Our interaction was made easier by the food we shared and the partnership of learning that had been in place for some time.

A spirit of enthusiasm and mutuality was apparent amongst the group, based on working towards some common goals, though everyone was conscious of having a unique, valuable and valued role to play in developing the whole picture to be observed on review day. The Reviewer was perceived as our common enemy (Newman 1995) with many things put in place in an effort to neutralise her power. We felt positive and confident about meeting the role descriptors and achieving our goal(s).

## **Review day**

On review day a surreal atmosphere surrounded Kulai. There was tension around what the Reviewer would be like, the questions she might ask, how to handle them, what she would do and want to see. Each one of the team appeared in identical white polo-neck shirts, with Kulai Aboriginal Preschool and a porcupine (echidna) printed on the pocket. It was the first time the team had appeared in uniform. Common clothing may have symbolised feeling as one, as a team. The staff had observed uniforms at an already accredited centre and they may have been perceived as equating with quality presentation.

The staff went proudly about the preschool setting up for the day, probably driven by the force of adrenaline. They moved from area to area fine-tuning in readiness for the children and in anticipation of the Reviewer. There was more urgency about their work than usual as activities appeared in every possible venue, to ensure every child's interests would be catered for. In an effort to limit my own visibility I decided to skirt around the edges, to check what was happening and lend a hand where needed.

A cry went out: *They're here!* The bus had arrived. Julie and Leanne were at the front door to greet each child and the Reviewer as s/he came in. Sid had a big broad smile across his face, saying in an unvoiced manner: *That part went okay!* Katrina exuded a different message, she was on high alert in an agitated state as she burst through to the kitchen.

*Katrina:* I think we've failed. It was just horrible! I'd put some kids in their seats and the belt wouldn't shorten, so I'd have to move them somewhere else. One good thing happened, Dganargin's dad came out and spoke to the Reviewer: I'm prepared to write a report on what a bloody good program they have at the preschool. When we went to pick Irara up he wouldn't get on the bus. I tried talking to him but he wouldn't budge. I suggested Mum put him on herself and that was okay. At another place Sid just took off before I had Shanisha's belt done up. He'd parked across someone's driveway and just got goin'. We're gunna fail ya know, we're gunna fail!

This story lifted the tension to another level. Diane, Melissa and I worked more feverishly in the kitchen peeling, cutting and preparing food in readiness for morning tea and lunch. Like clockwork the tables were set and several children arranged flowers in the centre of each one. I was pulled aside and heard a whisper:

*Julie:* The Long Term Goals, they should be up on the noticeboard, could you and Melissa get them typed up.

The list materialised and was erected in the office as if it had always been there. There was a quiet hum around the playroom as the children selected the activities they were interested in (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson 2001). They engaged in the planned creative experiences, played imaginatively in home corner or explored books and puzzles on the mezzanine level. The Reviewer wandered off into the kitchen to chat with Diane and Melissa.

Lunch was a great feast, with many choices of hot food and several plates of sandwiches, as another alternative. The children eagerly helped themselves, just as if that was the way they had always done it. Then to rest time, where most children settled quickly and the remainder got up and played quietly to the side of the room, with restful music playing in the background.

Things came alive again as the children drifted out to play in the sand and garden. Several little girls took it on themselves to chat with the Reviewer who showed an interest in their play. When Remella removed several spikes of rosemary from the herb patch and replanted them in an old seedling container

to take home, the Reviewer commented she was impressed he was allowed to do that without recrimination.

The Reviewer spent a deal of the afternoon in the staff room, writing up her report. Every-so-often she would get up and wander out to check what was happening. In the final group session the children talked about their drawings and enjoyed an activity and song with the crocodile puppet to finish up, before moving happily out to the bus. An open, yet curious, response was visible in the way the children operated:

*Julie:* It was good because some of them were really curious ... Tallara actually went up to her and sat down beside her and had a big talk to her. A few other kids were asking her questions. ... You can see the difference in the kids. Like there is more chatting, there's more questions being asked. They're more sort of, even [in an animated voice] their body language, they're more sort of relaxed. They're not as structured.

The Reviewer showed interest in what the children were doing and was happy to chat. It seemed they saw it appropriate to be respectful and welcoming to the visitor and to enjoy her company. Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson (2001: 188) suggest that, for a preschool to be judged to be operating at the highest level, the children should be seen "to participate in and influence the overall organisation, routines, content and activities that are initiated by the teachers." The Kulai program went at least part way towards facilitating the children's voices in this way.

At the end of the day the Reviewer went through each of the principles and identified primarily the positive aspects. Overall her verbal feedback gave the impression she had viewed a high quality service. She wanted further information about several principles, such as special needs and health education provisions. Julie searched unsuccessfully for documentation in the staff room and then went off to look in the office. During this time I attempted to give an account of the special needs and health areas. It became clear from muffled responses and rapid writing that the Reviewer was either not open to listen or too busy for my input.

The Kulai assessment was the Reviewer's third experience using the instrument to evaluate services. She seemed to be particularly relaxed when participating in the program and relating to the staff involved. The written report submitted to Kulai and the QIAS Moderators, however, appeared to contradict her verbal feedback.

A different persona came over the Reviewer as we drove to the airport and reflected on the process. She seemed to now place me in the category of early childhood peer as she talked about being chosen as the QIAS reviewer for three of the Aboriginal preschools in the pilot study. She commented the QIAS tool had been long and repetitive. As an instrument designed to assess long day care centres, she found it tended to have insufficient focus on self help and independence skills and omitted to make allowances for different cultural values.

With the Reviewer gone, a sense of joy and relief pervaded Kulai as Julie reflected on the manner in which the Reviewer performed her task and presented herself:

*Julie:* The feedback that I got from other centres, Aboriginal services, was that she was very posh and when I look at her she didn't look posh. ... Whether it was because she was in the country ... And she was a quiet sort of mannered person ... that made a big difference.

The long and stressful build up to review day left staff relieved it was over. Their shared elation of passing the process came through in the comments below on the overall affect on the preschool:

*Julie:* I would do it all again to get to this level that we're at now, because it has made the staff more confident, all the staff including myself ... they seen how important it was to be involved and for them with their duties as a staff member and how we had to do it all together, the individual recognition of each person's role and how important it was to make the whole thing work had lot to do with it.

Another explained a long term view of the changes that had taken place:

*Leanne:* Accreditation was definitely worthwhile. We are working a lot better now. The kids have responded really well to all the

activities. With having more things out they are more interested and easier to manage. I now know and understand why we need to do observations. Knowing what the kids are able to do and plan around that helps heaps.

Some focused on the immediate affects of review day:

*Diane:* They shouldn't asked me so many questions [This was said with an enormous smile on her face, which seemed to say but it was really great that she sought our opinions on things and I felt important]. She asked me what you did, Helen. I went out and tried to find you or Julie to get an answer and I couldn't get you, so I told her you were a "Jack-of-all-trades" ... The day went really well. Much better than I had expected. The reviewer was really sufficient, you know, the questions she asked.

When Katrina was asked what it meant for her, she was so excited that she voiced over the question. Her response was in stark contrast to the dire story presented above, after her bus trip with the Reviewer:

*Katrina:* It was just like all the staff working together so everything fell into place and about a week or two before I was thinking yep we're gunna do it. ... there is a much more pleasant atmosphere.

Everyone was voicing a different perspective, having encountered different challenges, seized a range of opportunities and overlooked other things. From the staff feedback Julie and I summarised their responses onto the Director's evaluation form required by the Project Officer. The concept of the organisation operating like a banksia in full bloom at the peak of quality, equated with the photographic timeline on the staff room wall and was articulated again in nature by a small tree at the top of the playground.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter introduced Kulai and its staff. Details followed of our journey as part of the NSW pilot study of the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS). I reported on how the preschool formulated local goals and mounted resistance to organisational change in general, and to the forces of homogenisation from this global instrument (Jipson 2001). All participating early childhood services who engage with QIAS are required to embrace or simulate these ideals to achieve accreditation as a quality service. At Kulai

conflict or dissonance is created by value differences between the local Aboriginal ways and the new global or dominant culture practices. The new practices at Kulai, were allowed to take some prominence for the duration of the QIAS review period, but only those identified as appropriate to the community's needs have been retained. This code switching strategy, recognised the need for initial compliance with the prescribed Anglo-Australian practices. Their home culture values and associated practices might be reviewed by early childhood peers in the accreditation process to be of a lesser or unsatisfactory quality. Once the review was completed some new practices remained in place, whilst others were switched back.

For the period of the study the journeylines at Kulai were guided by protocols of Indigenous research, following the action spirals, which form a part of a participatory action research approach (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000). These were loose frames allowing many and varied directions, without a commitment to fixed goals as a starting point. It was only after relationships of trust and engagement had been formed that the process of planning, implementing, observing and reflecting on organisational change could begin. Along the way we confronted and challenged multiple points of tensions, resistance and open conflict between us.

The outcomes often surprised us, sometimes binding us together and at other times deepening existing fractures between us. Involvement in the process led us to reflect on past and present theories and practices at levels we had not previously encountered. It was a social process that involved listening, acting, speaking and sharing knowledge in ways that often had not been part of our agenda prior to the research. As a consequence of living through these experiences my understanding began to emerge about how people participate in or avoid organisational learning. Both the Kulai staff and I also further developed our skills in code-switching, to help in the process of blurring boundaries and successfully moving between cultures (Kiriakou 2001).

Learning for all of us has now continued far beyond the conclusion of the research project. Enrolments at Kulai continued to grow and the complexities

the organisation faced also continued to expand. In the wider community families whose children attended the preschool were confronted with significant and ongoing social, economic and political problems. The preschool continued to play an important role in preparing children for the transition from the safety of Kulai and their home culture into schools situated within and operated by the dominant Anglo-Australian culture.

Some new staff have come to share in the learning process at the preschool and injected creative ideas from their previous experiences. All the team members elected to annually subject themselves to the rigours of a performance appraisal review based on fragments of QIAS combined with locally formulated goals as integral parts of their organisational learning. As the staff gained confidence they continued to push themselves forward to new heights and speak with more confidence about what could be achieved by co-participating in learning experiences. The initial change generated by the leverage of the QIAS pilot study and this research project has nourished Kulai and its community, in the (re)construction of past knowledges, experimenting with new practices and formulating plans for the future.