

Winners of national early childhood education and care awards announced

A NSW early childhood education service that promoted inclusion, a VIC pre-school that fostered learning about First Peoples culture and a NSW early childhood teacher who facilitated the creation and application of a Reconciliation Action Plan received top honours at the 2016 HESTA Early Childhood Education and Care Awards.

The winners were selected from eight finalists from across Australia at the HESTA Early Childhood Education and Care Awards in Darwin on Friday, 7 October 2016.

HESTA CEO, Debby Blakey, said the inspirational stories of finalists and winners shows the vital role early childhood education and care professionals play in expanding learning opportunities for children, and in pioneering collaborative programs that enhance connections to local communities.

"This year's winners displayed the highest standards of professional excellence, demonstrating leadership in identifying and implementing practices to improve early childhood education and care," Ms Blakey said.

"We are pleased to acknowledge the valuable contribution these winners have made. Their important work has improved the way in which children learn and develop, while embedding inclusive practices which have positive outcomes for their communities."

Each winner received \$10,000 towards professional development, or to further implement learning programs at their services. The \$30,000 prize pool is generously provided by long-standing Awards sponsor **ME** - the bank for you.

The 2016 winners are:

Excellence in Building Inclusion Award

The Infants' Home Ashfield, NSW

The team at the integrated early learning childhood education service were awarded for their holistic approach and innovative strategies to embed and promote inclusion across the entire organisation.

The service constructed an early learning facility to increase capacity to intake families with additional needs, appointed added allied health professionals and constructed new indoor and outdoor learning spaces, with their inclusive-centred approach in mind.

The service operates as a single organisation offering five early childhood programs, family day care, intervention and clinical programs for young children and families. Each day, 289 children attend the service on site. A third of services are specifically designed for children and families with complex support needs or who are in vulnerable circumstances.

The Infants' Home Integrated Services Manager, Lynn Farrell, said the service, which first opened its doors on the same site in 1874, provided an 'oasis' for children.

"Our staff does an amazing job every day. There's such a strong commitment to social justice and a holistic approach to inclusion that informs everything we do, from the team collaborating across a range of disciplines to staff collectively speaking 22 languages," Lynn said.

“Inclusion isn’t just a program – it’s in our heart and soul and we do it so the children we care for will grow up as citizens who are genuinely inclusive.”

Lynn said the Infants’ Home would use the development grant to produce material promoting inclusive education practices for children that educators across Australia could access.

Advancing Pedagogy and Practice Award

Bundjil Nest Project Team Balnarring Pre-school Balnarring, VIC

The team at Balnarring Pre-School was recognised for developing the ‘Bundjil Nest Project’ and wider educational program for children. This initiative acknowledges and embeds the beliefs and values of the First Peoples into the service’s practice and learning.

Development of the Bundjil Nest Project brought together three children’s services — a primary school, early learning service and a pre-school — in the first local collaborative effort of its kind. Over 700 people from the local community participated in a ceremony to build ‘Bundjil’s Nest’ on the local beach.

As part of the ongoing education about First Peoples culture, Balnarring Pre-School consults Boon Wurrung Elders and members from the local community to share stories, songs and dance with children, their families and teachers.

Balnarring Pre-School Educational Leader, Karen Anderson, said the project has resulted in children and their families having a greater understanding of the First People’s culture and greater a sense of inclusion amongst those in the wider community.

“The learnings from the Bundjil Nest Project have rippled out through the community developing new relationships and collaborative partnerships both within our local community, and beyond,” Karen said.

“One of the most rewarding aspects of the project is the relationship and understanding we’ve developed with local Elders, Arweet Carolyn Briggs and Fay Stewart-Muir, as without them our journey of understanding wouldn’t have been possible. We really value the trust they placed in us and the support they provide to continue this project.”

Karen said the Pre-School would use the development grant to further promote local understanding and awareness of local First People’s culture including a festival.

Outstanding Young Graduate Award

Rachael Sydir Explore & Develop – Penrith and Penrith South Penrith, NSW

Rachael was awarded for strengthening children’s understanding of Aboriginal culture and practices by facilitating the creation of and applying a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) to the Services’ curriculum.

As part of her strategy to implement the Services’ first Reconciliation Action Plan, Rachael facilitated ongoing professional development for curriculum leaders and educators, to ensure all employees gained the in-depth knowledge and confidence required for the teaching and learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and culture.

Rachael’s commitment to formulating quality improvement plans led her to recognise that establishing and implementing a Reconciliation Action Plan would enrich the Services’ approach to teaching.

“Introducing the RAP has resulted in significant changes to the curriculum and professional development by our teams, as we wanted to move beyond tokenism and develop an approach that provided deeper meaning and learning,” Rachael said.

“We want to keep going and continue developing the program — we’re not going to stop.”

Rachael said that she wanted to use her development grant to visit remote communities to learn more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and share those learnings across Explore & Develop's 24 Services across NSW.

Find out more about the HESTA Awards Program at hestaawards.com.au

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