

Indigenous culture: It's everybody's business

'We don't have any of those children here.'

'We celebrate NAIDOC Week.'

'We include all cultures—we treat everyone exactly the same!'



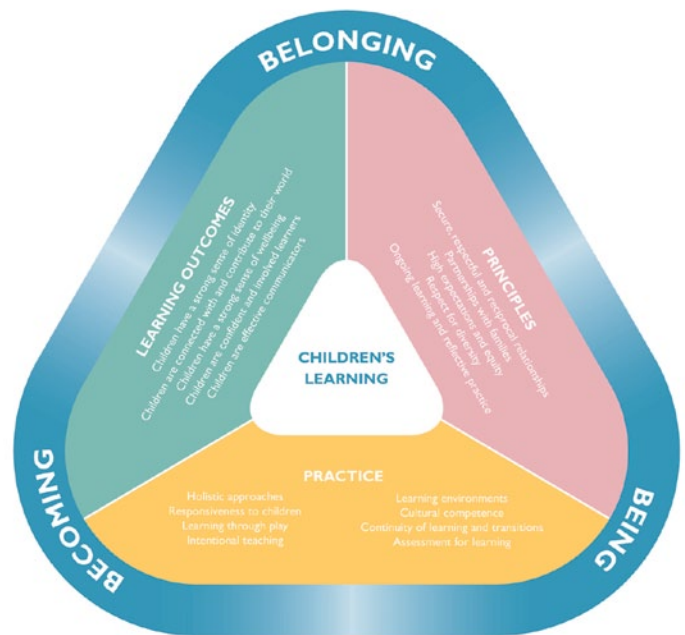
Educators often make such statements when considering the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Such approaches, while often well-intended, ultimately fail to acknowledge the particular significance and importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and place barriers in the way of true Reconciliation.

The first and most important thing to become aware of and embed in our thinking is the unique place that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures hold in Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have histories in Australia dating back 75,000 years. Theirs are some of the oldest cultures in the world and as such demand respect and consideration from us daily—yet how many of us think this way? Why is this history and culture often an add-on or completely ignored when we consider what is important to explore with our children, families and community? Why is it that some of us tend to wait until we are given directives from our governments about the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures into our programs? This 'avoidance' of the real issues can lead to a kind of tokenism—putting up posters or celebrating on one day a year, for example—when we could find and use valuable opportunities to learn and teach about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures as part of our regular program.

A NATIONAL COMMITMENT

The *Early Years Learning Framework, National Quality Standard* and other national guidelines make very clear statements about what they expect early childhood educators to do in relation to the history, culture and the ongoing contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Australian life and culture. The *Early Years Learning Framework* has 'Respect for diversity' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13) as a key Principle and 'Cultural competence' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 16) as a key Practice. The *Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (DEEWR, 2010) recognises that 'cultural competence in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is distinctly different from the broad idea of "respecting all cultures"'. It pays particular attention to 'growing educators' competence in working with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures' (DEEWR, 2010, pp. 24 and 30).

a. The Australian Curriculum, which operates in school settings working with children from age five, gives special consideration to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures: 'to ensure all young Australians will be given the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of histories and cultures, their significance for Australia and the impact they have had, and continue to have, on our world' (ACARA, 2010, p. 20). This cross-curriculum perspective indicates our government's strong commitment to these issues as part of the bigger picture for every child's education in Australia.



Elements of the *Early Years Learning Framework*

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments (2009). *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, p. 10. © Commonwealth of Australia (used with permission).

THE WHY AND HOW OF CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Some of the biggest concerns raised in services about the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are the fear of causing offence, the belief that it is too political for early childhood education and care, and concern about the perceived lack of time and resources to do the work well. While these concerns might be understandable, it is not OK to simply do nothing. Some of the most important things we do in life are often the most difficult or challenging.

Current research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies tells us that:

- Services are more effective for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families when educators are aware of and address cultural competence in their service delivery.
- It is critical for non-Aboriginal staff to be aware of how to engage and support all cultures, but particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.
- Honest engagement, building trust, and working with community members is essential.
- When working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, a focus on empowerment and working from strengths makes a difference.

When considering these points it is not just about 'adding' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives 'on top of' our own values and attitudes, but about the wonderful new insights that can come from considering and accommodating a new world view. In working with all children, but particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, we need to understand the strength, sense of identity and belonging that comes from recognising culture as a unique, core part of every individual's being. The *Early Years Learning Framework* has 'a sense of identity' as a core Outcome for all children. This recognises that identity underpins personal wellbeing, social competence and learning success.

THE MATTER OF CULTURE AND THE NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD

We are in a brand new world with the new *National Quality Standard*. It is timely for us to reflect on what our commitment is to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, what we do and why in relation to Reconciliation, and to begin to unpack and explore culture from a different perspective to discover what it has to offer to all of us.

The Educator's Guide to the *Early Years Learning Framework* for Australia (DEEWR, 2010, p. 26) has a diagram that is useful for supporting educators in reflecting on their current attitudes, skills and knowledge about cultural competence. It is important that time is allocated for all educators to learn about perspectives other than their own and to engage in a process of reflection that has real meaning both for the individual and the team in which they work.

'Reconciliation' is about promoting equality and recognition across cultures; this might seem to be a big concept for young children, but the things we do every day either contribute to the respectful meeting of cultures in Australia, or they hinder that process.

What message do you send on a daily basis about your views on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples? What does both your personal and service philosophy tell us about how you value culture? We need to start locally and find our own stories in our own landscape. How much do you really understand about the land on which you work with children, families and communities? What do you know about the histories of your local land—about the traditions, dreaming stories, spirituality, lore, ceremonies and rituals?

For those of us who came into early childhood education to make a difference in the lives of children, it is now time to be challenged. How are you making a difference in the Reconciliation process? The majority of educators working in services are from a non-Aboriginal background. To put it very simply, the building of understanding and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cannot happen without you. This is everybody's business.

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References

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) (2010). *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum, Version 2.0*. Retrieved 10 February 2012 from http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/Shape_of_the_Australian_Curriculum.pdf.

