Cultural competence: Working towards Reconciliation

The Early Years Learning Framework was, for our service as a whole, the beginning of some deeper understandings around culture and the impetus to move from the simplistic and superficial to something more meaningful and ‘every day’.

As a team we had many discussions, over time, about what ‘respect for diversity’ and ‘cultural competence’ meant for us personally and how that was enacted at our ‘place’. This included educators writing a small article to be shared with each other and families about who they were, where they came from and their family traditions and rituals. This was done with the view that we all have a culture and our history and past shapes who we are and impacts on our future. We also ask families to share their stories as well to enable us to understand them and share their hopes and aspirations for their children.

The Early Years Learning Framework (p. 13) reminds us to ‘recognise that diversity contributes to the richness of our society and provides a valid evidence base about ways of knowing. For Australia it also includes promoting greater understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being’ [emphasis in original].

On conducting our self-assessment as part of developing a Quality Improvement Plan, we identified that we had made some progress but needed to be more focused and deliberate if our whole service was to achieve our goal that ‘all children grow up to be culturally strong’.

We identified that each of the members of our staff team comes with varied knowledge and understandings of the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and, in particular, the local history and place of Cooloon Children’s Centre in Tweed Heads today. We knew that Cooloon was named in a newspaper competition 25 years ago and Cooloon is a local Aboriginal word meaning ‘place of many trees’ and was in fact the original name for Tweed Heads. We are situated in Bundjalung country.

This reflective process saw educators identify the need for our service to move beyond the tokenistic to a deeper understanding of the histories and cultures of our families and each other, and how these understandings will support our work towards Reconciliation.

We decided that the process of the Quality Improvement Plan would be our tool to further our understandings, to increase our knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and—and more locally—Aboriginal and South Sea Islanders, and to ensure that our day-to-day practices reflect a more holistic approach to cultural competence and Reconciliation.

Our Quality Improvement Plan on cultural competence and Reconciliation has been developed and written in a way that touches on several of the Standards and we as a team have begun to work through these, with set priorities and timelines. In particular, the emphasis will be on:

- Quality Area 1—Educational program and practice
- Quality area 5—Relationships with children
- Quality area 6—Collaborative partnerships with families and communities.

We have further linked our goals to specific elements in the National Quality Standard. We decided the first step was for all educators to attend training around cultural competence, in particular focusing on the histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

So far, educators have had one initial training session and we know we have a long way to go to achieve our goal. Our children have also had an opportunity to hear the training presenters share their histories and culture through music and stories.
Some comments from educators after our first training session provide an interesting reflection on their changing understandings:

‘The exercise we participated in where we had to write down the five most important people/places/things to us was difficult enough, but when the presenter asked us to give one up and then just removed another really heightened my awareness and empathy for what it must have been like for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the past and how this must still impact on their lives today.’

‘My brother has been friends with one of the presenters since school days. I was surprised to hear him talk about his connections to his family and home culture so strongly and publicly. It’s a part of their friendship that has been so silent for many years.’

‘Coming from New Zealand, I did not realise there were so many dialects. This complicates understandings.’

‘I felt a bit uncomfortable in the workshop but on reflection maybe I need to be feeling this way ... I know we need to move from being ‘tokenistic’ but I’m not sure how—it’s a huge task!’

‘I know I can no longer be frightened and afraid to do the “wrong thing”. As an educator I have a responsibility to all the children I teach and by being respectful of everyone I can do this.’

‘I feel embarrassed that I grew up here and know so little of the local history and culture ... My two children attending primary school are now learning more about the local histories than I ever did. That’s a positive thing for the future ... I realise that most of what I thought I knew came from the media—that’s not always accurate.’

‘I have worked alongside some educators for many years. I didn’t realise one educator in our team, who identifies as Aboriginal and South Sea Islander, had such a history for us to learn from. Some of the things she talks about are so much part of who she is, she doesn’t even realise they are, for example, so different to mine.’

When we next meet as a group we will reflect further on these new understandings and explore and refine a way forward. We have already allocated resources in our budget for educators to spend time exploring local places of cultural relevance, before we take those steps with our children and families.

We are consulting with families to see how they might support us in this journey, discovering how we might tap into their knowledge. We know we have to build really strong relationships with all of our families before many will feel comfortable doing this.
We will look for ways that the Aboriginal and South Sea Islander-identifying member of our team can guide our deliberations and demonstrate leadership. We all have so much to learn from her.

We are committed to regularly reviewing the materials we use and display to ensure that they reflect our community, the broader community and traditional and contemporary cultures.

We are aware of Early Childhood Australia’s Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) and by the end of 2012 we want to have our own RAP, ensuring that this work is embedded in what we do, as a part of who we are and what we stand for.

We also share Early Childhood Australia’s vision for Reconciliation that ‘begins with our acknowledgement of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the original custodians of Australia and recognises that their cultures shape the cultural heritage of all Australians’.

Our Quality Improvement Plan will be on the agenda of all future educator and committee meetings. By doing this, we can ensure that we have more formal and deliberate discussions and make the necessary gains for children and families, as well as ourselves as educators. As the Early Years Learning Framework (p. 13) says, ‘Educators … become co-learners with children, families and community, and value the continuity and richness of local knowledge shared by community members, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders’.

Closing the gap in educational achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is a goal of the Council of Australian Governments. We have made it a priority in our service. It is our responsibility as early childhood educators to support this goal and to make the vision ‘that all children grow up culturally strong’ a reality.

Judy Radich
Cooloon Children’s Centre

References
Early Childhood Australia (ECA) [not yet published]. Reconciliation Action Plan. Canberra: ECA.

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