



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



Cultural competence—stories about work in progress

Note: This e-Newsletter builds on information in several publications:

- Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) (2010). 'Cultural competence' and 'The Journey for educators: Growing competence in working with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures', *Educators belonging, being and becoming: Educators' guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Canberra, ACT: DEEWR.
- Goodwin, J. (2012). Indigenous culture: It's everybody's business. *Every Child*, 18(1) p. 3.
- Connor, J. (2011). Understanding cultural competence. *ECA EYLF PLP e-Newsletter*, No.7.

If you are beginning to explore cultural competence and what it means for your work, you may want to review these articles before reading this e-Newsletter.

- appreciating the centrality of culture in children's *belonging, being and becoming*
- continually learning about different cultural practices and world views
- supporting and encouraging children's developing cultural competence
- learning to communicate in effective and respectful ways with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

(Adapted from EYLF, p. 16)

The term 'culture' encompasses not only ethnicity, but also other dimensions of identity and the ways we live our lives:

What is culture? Culture can be defined as 'what we create beyond our biology'. Not given to us, but made by us (Williams, in MacNaughton, 2003, p. 14). Using this definition, culture incorporates the scope of human diversity and ways of being, such as gender, ethnicity, class, religions, ability, age, and sexuality. (DEEWR, 2010, p. 22).

Setting the scene

Cultural competence, a Practice in the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF), is a complex concept that informs all aspects of the operation of an early childhood setting. It is defined as:

A set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals that enable them to work together effectively in cross-cultural settings. (Tong and Cross in VACCA 2008, quoted on p. 23, in the Educators' Guide to the EYLF, p. 21).

All seven Quality Areas in the *National Quality Standard* (NQS) require cultural competence, particularly those aspects of practice that relate directly to interactions, communication and relationships with children, families and colleagues.

Cultural competence includes:

- being aware of your own culture and world views and how they influence your practice
- respecting and valuing different ways of knowing, seeing and living
- honouring differences



The practice of cultural competence

Let's look at four examples of educators striving for cultural competence in three broad interconnected areas of practice:

- Curriculum
- Collaborating with families
- Using your cultural competence to support other educators.

As you read the stories, reflect on how they demonstrate cultural competence.



Practice example 1: Engaging children in Reconciliation

A centre, which has no Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children enrolled, is beginning to think about how to contribute to Reconciliation. This story focuses on curriculum content that opens up discussion and action relating to Reconciliation issues.

*Patrick asked if I could read to him. I showed him some of the books I had chosen from the library. He selected *The Rabbits*, by John Marsden and Shaun Tan. Using surreal illustrations and simple but poignant text, *The Rabbits* tells the story of the first Australians and the coming of the Europeans, with kangaroos and rabbits as the protagonists. It addresses issues related to land rights and the Stolen Generation. I know using this book with young children is controversial, but I made it available as I was curious to see how they would respond.*

Patrick was immediately interested in the illustrations, commenting that the ship looked like the ones in the book about Captain Cook. I found the book he was referring to and he compared the ships, which were very similar.

As I read, Patrick studied the illustrations and asked questions. The story had a powerful impact on him, and over several days we read it 11 times at his request!

Patrick suggested that the kangaroos might live in Australia. He was unsure why the rabbits kept coming and why they 'don't

listen to the kangaroos.' He noticed that the rabbits were chopping down lots of trees and commented, 'We need trees to get our food'. Each reading prompted more comments and questions. I explained that the book related to the story of Aboriginal Australians. We recollected our previous work on Captain Cook and how the Indigenous Australians lived here before the Europeans arrived. Patrick commented on the kangaroos' sad faces.

On the last page of the book, the question is asked, 'Who will help save us from all these rabbits?' Patrick suggested, 'Maybe Spiderman could come, or all the superheroes. They could swoop down and get all of the rabbits'. Another child asked what was happening in the book. 'The baby kangaroos are being taken from their families. They are sad aren't they?' explained Patrick. He continued, 'All the rabbits destroy the kangaroos. They need to stop being mean to the kangaroos. All the superheroes need to come.'

Reflections

The story is a very powerful one about big issues. Patrick spent a long time exploring the text—examining the different perspectives and analysing meanings. He showed real concern for fairness, as well as expressing empathy with the kangaroos.

What next?

This book has fascinated many of the children. We will look at it again, as it has raised many interesting issues. We will talk about Reconciliation and what we can do.

It is important to give the children the opportunity to answer the final question in the book. Leaving them with a sad story could be upsetting. Empowering them with opportunities to make a difference and to be active members of the community is essential. We must continue to find ways to embed knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture within the centre.

*We have been looking at and comparing the Aboriginal flag and the Australian flag. This has led children to ask, 'Does the Australian flag represent everyone living in Australia?' Rufus, Jasper, Meriam and Lucy have made an Aboriginal flag for our room. Ruby, Liam, Patrick and Jack were inspired by the colours of the flag and painted stones in red, yellow and black. We displayed these for children to use in an open-ended way, alongside a copy of *The Rabbits*.*

We plan to encourage the children to design and make a flag that represents all Australians.

Because we enjoy books so much, we collected money from our families to buy children's books to donate to the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation. A small group of children delivered them to the Foundation. This was an empowering experience, as it gave the children an opportunity to make a difference to the lives of other children.

Karen and Michelle, Gowrie Docklands, Melbourne.

The next two examples illustrate culturally sensitive collaboration with families that enriches the experience of all children.

Practice example 2: Incorporating family culture

Janani, a family day care educator, noticed that Bodhi, 18 months old, always placed his hands over his food before eating. She thought it was one of those mysterious things toddlers do—perhaps part of his exploration of food. When she mentioned it to his parents they said that before every meal they place their hands over the food and offer a blessing. Janani said, 'Bodhi's parents helped me make sense of something I would never have figured out the meaning of by myself'. Janani asked the parents if they would share the blessing with her. It is:

Thank you to the farmers who worked in the field planting and harvesting the food for our meal.

Thank you to the sun and rain that helped the food to grow.

Thank you to the sky and the earth below.

Peace on earth, health to all our families and friends, and blessings on our meal.

Janani decided that this blessing could be meaningful for all the children. It doesn't reflect a particular religious perspective and discussing it would help children consider a number of issues. She uses the blessing each day that Bodhi and his younger sister attend, which his family appreciates.



Practice example 3: Incorporating a family's wishes

Rukmini is the director of a service that includes families and staff from many different cultural, language and religious backgrounds. For the past three years they have celebrated the end of Ramadan with an afternoon tea for the whole service community. Rukmini says that it is now a tradition that everyone looks forward to.

A family asked permission to give all the children sweets or lollies, as is the custom at the end of Ramadan. The centre has a policy of providing all food—that is, not allowing any food from outside—and also giving children only healthy food. The staff wanted to honour this family's generous offer but also adhere to their policies. They discussed the policy with the family who had made the offer and reached a compromise that all were happy with. The centre would take responsibility for providing special treats for the children and would make it clear at the afternoon tea that the special treats were being provided because this family wanted children to have them. The family wrote children's names in Arabic on the packets of treats and presented them to each child.

Rukmini adds that the event was very successful and she and the staff are reflecting on ways to improve the quality of such events. She said, 'I can't tell you how many people came and enjoyed themselves, and they were all were blown away by the family and the sharing!'

Practice example 4: Respect and inclusion

This example illustrates how important it is for professionals who provide support and resources to other educators to be culturally competent and respectful.

One of the roles of the Family Day Care Association Queensland is supporting schemes to provide good-quality experiences for children. They are currently working with several schemes in Brisbane involving educators with an African background.

Peta, the Executive Manager, says that this experience is providing the Association with many exciting challenges. 'We're basing our work on the fundamental values of our organisation and the big ideas in the EYLF. We place a lot of value on respect and inclusion. We want to support all educators and not just say "you're not good enough to be an educator so you're out". We want to empower these women, many of whom have experienced trauma and have come from war-torn countries.

'Our job is to offer educators support and resources to be successful in their work. We're always clear that ultimately we want to empower educators to provide wonderful learning environments for children. We've had to take a step back and think first about how we can help these educators in their lives as family and community members. We're adopting a community development approach. We started by asking them what they needed. As a result we're working at the scheme level to link them to other community services that can support them and their families. We're mindful of the fact that eventually we should step away, and we want them to have strong connections in the community.'

Peta says that this experience has encouraged her organisation to look critically at their policies, procedures and ways of working, with the aim of eliminating obstacles for schemes and educators from different cultures and language backgrounds.



Conclusion

Hopefully these stories will prompt you to think about how your cultural competence and that of your colleagues can make a positive difference in all aspects of your practice.

It is important to acknowledge that cultural competence is always a work in progress. New challenges occur throughout our professional lives. What matters is that we continue to learn. As Michelle advises: 'If you're feeling hesitant about doing something, just have a go. If your intentions are genuine you'll be right!'

While, as mentioned earlier, 'cultural competence' pervades all relationships and programs encompassed by the NQS, it is particularly pertinent to Quality Area 6: Collaborative partnerships with families and communities. The questions to guide reflection for Standard 6, on p. 148–149 of the *Guide to the National Quality Standard*, offer a valuable springboard for educators to review current attitudes, values and practices.

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References

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Biography

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Jenni Connor wrote the e-Newsletter series in 2011 and is responsible for liaising with authors and overseeing the production of the 2012 series.



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