



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



Becoming culturally competent—Ideas that support practice



There were never in the world two opinions alike, any more than two hairs or two grains. Their most universal quality is diversity.

Michel De Montaigne, 1533–1592

Becoming culturally competent is about building respectful relationships. It occurs over time, by our connection with others and through our daily experiences with children and families in local communities. It is as much about what we do every day, the little decisions we make and the words we use, as it is about what we think, what we understand and what we believe. Even though it is multilayered, interconnected and at times very complex, it is one of the most important ways we can ensure that Australia remains a place of peace with justice for its citizens.

Knowing about and putting the ideas of cultural competency into practice can seem like a daunting task. This e-newsletter aims to explain what we now understand about 'being culturally competent', to suggest some practical ways to take action and to remind us about what is expected of contemporary professionals in early childhood settings.

So what exactly is cultural competence and why should we do it?

Cultural competence is a term that is used widely to describe the ways in which individuals and services work more effectively to support, promote and embrace cultural difference. In dealing with these ideas, we join with our colleagues in health and social work for example, who have been using the terms for many years, to better understand and respond to cultural diversity and thereby provide better and more inclusive services to the community.

'Cultural competence requires that organisations have a defined set of values and principles, and demonstrate behaviours, attitudes, policies and structures that enable them to work effectively cross-culturally.' (National Centre for Cultural Competence, 2006)

Becoming culturally competent is a clear expectation of the *National Quality Framework* (NQF) and features strongly in the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) and the *National Quality Standard* (NQS). It is something for all of us to consider in our practice with children and their families irrespective of where we are in Australia or the range of diversity present in the communities we are part of.

The guiding principles of the NQF are explicit and require services to attend to diversity as a matter of principle, policy and action:

- The rights and best interests of the child are paramount.
- Children are successful, competent and capable learners.
- Equity, inclusion and diversity underpin the Framework.
- Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are valued.
- The role of parents and families is respected and supported.
- Best practice is expected in the provision of education and care services.

The EYLF defines cultural competence as ‘the ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures and explains that cultural competence is our capacity to:

- be aware of our own world view
- develop positive attitudes towards cultural differences
- gain knowledge of different cultural practices and world views
- develop skills for communication and interaction across cultures.

As we practise these capacities over time, they become stronger and more embedded in our everyday thinking and acting. It is about continually improving and learning, through reflection, from our successes and mistakes. Cultural competence is a big idea; it’s bigger than ethnicity, more than celebrations, larger than food—it’s about all that we are, what shapes our beliefs and how we understand the world. For example, my cultural background is more than my Anglo Irish heritage. It is also about my Grandmother’s (and I assume her mother’s before her) beliefs in manners and punctuality. These beliefs were a feature of my childhood and shape the person I am today. It is something that I grappled with when I worked in a community that viewed time as much more flexible and relaxed than my grandmother’s strict way of life. My growing cultural competence invites me to be aware of my own background and how it affects my relationships with children and their families and the decisions I make.

‘Educators who are culturally competent respect multiple cultural ways of knowing, seeing and living, celebrate the benefits of diversity and have an ability to understand and honour differences.’ (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009, p. 16)



Cultural competence also includes our efforts to value and build connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Programs that highlight and share Australia’s rich Indigenous culture with all children contribute to the work of Reconciliation and support the rights of all citizens to be valued.

But perhaps the most important reason to pay attention to cultural competence is that, by knowing more about and respecting our varied cultural ways of being, we create children’s services that welcome everyone, build a sense of belonging for all, and equip all children to live well with diversity. When we take action to make these ideas true and real for everyone, we assist children to learn and grow in the five learning outcomes of the EYLF and become active citizens now and into the future.

In 1991, Anne Stonehouse invited us to consider cultural competence from a very practical perspective ...

‘Today’s children will work with, go to school with, be friends with, live next door to, form permanent relationships with people from cultures different from their own.’
(Stonehouse, 1991)

This quote remains true, more than 20 years later, and provides a powerful rationale for cultural competence.

Getting on with cultural competency

Taking practical steps towards cultural competency doesn’t have to be complicated. It’s best to start locally and with the children and families that you know well. As we learn more and become increasingly confident we can stretch our competency further.

The following ideas come from a range of service types in various communities across Australia. As you read them, reflect on whether these ideas might be something to try in your service.

Understanding ourselves ...

Knowing about our own cultural identity is an important first step in the process of becoming culturally competent. When we understand the beliefs and values that are important to us and the way that our own cultural background has shaped our own life we become more able to acknowledge how these factors impact on others.

A small rural service decided to start talking about cultural competency by updating the information they shared with families throughout the centre. Each staff member created a document that was displayed in the foyer and in the children’s portfolios. Rather than prescribing the information to be included they invited the staff to share something important in their own family and cultural life. What happened surprised everyone. Conversations were sparked that built connections between and across the centre. People noticed similarities and revelled in the differences. The simple act of sharing information supported stronger connections and families started to reciprocate with their own pages.



This example is from Milleara Integrated Learning and Development Centre for Children in Melbourne which undertook a similar project and displayed their stories in the foyer.

Questions for reflection

Where are the opportunities for educators to discuss their understanding of cultural competence and their own cultural identity?

How can these understandings be shared ... with each other? with families?

Start local, with families and communities ...

Cultural competency need not be about the exotic or far away, it can start with your local community. Increasing our knowledge and developing positive attitudes towards cultural differences can be as simple as being more and more aware of what is happening locally and what is important to the people of your community. Communities change and develop; things happen

and priorities shift. Families bring with them a vast array of cultural perspectives and values. Services that respond to local events and neighbourhood cultural features make cultural competency a relevant and meaningful experience.

A Family Day Care (FDC) scheme, in response to the growing number of families settling in the local community from Africa (mostly Somalia), began a process of working with local agencies and the community Elders to make connection and build relationships. This getting to know you process happened over a year or so. Conversations about expectations, child rearing practices etc. lead to social events and invitations to join cultural celebrations. Recruitment of educators to the scheme from the community increased, and the confidence of local families in the scheme's service strengthened. Sometimes cultural competency is a long process that invites us to look beyond our own walls to seek relationships with our community.

Questions for reflection

What's going on in your community?

What changes or shifts do you need to be aware of?

How do you know about the cultural perspectives and values of the families you work with?

What do you do with this information?

Where can you go to find out more?

Celebrate ...

Celebrations seem to be an easy way for us all—children, families and educators—to learn more about each other and become culturally competent. There was a moment there that we were so worried about imposing celebrations on one group or another that we stopped doing them all together. But what we know is that celebrations of all descriptions are an important part of our cultural life and that they take many forms. There are religious celebrations like Eid at the end of Ramadan, or those that connect us to place like national days of celebration, or connect us to ancient cycles like the Luna New Year. Or of course they can include the everyday celebrations that honour birthdays and other rites of passage.



Celebrating birthdays can be an important cultural event and an important way to recognise children's identity and their family connections.

It doesn't really matter which events we celebrate with children in our services as long as they are relevant and meaningful to the community that our service is a part of; as long as we seek guidance and connection with the families and involve the children.

A preschool service I know makes a deliberate effort to identify the celebrations that are important to their children and families through the use of a family information document distributed in the enrolment process. The educator works with the children to plan a series of experiences that explore what their particular celebrations mean. These processes often end in a shared event where children and their families are invited on a Friday night to have an early dinner together that includes an aspect of the particular festivities. Parents are invited to share artefacts, rituals or traditions with children and other families. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

Gowrie Victoria in North Carlton tried a different approach and chose to celebrate the Winter Solstice with families. This neutral and non-specific celebration involved making candles with children and walking in the park as it became dark, followed by a shared meal back at the centre. Celebrations like this are a great way to build connection across the community.

Questions for reflection

Do you know about the celebrations that are important to the children and families that you work with?

How will this information be included in the program?

Which celebrations are relevant in your broader community?

How can you involve children in the planning and preparation of the celebration?

Becoming culturally competent is about connections and relationships. Firstly, as educators, connecting to our own cultural identity, knowing what's important to us and where these ideas come from. From there, our efforts to recognise and celebrate the cultural identity of the children and families we work with can be as small as learning a greeting in a child's home language, introducing a Dreamtime story, or asking a family about how they plan to celebrate their version of New Year. As we become more

confident we can look for bigger projects that intentionally invite children to think and learn about their own and others' cultural identity, challenge prejudice when we encounter it, and explore new ways of knowing and being.

Cultural competency is ultimately about respect, learning to respect our own and each other's identity, standing up to actions that erode these rights and exploring ways to demonstrate this commitment every day.

This is a challenge that cannot be ignored or reduced to a token event or someone else's problem. It requires each of us to decide how we will live and more importantly what message we send to children about how they will live. It is through our commitment and our daily action to truly value difference that we become a community in which *all* can belong and flourish.

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Biography

Catharine is an early childhood consultant and writer. Catharine began as a teacher in a sessional kindergarten program and went on to manage a range of services for children and their families from child care in the Northern suburbs of Melbourne to school-based programs in Papua New Guinea.

Catharine has a Masters in Early Childhood Education specialising in early childhood policy and governance, the delivery of integrated services and the exploration of innovative programs to engage vulnerable children and their families.

Coordinating Editor

Jenni Connor wrote the e-Newsletter series in 2011–12 and is responsible for liaising with authors and overseeing the production of the 2013 series.

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Gowrie Victoria, Newry St Carlton North.



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