The Global Leaders for Young Children program at the World Forum Foundation seeks to identify and develop the next generation of early childhood leaders throughout the world. The World Forum Foundation and the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood have partnered together to develop leadership in the Asia-Pacific region. Thanks to the financial support provided by Educational Experience, Early Childhood Australia has recruited two participants who are now part of the current Asia-Pacific cohort.

Jessica Staines is a Wiradjuri woman and Early Childhood Teacher who was born and raised on Gadigal land in Sydney’s inner west. She currently runs an Aboriginal early childhood consultancy called the Koori Curriculum, whose main role is to support and mentor educators to make curriculum decisions that respectfully include Aboriginal perspectives into their program.

Jackie Bennett is a Kamilaroi/Bigambul woman from St George in South West Queensland. She is currently a Cultural Diversity Advisor for C&K, providing support to educators across Queensland. Jackie also advises educators about where they can find resources and information to assist them with embedding Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse perspectives into their services and daily practice.

How has your experience of the Global Leaders program been so far?

Jessica: [It] has been an amazing and invaluable experience. Part of the program allowed me to attend the World Forum Foundation’s Conference in Auckland where I had the opportunity to meet with Indigenous people from all around the world. Through sharing stories I quickly understood how similar our contexts are in regards to children in out-of-home care and intergenerational trauma.

Jackie: I am enjoying the Global Leaders program and I have learnt so much in the first year. I have met some amazing people and I have learnt about the challenges that they are experiencing in the provision of early childhood in their countries. I have also shared the challenges that we face in the delivery of early childhood education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children here in Australia.

What have you gained from this experience that you can bring back to your work here in Australia?

Jessica: Part of the program requires us to engage in a project and develop a resource that supports vulnerable children. I’ve been using this opportunity to develop an early childhood curriculum and practice guide that supports the inclusion of Aboriginal children in the early years. I’ve been collaborating with Dr Red Ruby Scarlet on this project and we hope to have a draft finalised by the end of the year.

Jackie: I have learnt that Australia is a country that can lead the way in how early childhood education can be delivered, and feel that we have a lot to offer other countries that are not so fortunate. I think the Global Leaders experience has enabled me to broaden my thinking on how I communicate to educators about how they can better embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into their everyday practice.
I can see that there is real potential for true reconciliation to occur in early childhood, especially if we all work together to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives …

How can educators help to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into their services/curriculum?

Jessica: The Koori Curriculum advises that educators don’t try to teach about Aboriginal culture as if it is a topic or a theme. Instead we advise that educators identify what the children are interested in and use this interest as a vehicle for learning and find Aboriginal perspectives that can be interwoven this way.

Jackie: A good place for educators to start their journey is to learn about the hidden history of Australia. Once this journey begins, I find that what started out to be a ‘ticking the box’ exercise for educators quickly turns into a personal journey for them to find out more, and they develop a need to truly embed rather than it being a tokenistic gesture.

What are some of the ongoing issues still impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today?

Jessica: Today, one in six Aboriginal children are in out-of-home care in New South Wales, and these numbers are 100 times higher than what they ever were during the stolen generations. While Aboriginal people are less than 3 per cent of Australia’s population, we are over 50 per cent of Australia’s juvenile prison population. Aboriginal children are more likely to end up in jail than they are to finish high school. These statistics are scary and very real.

Jackie: Some of the ongoing issues are alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence; youth crime is increasing, as is youth suicide. I feel that intergenerational trauma is one of the things that has contributed to these issues and are still impacting on many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and families today, and I believe that the long-term effects of this trauma is not easily understood or acknowledged.

What does it mean to you to be an Aboriginal person in Australia today?

Jessica: Being an Aboriginal person in Australia today means that you experience extreme highs and lows. As a fair-skinned blackfella, at times I feel that I am not accepted or seen as a ‘real’ Aboriginal person. There are still a lot of bias and stereotypes out there about what an Aboriginal person is and should be like.

Jackie: The biggest challenge for me being an Aboriginal person today is not knowing all my family. I am from a big family but because of our history, my family was dispersed everywhere, so sadly today we are still trying to find each other. Our family reunion every two years is assisting us to do that. All I want is for my children and grandchildren to know who they are, where they come from and to know who family is.

What could communities and families do to promote the importance of identity and culture?

Jessica: I think the best way to grow children up to be culturally strong and proud is by immersing them in the Aboriginal community. It’s important to attend community events to feel togetherness and reconnect.

Jackie: There are more and more programs and events that celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and identity throughout the year. If all communities and families attended at least one of these events with their children, everyone as a whole would gain a better understanding of how important culture and identity is to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Was early childhood a sector you always wanted to be involved in?

Jessica: I originally wanted to be a social worker and support vulnerable children and families. However, once I started working in early childhood I quickly understood that educators in some contexts are social workers as well. If we want what’s best for the child then we want what’s best for the whole family. I love the way that early childhood services value a joined up service delivery approach and foster secure, respectful and supportive relationships with families and children.

Jackie: I started working with C&K three-and-a-half years ago; this is when I developed a true understanding of the importance of early childhood education. I have always been passionate about promoting education to parents and families, especially about the importance of education and I am totally enjoying this early childhood space. I can see that there is real potential for true reconciliation to occur in early childhood, especially if we all work together to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into our everyday business in the kindergartens and long day care centres.

Global Leaders engage in a two-year program, during which time they develop and implement action-oriented projects in their own communities aimed at improving the lives of young children.

Interview by Jessica Deotto
Publishing Editor, ECA

Further information
World Forum Foundation—worldforumfoundation.org/about-us
Educational Experience—www.edex.com.au
Koori Curriculum—www.kooricurriculum.com
C&K—www.candk.asn.au

www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au