



Stretching and disrupting for

reconciliation

'We teach ethics but not the moral courage that goes with them when there is a personal or professional conflict' (Dr Cindy Blackstock, 2018).

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) was one of the first organisations in the early childhood sector to begin a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) (2012–2016), so it seems a good time—more than six months into our second RAP, *Embed, Enable and Strive: A Stretch Reconciliation Action Plan for Early Childhood Australia (January 2018–December 2020)*—to assess what we've been learning and where it is likely to take us in the next three years.

That first ECA RAP triggered many new directions and we are pleased to see progress, yet each step is a reminder of how much we need to keep moving.

ECA committed to a 'Stretch' RAP in 2018, which is designed to take organisations beyond initial steps and to embed initial reconciliation initiatives into longer-term strategies. A Stretch RAP is a commitment to accountability for progress and to making reconciliation 'business as usual'. It is also a commitment to advance reconciliation within our sphere of influence.

ECA's Stretch RAP provides a platform of the values and principles from which we can help advance reconciliation in our communities, and provide leadership and support to the early childhood education and care professionals we represent.

We are making progress as an organisation and seeing progress in the early childhood sector too. However, we also experience stumbles, questions and uncertainty, and have learnt to trust the process and learn from our mistakes.

Since our first RAP, ECA has developed a number of initiatives that have become embedded, or are on their way to being embedded. Cultural awareness training for all ECA staff and ECA Council delegates is now embedded. ECA strives to identify and include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices across our learning resources, publications and structures. We work with SNAICC—National Voice for our Children, Narragunnawali, Reconciliation Australia and other specialist groups to promote information, resources and events to the early childhood sector that increase cultural understanding and support young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, their families and communities to participate in early learning. ECA's Reconciliation Advisory Group has provided wisdom, expertise and guidance, and this has been further

'From ECA's perspective ... We cannot advance towards reconciliation without disturbing and unsettling our worldviews.'

enhanced with the 2018 addition of Associate Professor Grace Sarra, from Queensland University of Technology's School of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education.

A key initiative that began in 2014—a national event for the sector, ECA's Reconciliation Symposium—is now embedded as an annual event. The ECA Reconciliation Symposium has grown considerably since first held in 2014. An accompanying closed Facebook group—*Reconciliation Champions*—encourages participants to share practices and experiences in their own journey and with the teams and children they work with.

We take it as a sign of the maturing capacity of ECA's reconciliation initiatives and of the early childhood sector that the 2018 ECA Reconciliation Symposium in Fremantle, WA, held in May, saw a lively debate emerge with strong and divergent views expressed at and beyond the event. Focused on a popular children's picture book, *Sorry Sorry*, the discussion it triggered has been a way to consider ongoing practices within ECA and across the sector. You can read the background about the discussion at ECA's blog *The Spoke*: 'Controversy over *Sorry Sorry*—a welcome debate arising from ECA's Reconciliation Symposium' (2018a).

Some educators expressed anger and dismay that the book glossed over first contact between 'First Peoples' and 'Others' and that ECA stocked the book. Some listening to the discussion felt distressed, uncomfortable or confused about the discussion or the book.

From ECA's perspective, disagreement and disharmony are a natural part of the reconciliation journey. We cannot advance towards reconciliation without disturbing and unsettling our worldviews. Discomfort, sadness and anger as part of respectful discussion are to be expected. How else will we understand other perspectives and develop our own?

The discussions at the 2018 ECA Reconciliation Symposium, and through ECA social media and networks in the early childhood community, lead to several immediate outcomes.

ECA consulted further with Aboriginal early childhood pedagogues on the *Sorry Sorry* picture book. It is one of only a few resources aimed at very young children that tries to answer, in an age-appropriate picture format, the need for an apology and the need for reconciliation. For the moment, ECA recommends it as an educator reflection resource rather than as a reading experience with young children. Gisella Wilson—ECA Reconciliation Advisory Group member and manager of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs at KU Children's Services—urged educators to have 'a conversation' about the book and see it as a tool 'to deepen the thinking and increase the understanding of educators and parents/carers/adults' (ECA, 2018a).

ECA also reviewed its processes generally and strengthened how we quality-assure books dealing with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander themes.

ECA approached the author and publisher about the potential to address concerns in collaboration with ECA and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts.

Some educators have indicated they have learnt from the symposium discussion, have reflected on the issues with colleagues, or reconsidered the resources they use on reconciliation in their educational practice with young children. Some educators have decided not to use the book and are reviewing how to support young children's understanding of concepts such as dispossession, fairness and the impact of settlement on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Others reported previous positive experiences using *Sorry Sorry* as a resource with young children and believe they will continue to do so.

For ECA, the controversy was a chance to see reconciliation at work and to recognise that for some issues there is no single correct answer, but that divergent, well-considered responses may lead to completely opposing viewpoints and practices. Importantly it confirmed ECA's commitment to embed, enable and strive under our Stretch RAP. We need to keep wading into uncomfortable depths. We need to continue creating opportunities for respectful speaking, listening and—yes—disagreement across the early childhood sector.

We have a way to go and will continue to stretch ourselves further. As Dr Cindy Blackstock (2018)—an uncompromising advocate for First Nations children in Canada—reminds us, 'true and meaningful reconciliation' will occur when a new generation of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children 'grow up so they never have to recover from their childhoods' and when a generation of non-Indigenous children will not have to say sorry.

Read more from Dr Cindy Blackstock, a keynote speaker at the 2018 ECA National Conference, at ECA's blog The Spoke: 'The time for first steps is over: Doing better for all young children' (2018). Learn more about reconciliation and the different kinds of RAPs that organisations can embark on at www.reconciliation.org.au.

Early Childhood Australia

References and further reading

- Blackstock, C. (2018, August). *The time for first steps is over: Doing better for all young children*. Retrieved from <http://thespoke.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/time-first-steps-better-young-children>.
- Early Childhood Australia (ECA). (2018a, June). *Controversy over Sorry Sorry—a welcome debate arising from ECA's Reconciliation Symposium*. Retrieved from <http://thespoke.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/controversy-sorry-sorry-welcome-debate-arising-ecas-reconciliation-symposium>.
- Early Childhood Australia (ECA). (2018b). *Embed, Enable and Strive: A Stretch Reconciliation Action Plan for Early Childhood Australia (January 2018–December 2020)*. Canberra, ACT: ECA. Retrieved from www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ECA-RAP_2018-20.pdf.
- Kerr, A. (2014). *Sorry Sorry*. Tingalpa, Qld: Boolarong Press.
- Marsden, J. (2008). *The Rabbits*. Sydney, NSW: Hachette Australia.
- Reconciliation Australia. (n.d.). *Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Schools and Early Learning*. Retrieved from www.narragunnawali.org.au.
- Reconciliation Australia—www.reconciliation.org.au.
- SNAICC—National Voice for our Children—www.snaicc.org.au.