



# Inclusion

## for our culturally and linguistically diverse community

I grew up in the 70s with a real sense of belonging to my place of birth. I was born in Tweed Heads where for many generations my family originated. In Tweed, I was supported by a large group of family and friends, with similar upbringing, socioeconomic status and culture. This in turn, made it difficult for me when I got married and started moving around Australia, making new friends, finding employment and feeling connected to support networks.

I cannot imagine what it would have been like if I had to move and not be able to speak the language or know the culture. This is the case for many of the families at Anglicare's Franklin Early Childhood School (FECS), Canberra. Our vision for our families, children and staff at Anglicare at FECS is a transformational place of learning, connection and inclusive practice.

### Franklin Early Childhood School community

#### The school

Franklin Early Childhood School is the fifth school in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Government's early childhood vision. That is, a purpose built integrated service that caters for children birth to eight years. The childcare service is managed by Anglicare New South Wales (NSW) south, west and ACT, and delivers long day care, integrated preschool, before and after school care and vacation care. Our school population includes families from 35 countries who speak 47 languages. They consist of embassy or defence families, families on work/study visas and skilled migrants choosing a new life who are awaiting permanent residency or citizenship. We often have families who need to leave Australia, sometimes on short notice due to funerals or family illness. We are very flexible around this and offer families options, enabling them to easily return to their childcare places.

#### Connections

Connections are a very important means to create a sense of belonging and enable inclusion of culturally and linguistically diverse children. We connect at Franklin in many ways.



The role of our community coordinator, Annette Evans, is to merge the school and the childcare service to ensure that the holistic environment is reflective of families and individuals from all backgrounds and beliefs. Annette supports this by creating groups such as the Grandparent conversation group or specific nationality focused play and language groups. Through Annette's work we have access to a network of cultural advisors and families willing to share stories of history and culture. In addition, the ACT Playgroups Association along with Anglicare run free networking activities such as playgroups, park and play, and paint and play sessions. The attendance of a regular coffee van helps create a less formal environment that in turn breaks down barriers.

Many families at Franklin have grandparents who live in our community for periods of six and 12 months at a time. As the parents venture off to work and study, the grandparents are available to support and nurture the transition into child care. Agha Jan (meaning 'Sweet Poppy' in Farsi) comes and spends time, singing his traditional songs with his flute. We really appreciated his contribution to our school and wished to show this by buying him a gift. In a conversation with his daughter about this she said 'these musical sessions are gift enough for him. He loves to perform and spend time with his granddaughter'.

We find that food and celebrations connect families, children and the community. We celebrate many cultural events including, but not limited to, Diwali, Chinese New Year and NAIDOC week. Parental and wider community involvement has led to children sharing cultural foods and traditional costumes, engaging in photo shoots and connecting and learning about each other's cultures. Our cook caters to a wide variety of dietary needs with a diverse menu to meet the nutritional and religious guidelines of our population, including vegetarian and halal options. Some menu choices are butter chicken or chickpeas with saffron rice, truffle mac and cheese, and margarita pizza with bocconcini and basil.

### Transformational learning

At Franklin, play drives language and learning. On enrolment, families usually tell us 'my child cannot speak much English as we speak our mother tongue at home'. Our educators use a range of methods to communicate messages and help develop relationships with children and families. Interest-based activities encourage the gateway to participation. One of our new bilingual children proudly showed me a book that her educator had made with her saying 'this is the story of me and shows where I go to school now'. We

provide programs and resources that are respectful and holistic such as Yoga, and build language skills through play and the Talking Tots program, with its focus on language development for birth to two-year-olds, delivered by speech pathologist Bronwyn Conroy from the ACT child development service. I am constantly amazed at how quickly children learn English through play-based activities and social connections.

Our team of diverse educators speak many of the languages of families and are able to help interpret the needs of the family, their culture and their children. We bridge the language barrier by utilising our bilingual educators to assist in our orientation process and in supporting children when they are having difficulty with the dramatic change in culture they experience when they first attend our education and care service.

Our reciprocal relationships mean we can support each other to provide best outcomes for all. By providing a multifunction prayer room, that was once an unused space, helps our educators and families with a discreet place where they can practice their spirituality. We are also flexible with work/life balance with reduced hours in times such as Ramadan. Many of our educators have strengths that we nurture and share with our families in ways to extend learning and connection.

### Conclusion

We have all heard the saying 'it takes a community to raise a child', and that is true for Anglicare at FECS. Through our many relationships, we strive to create a transformational place of learning, connection and inclusive practice. Everything we do from the time the parents join our waitlist and come in for a tour of the service, to the time the children transition and graduate from one room to the next is individual and focused on the needs of that child and family. 'Culture is the fundamental building block of identity, and the development of a strong cultural identity is essential to children's healthy sense of who they are and where they belong' (DEEWR, 2010, p. 21).

### Melissa Johnston

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### References

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). (2010). *Educators Belonging, Being & Becoming: Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework*. Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia.