



Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

**OUR
VISION:
EVERY
YOUNG
CHILD IS
THRIVING
AND
LEARNING**

Indigenous cultural competency in the Australian teaching workforce

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL)
discussion paper – *Indigenous Cultural Competency in the Australian Teaching Workforce* project

Early Childhood Australia

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About us:

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is a not-for-profit organisation that has been a voice for children since 1938. We have a federated structure with branches in every state and territory in Australia and our membership includes individual professionals, early childhood services and schools, as well as public, private and not-for-profit organisations that share a commitment to young children.

Our vision is that every young child is thriving and learning. To achieve this, we champion the rights of young children to thrive and learn at home, in the community, within early learning settings and through the early years of school.

Our work builds the capacity of our society and the early childhood sector to realise the potential of every child during the critical early years from birth to the age of eight. ECA specifically acknowledges the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, and the past and current injustices and realities for them around Australia.

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1. Executive Summary

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) welcomes this opportunity to contribute to AITSL's *Indigenous Cultural Competency in the Australian Teaching Workforce Project*.

All children should be empowered to realise their potential and determine their own futures. ECA is passionate about closing the gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by improving their access to high quality early education and ensuring that they experience the opportunity to thrive and learn in learning environments that celebrate and value Indigenous cultures.

ECA has a good track record in supporting Reconciliation and culturally responsive early education. We work in partnership with the Narragunawali team at Reconciliation Australia and SNAICC, the peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early education services. We are also committed to working with families, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations, services and governments to drive the holistic and comprehensive strategy necessary to support First Nations children to experience equality in the early years.

Early childhood education and care is not specifically considered in the AITSL discussion paper, however there are a range of initiatives in the sector which are relevant to the project.

In 2019, ECA produced a [position paper](#) with SNAICC—National Voice for our Children, entitled *Working together to ensure equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years*¹. The position paper drew on extensive research into the barriers to young Indigenous children participating in early learning.

ECA's response will draw on the findings of this paper, and also early childhood teachers who play an important role in the early education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, in early childhood settings and in schools.

We ask AITSL to consider early childhood education and care in its work to improve Indigenous cultural competency. Cultural competency is framed with the [Early Years Learning Framework](#)² – a nationally approved learning framework for children aged birth to five years and services are active in developing and implementing reconciliation action plans.

ECA is aware that AITSL will convene an early childhood forum in 2021 and looks forward to participating. ECA would welcome the opportunity to support the forum by consulting with members as appropriate.

¹ ECA and SNAICC. (2019). Working together to ensure equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years.

² The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia.



ECA acknowledges input from ECA Branches including the ECA Victoria Branch's Anti-Bias Special Interest Group and ECA Queensland's Reconciliation Group.

Early Childhood Education and Care and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children

While many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are thriving, the evidence indicates that they are twice as likely as non-Indigenous children to start school developmentally vulnerable in one or more of the domains reviewed in the AEDC (Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2017³).

There is compelling evidence that high-quality early education can amplify children's development and enhance lifelong social and emotional wellbeing. This is particularly true for children who experience disadvantage early in life (McLachlan, Gilfillan & Gordan, 2013⁴). In relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in particular, evidence suggests that those children who attended preschool were significantly less likely to be developmentally vulnerable than those who did not attend preschool in three of the five developmental domains, with the biggest differences being noticed in language and cognitive skills (Biddle & Bath, 2013⁵).

A number of early education programs clearly evidence early learning and development outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. These include: The Abecedarian program, mobile preschool programs, supported playgroups, transition-to-school programs, Let's Start and HIPPY.

Barriers faced by First Nations children accessing early childhood services can exist at a number of levels:

- Individual-level barriers can be the number of children in a family, employment, income, discrimination and housing.
- Service-level barriers include issues such as service quality and cultural competency.
- Social and neighbourhood barriers include community transience, living conditions, and social and geographical isolation.
- Cultural barriers, such as a lack of trust in services or difficulty culturally engaging, can also hinder access.

³ Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2017. *State of early learning in Australia 2017*. Canberra, ACT: Early Childhood Australia.

⁴ McLachlan, Gilfillan & Gordan, 2013, *Deep and persistent disadvantage in Australia, Working Paper*, Productivity Commission, Commonwealth of Australia.

⁵ Biddle, N. and Bath J. 2013, *Education Part 1: Early childhood education, Paper 7, CAEPR Indigenous Population Project, 2011 Census Papers*, Centre for Aboriginal and Economic Policy Research, School of Social Sciences, Australian National University College of Arts and Social Sciences: Canberra.



The ECA–SNAICC joint position paper, *Working together to ensure equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years*, identified opportunities to lift outcomes for developmentally vulnerable children including the provision of integrated, family-focused programs that deliver meaningful support across a range of areas (e.g. health, parenting support) to build engagement with families over the longer term.

In November 2020, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training published its report from its Inquiry into the education of students in remote and complex environments.

ECA’s submission to the Inquiry made a number of recommendations, including:

- Develop a cultural competence framework and accompanying resources to support implementation of the guiding principle in the NQF on valuing Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.
- Work with the sector to promote and support effective two-way learning processes of genuine partnership development and cultural competency between mainstream services and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, services and communities.

The issue of cultural competency for working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities was identified as an issue arising from the Inquiry. The Inquiry reported support for improving the cultural competency and the provision of early childhood education as part of holistic family support services, particularly in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The report included five recommendations for early childhood including a recommendation for the new national workforce strategy for the children’s education and care workforce to improve the cultural competency of staff working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Qualifications and Professional Development

In December 2019, the Council of Australian Governments’ Education Council endorsed the development of a new national early childhood workforce strategy. The Australian Early Childhood Quality Authority (ACECQA) is leading the development of the strategy and supporting action plan. It’s expected that Education Ministers will endorse the final strategy and action plan in mid-2021.

In 2017, the Australian Government commissioned an Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) led by Emeritus Professor John Halsey.

While the findings of the Halsey Review are specific to the school sector, they reinforce the scale of the teacher shortage in early learning. The review concluded that addressing the



teacher turnover rate in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools, and improving the teaching experience, constitute a ‘critically important matter’⁶.

ECA supported the inclusion of a core unit of competency, CHCDIV002 Promote Aboriginal and /or Torres Strait Islander cultural safety, in approved Certificate III and Diploma vocational education and training courses. Feedback from some Indigenous students is that those delivering the unit of competency do not have sufficient cultural competency to ensure the content is accurate and meaningful.

ECA actively supports early childhood teachers and educators with cultural competency, in the following ways:

Reconciliation Symposium

For the past 5 years, ECA in partnership with the Narragunawali team and SNAICC, has hosted an annual Reconciliation Symposium for early childhood educators, teachers and service leaders. This event has been hosted in Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Fremantle – in 2020 it was held online as ‘Reconciliation Connect’. This event typically attracts 300 delegates who hear from keynotes and panellists to gain a deep understanding of reconciliation in the early childhood context and engage in facilitated dialogue to begin or continue their own reconciliation journey and professional learning. Many early childhood leaders have credited this event with leading them to engage in the development of a Reconciliation Action Plan, invest in cultural awareness training for their staff and reach out to partner with local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander organisations – some have gone on to win a Narragunawali Award.

National Conference

ECA’s National Conference always includes keynote and workshop content on the importance of cultural awareness, professional development and reconciliation in early childhood contexts. Over the years we have had many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander thought leaders, academics and teachers presenting and we are committed to providing as many opportunities as we can to amplify the voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in our sector.

Publications

ECA is a significant publisher with an academic journal, professional magazine and various professional learning titles and series. We have made a commitment in our Reconciliation Action Plan to have at least 10% of our published content written or produced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors, editors and reviewers to promote authentic Indigenous voices on all topics – across curriculum areas, practice and pedagogies, research and leadership.

⁶ Halsey, J. 2018. Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education – Final Report.





Professional Learning

ECA has compiled a variety of resources and information related to reconciliation including cultural awareness, relationships with families and improving children's outcomes.

- Development of a position statement in support of increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural content in mandatory qualification training for early childhood educators and teachers, including degree, diploma and certificate courses.
- ECA's Learning Hub is an online learning platform with over 30,000 active users - we have developed online learning modules on reconciliation, Aboriginal perspectives on the arts, culturally aware practice and inclusion. We are currently developing a set of Koori Curriculum resources with an Aboriginal Consultant.
- We have committed to the development of a series of 'best practice' factsheets on cultural protocols and responsiveness for early childhood organisations, covering topics such as:
 - learning about local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and heritage
 - understanding cultural identity, including language groups and family relationships
 - how to respectfully include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in early childhood settings
 - how to consult and engage with communities, including Elders and representatives.

Be You Always

Since 2018, ECA has delivered Be You Early Childhood in partnership with Beyond Blue and headspace and prior to that we delivered KidsMatter Early Childhood. Resources have been developed to be culturally inclusive and Be You Always is a pathway into Be You for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and educators/teachers.

Leadership

ECA is seen as a leader in promoting cultural competency because we have walked our own road of engaging in reconciliation - diversifying our governance structure, establishing advisory mechanisms and meeting the commitments of our Reconciliation Action Plan. Our staff receive appropriate professional development and we are working to ensure that we have Indigenous representation and perspective informing the way we work at all levels of the organisation.

[Example of cultural learning in early childhood service delivery](#)





1. Goodstart Early Learning and Baya Gawiy Early Learning Unit

The program developed by Goodstart Early Learning and the Baya Gawiy Early Learning Unit in Fitzroy Crossing (WA) is a proven and innovative way of meeting the early learning staffing challenge in remote communities.

The model developed by Goodstart Early Learning and Baya Gawiy could be applied to other remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, to improve children's outcomes and build reconciliation, and strengthen the viability of remote early learning services. It is vital to note that such programs will only succeed with the input, advice and direction of the community in which they are located.

In 2016, at the invitation of the Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre and the Baya Gawiy Early Learning Unit in Fitzroy Crossing (WA), Goodstart Early Learning entered into a partnership to establish an Educator Secondment and Cultural Immersion Program.

This program is a two-way cultural learning program which involves Goodstart providing two qualified educators each school term (eight educators per annum) to work at the Baya Gawiy Early Childhood Learning Unit alongside local educators. This enables the Centre to operate with consistent staffing and deliver a high quality early learning program, to support access for highly vulnerable children and families within a remote, disadvantaged community.

The program also highlights the critical importance of two-way learning and reconciliation. For each 12-week period, the participating teachers and educators had a unique opportunity to live and work in an Aboriginal community, with the aim of enhancing cultural understandings and practice that can be applied when they return to their own communities.

Over the four years of the partnership program:

- *Baya Gawiy has maintained consistent child numbers through continuous, qualified staffing.*
- *The two-way cultural exchange has enabled Goodstart educators to authentically embed practice in their home Centre, strengthen community connections and relationships in their local community and progress their own, and their Centre's reconciliation journey.*
- *Baya Gawiy educators have gained professional development opportunities through shared collaboration on educational practice and engaged in external professional learning programs otherwise unachievable due to staff shortages.*



Responses to AITSL's areas for discussion

What does a culturally competent teaching workforce (including teachers, school leaders, and schools) look like?

The strengthening of community and connectedness occurs when ECEC, primary and secondary education come together to create continuity of care. We see this within our current relationships where children take the knowledge gained from one education sector to the next creating a flow of knowledge.

It takes time to embed and it takes time being respectful. It is important to be respectfully persistent embracing community.

A culturally competent workforce is multi-faceted with different components which can be broken down into:

- in-service
- pre-service
- an ongoing relationship focus and expectation
- local focus

There needs to be a commitment to prioritising cultural competency within the workforce to support self, children, families, and community. This sees a mix of symbolic practice such as displaying flags, email signatures, plaques, and Acknowledgment of Country with children. Importantly, there is also a practical sense of asking how culture is embedded in classrooms? How are we respecting culture as an organisation? Are we making space for the different families who may be enrolled?

The ECEC sector maintains regular outcome-based checks against the National Quality Standards (NQS). This includes connection to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and how cultural knowledge is embedded into our programs. This is documented in our Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) which in turn is assessed along with our practice against these standards.

ECEC organisations are collaborating in the creation of their own individual Reconciliation Action Plans (RAP). These are used to map our routes to be more respectfully engaged, confident in knowledge and connected with community. These plans allow us to measure our progress, area of opportunity and ways to move forward together.

With this in mind, we consider the following for Indigenous cultural competency in the Australian teaching work force.

- Develop an outcomes-based approach to cultural competence, with a focus on transitions; allowing students and families to feel culturally safe and welcomed. Ensure services hold themselves accountable through action plans (such as the QIP and RAP used in ECEC).



- Educators need to be given the opportunity to understand truths and expose the silences within Australian history, and the role of education in either maintaining or breaking those silences. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities need to play a key role in this teaching process.
- Ensuring that prominent local and national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations have the opportunity to be present within schools.
- Ongoing teacher registration could be more purposeful toward cultural competence. For example, to maintain your registration, regular professional development that is aimed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural competency.
- Cultural integrity is doing the right thing all the time. For a culturally competent workforce, every decision that is made should be embedded with ‘am I making the right choice?’

What does a teacher/school leader need to be culturally competent?

- Stronger collaborative partnerships between formal school settings and local ECEC services to ensure the effective transmission of information and knowledge regarding children and family cultures. Commitment should be made to two-way partnerships with a focus on ongoing connection.
- Commitment from schools to further engage with families outside of normal parameters. Opportunities to get to know the unique cultures of each family will be invaluable to teacher and school leaders in increasing their cultural competence.
- Consideration given to how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are embedded within all teaching practice, rather than being situated as a once off or during “cultural weeks”.
- Willingness of all teaching staff to engage deeply in critical reflection on their own cultures and ongoing professional learning around the culture of others.
- Undertaking professional learning on trauma informed practice as a way of recognising the generational trauma that may impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. This also needs to be valued within leadership and governance teams.
- Making a focus of Country/Place as the core of the school environment.

What does cultural safety look like in schools?

- Cultural safety sits with the idea of being brave, acknowledging that you don’t know everything and reframing into a way of thinking that focuses on ‘how do I relearn so that I can support a culture?’.
- Cultural safety is part of the commitment plans that we have within our workforces. This includes:
 - statements of commitment to cultural awareness and support
 - inviting people into your space to share knowledge
 - practical signs such as flags and resources
 - consciously practicing focused meetings and acknowledging Country in programs and gatherings



- looking for opportunities to collaborate.
- Cultural safety is not a map to success. It is something we practice and continually work on with all stakeholders.
- Culture is a very individual experience and feeling. To support students, both adult and child, to understand their own culture first is key.
- Cultural safety is a desire to look further than a document to provide culturally safe spaces. We create safety by being welcoming, by being willing to learn, listen and look in the mirror to see the role we play as a teacher.

What might be some of the challenges or barriers we face in developing a culturally competent teaching workforce?

- The primary and secondary education curriculum does not necessarily support the depth of relationship building suggested above due to its focus on learning outcomes and standards.
- Active time, to build relationships and engage in reflection and professional learning, will always be a challenge given the current demands on teachers and school leaders across all sectors.
- If school leaders are unsupportive of the pursuit of cultural competence, then challenges will arise for teachers in accessing and engaging in professional learning.

ECA Recommendations

Early Childhood Australia encourages AITSL to specifically consider early childhood education and care, and makes the following recommendations:

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations should play a greater role in delivering education and supporting cultural competency in their communities.
2. Ensure teaching units in early childhood teacher and educator qualifications (such as, 'Culture Studies: Indigenous Education'), are developed and taught by someone who is culturally competent.
3. Ongoing practical support to teachers, recognising the diversity within Australia's Indigenous peoples and reflecting this in the way that they teach as well as the curriculum or program of learning they deliver.
4. Formal recognition by all education departments and teacher registration bodies to recognise cultural competency as essential for all teachers.
5. Strategies to support more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to train as educators and teachers to enhance the diversity of the profession.

