

MEMBERS' BRIEFING PAPER 11.3

Constructing an Indigenous Inclusive Philosophy within an Early Childhood Service

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Today many early childhood practitioners are on a journey towards a more socially just society in constructing an Indigenous inclusive program. This journey is not a simple one. It involves reflecting on and interrogating understandings of a contemporary Victorian Aboriginality as practitioners interrupt the silences around Indigenous inclusion in the philosophy and practice of their services.

Indigenous families and communities are ideally positioned as both leaders and partners in this journey. While recognising the benefits of 'mainstream' early childhood education and care for their children, Indigenous communities continue to challenge the early childhood sector to examine the conception and delivery of such programs. Such challenges focus on the needs and rights of their children to an empowering early childhood experience which engages more authentically with local Indigenous identity and culture.

Belonging, Being and Becoming

In the context of the Australian National Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009), which aims to build a sense of Belonging, Being and Becoming for each child, an Indigenous family may pose the following questions when enrolling their child at a service. In partnership with my family and community how will you:

- Ensure that my child feels a sense of belonging here as an Indigenous person?
- Support my child in being a proud Indigenous person?
- Support my child in becoming a future Indigenous Elder?

A genuine engagement with Indigenous inclusion means answering these questions in the light of the rights of Indigenous people as the original owners of Australia to self determination, including the right to determine the direction of the early childhood education and care of their children. It is through this rights based approach that Indigenous families and communities may frame their goals and understandings of an empowering early childhood experience for their children which ideally:

- Is constructed in partnership with the local Indigenous community
- Strengthens their children's identity and is built on an informed understanding of and respect for their culture
- Challenges bias and discrimination against Indigenous families and communities

- Challenges the concept of authenticity constructed around stereotypes which render Indigenous Victorians as largely invisible
- Addresses Indigenous disadvantage here in Victoria which is reflected in poorer educational outcomes for Indigenous students (DEECD, nd)
- Addresses barriers around early childhood services which compound such disadvantage.

Belonging, Being and Becoming at a local level

Here in Victoria's City of Moreland and in the neighbouring City of Hume a recent report "*Early Years Service Delivery System for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and Children living in Hume and Moreland Municipalities*" was delivered by ASR Research in June 2012 for Hume City Council. The report identified the strengths of and barriers to participation in early years services by interviewing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families living in the municipalities who use these services. Data was also gathered from the 'mainstream' service providers including kindergartens and long day care services within the municipalities.

When looking at the strengths of 'mainstream' early childhood services Indigenous participants spoke of a spirit of goodwill or openness to Indigenous inclusion that saw an evolution of such inclusion in programs. Participants were also pleased that service providers were undertaking training around such inclusion, as well as consulting with families around the construction of Indigenous inclusive programs.

When looking at barriers to participation, Indigenous participants voiced concerns around a continuing absence of inclusion and or the lack of genuine inclusion in programs that focused only on special events such as National Aboriginal and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC). The persistence of stereotypical views of Aboriginality in some services which took the form of questioning fair skinned Aboriginal parents identity or a general cultural insensitivity were also cited as barriers to participation by some participants.

Addressing Barriers

In addressing these barriers the Indigenous participants felt that staff needed more rigorous cross cultural training and that services should be more active in forming partnerships with Indigenous families and the local Indigenous community in

planning and presenting Indigenous inclusion in their programs.

Echoing the voices of the Indigenous participants, 'mainstream' early childhood service providers also saw the need for a stronger engagement with and the building of links with Indigenous families and services and accessing a greater understanding of Indigenous culture via ongoing cross cultural training.

Significantly the vast majority of 'mainstream' participants providing Indigenous inclusive programming saw this inclusion as important regardless of whether Indigenous families were enrolled in the service or not. Their position being that a knowledge and understanding of Indigenous culture was important for all children (Hume City Council, 2012).

This finding is consistent with the concept that Indigenous Inclusion gives all Australians an education in a cultural heritage that is unique to Australia (Lopez Atkinson, 2008). As such, Indigenous inclusion deserves a special status and should be a frame of reference for all Australians.

A genuine engagement with the rights of Indigenous people around Indigenous inclusion in the early years is also an engagement with the rights of all Australian children to access such knowledge as part of a learning community in which Indigenous people are teachers. All children also have the right to acquire the skills and knowledge which will prepare them to recognise and challenge bias and discrimination against Indigenous Australians.

Constructing a philosophy

Until Indigenous culture is positioned as central to early childhood services and is clearly part of each services' philosophy, policy and practice, early childhood spaces will be comprised as sites of rights based practice for all Australian children.

This is a substantial and complex commitment, which requires self reflection, patience and risk taking, a journey often dogged by a lack of knowledge, self doubt and the desire to proceed with sensitivity. Constructing a personal/professional philosophy is a vital first step and cornerstone in such a commitment as it:

- Provides an opportunity to build partnerships with the local Indigenous community
- Provides a foundation for services to reflect on, clarify and build their own position and understandings
- Provides an opportunity to build new knowledge beyond dualisms such as traditional/assimilated and black/white
- Makes explicit the commitment to practices that recognise and respect Indigenous identity and culture

- Provides a philosophical base that staff can communicate with confidence at points of resistance.

When reflecting on your own values, knowledge and theoretical perspectives in terms of social justice more broadly it is useful to revisit or visit authors such as Glenda Mac Naughton, Susan Grieshaber, Gaile Sloan Cannella, Louise Derman-Sparks and Patricia Ramsey who explore issues such as diversity, inclusion/exclusion, equity and multiple perspectives which are central to Indigenous inclusion in philosophy and practice.

More specifically explore the writings/research of Indigenous early childhood professionals and academics such as Karen Lillian Martin, Deb Mann and Samantha Knight and papers produced by the Secretariat of Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC). "*Dardee Boorai: Victorian Charter of Safety and Wellbeing for Aboriginal Children and Young People*" (DEECD, 2008) provides another insight into delivery of the human rights of young Indigenous Victorians. While "*Balert Booron: The Victorian plan for Aboriginal Children and Young People (2010-2020)*" (DEECD, nd) explores the Victorian Government's commitment to these principles.

Both of these documents have been constructed in partnership with Indigenous people based on the principle of self determination and this principle applies equally to the construction of your own philosophy and policies. Acting on the principle of self determination means consulting and building partnerships with:

- Indigenous families at your service
- Local Indigenous Elders
- Indigenous staff employed by your local council such as the Aboriginal Parent Engagement worker at Moreland/Hume
- Other Indigenous early childhood professionals such as your local Koorie Engagement Support Officer
- Other non Indigenous early childhood professionals with experience around Indigenous inclusion.

Philosophy and practice

Boroondara Kindergarten in Richmond and the Audrey Brooks Memorial Preschool in Heidelberg West in Victoria are two examples of early childhood services which have formed successful partnerships with their local Indigenous community, strongly informing their philosophy and practice around Indigenous inclusion.

The following extracts from the 'Boroondara Kindergarten Philosophy' (2011) demonstrates respect for Indigenous people as the original owners of the

land on which the centre is built and positions staff and families as part of a learning community that values Indigenous culture and knowledge.

'Our Place

Boroondara Kindergarten acknowledges that we work together on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation

We want to ...

Have greater understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being

We will...

Provide learning experiences that reflect and respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.'

When Indigenous parents enter the foyer of Boroondara Kindergarten there are signs and symbols of welcome and respect such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags, acknowledgement of the traditional owners of the land and visual representations of local Indigenous culture. Similarly, when Indigenous parents step into the foyer of Audrey Brooks Memorial Preschool they see the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags, a copy of the Apology to the stolen generations delivered by Kevin Rudd in 2008 and the following statement:

'How we are promoting and celebrating Reconciliation at Audrey Brooks Memorial Preschool'

Audrey Brooks Memorial Pre School acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations as the traditional custodians of the land on which our kindergarten stands. We pay our respects to Elders both past and present for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and hopes of Indigenous Australians. Reconciliation among Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians is about finding new and better ways of solving problems and of connecting with each other. Reconciliation involves justice, recognition and healing. We value and promote respect, tolerance and understanding for all of our community.

At our Kindergarten we are working on a daily basis to make reconciliation a part of our kindergarten program. Traditional and contemporary Indigenous culture is part of all Australia. This history belongs to all of us and we respect how Indigenous Australians wish for this history to be told, Our aim is to ensure that Indigenous children and families feel proud of their culture and heritage and that non Indigenous children, families and staff have an increasing understanding and respect for the richness of this culture.

Traditional and contemporary Indigenous culture is a part of our kindergarten program, this is displayed through photos, art, stories, natural materials, activities, songs, games, cooking and dance. Non Indigenous cultures are promoted in the same way. Everyone is encouraged to be proud of who they are. We respect the outdoor environment we nurture and look after all the creatures, birds, bugs and plants who share this earth with us.

(we acknowledge information from the Dare to lead program in writing and preparing this document)'.

In these two centres the foyer acts as a border land where Aboriginal families can travel from the exclusion and invisibility of urban Aboriginality often experienced in the mainstream to an inclusive, respectful and welcoming environment.

A final reflection on Belonging, Being and Becoming

In conclusion and as a final reflection ask yourself, 'when Indigenous families step into my service or read the service philosophy do they feel respected, welcome, comfortable and confident in my ability to offer their children genuinely inclusive experiences of Belonging, Being and Becoming?'



Bartja and Mayila by Annette Sax (reproduced with permission).

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Further Reading

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1. This paper is based on a presentation delivered at the Moreland Early Years Conference "Partnerships, Rise to the Challenge" in 2012.

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