

Engaging respectfully and ethically with Aboriginal perspectives in early childhood education

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On behalf of Action on Aboriginal Perspectives in Early Childhood (AAPEC)

AAPEC are a group of Aboriginal and non Aboriginal early childhood educators, academics, and others working in the early childhood field. We are advised by Aboriginal elders and are committed to respectfully embedding Aboriginal perspectives in early childhood education.

Engaging respectfully with Aboriginal knowledges is an important aspect of living in post colonial Australia. Aboriginal Australia is often cast as a single, homogenised group, with little attention paid to the diversity of groups across Australia.

Paying attention to local Aboriginal knowledges is a way to respectfully engage with Aboriginal perspectives in early childhood education and works to disrupt the stereotypical and generic representations that can often be found of Aboriginal peoples and cultures in books, puzzles, posters etc.

Respectful engagement could begin with finding out about local Aboriginal knowledges in the place where you live and/or work. For example, who are the traditional owners in your area? Do you have a map of the local Aboriginal language/s and cultural group/s? The next step could be to find some resources to support learning that reflects the local area that you are in. As educators, many of us are time-poor, and often turn to on-line catalogues or professional networks on social media as ways to purchase resources for educational programs. When purchasing resources to support the practice of embedding Aboriginal perspectives respectfully in teaching practices, it is important to think about the following:

Do the resources reflect local, Aboriginal knowledges respectfully? For example, do the resources disrupt the stereotypical image of how Aboriginal people can often be portrayed: painted up, standing on one leg with a spear.

- Is the source of the Aboriginal design (artist, local group) referenced? For example, if the resource has particular designs, has the artist and cultural group been acknowledged?
- Are the resources local or generic? In Victoria, for example, dot paintings are not typical of local cultural practices.

Thinking about these questions is important because there are many unethical resources available to purchase, particularly online. When resources are produced unethically, there are consequences: unethical appropriation of cultural knowledges and economic disadvantage for Aboriginal artists. Economic disadvantage occurs when artists are not acknowledged or paid for their designs. If the demand for unethical resources continues, then so will the supply. Maintaining the supply of unethical resources means that the demand for culturally appropriate, ethical resources is diminished and this has an effect on Aboriginal self-determination. Supporting local Aboriginal artists – not just painters, but also singers, dancers, writers, and story-tellers etc. provides the opportunity to move away from economic disadvantage.

As early childhood educators, it is important to engage with ethics and politics in our work. We need to pay attention to the types of resources and ensure that we purchase ethical products.

How can you tell if you are purchasing ethical Aboriginal resources?

- The Aboriginal artist is acknowledged and information about the artist is available.
- Local expressions of Aboriginality are respectful and reflective of contemporary Aboriginal culture.



An imaginative or dramatic playmat featuring the artwork "Three Rivers" by Billyara

Billyara is a respected artist from the Wiradjuri tribe. The name Billyara comes from the artist's totem, an eagle, which stems from his connection with the land. He has been painting Aboriginal art for 23 years and teaches these traditions to younger generations. His artwork is a mix of traditional and contemporary Aboriginal art with a Western influence. He has exhibited extensively, and sold his paintings internationally.

Through a relationship with Modern Teaching Aids, Billyara hopes to introduce contemporary Aboriginal art to young children in fun and engaging ways.

(Image and information from Modern Teaching Aids Catalogue.)

How can I advocate for ethical resources in early childhood?

What should I do if I find resources that do not acknowledge Aboriginal artists or do not engage respectfully with local expressions of Aboriginality?

- Ask specific questions of suppliers about where the Aboriginal art and designs come from and if the artists have been paid for their designs and given permission for them to be reproduced.
- If this information is not forthcoming, carefully consider your purchase from the supplier.

How can I find out more about local Aboriginal knowledges in my area?

- Contact your local Aboriginal co-operative
- In Melbourne
 - * Koorie Heritage Trust www.koorieheritagetrust.com
 - * Bunjilaka gallery – Melbourne Museum <https://museumvictoria.com.au/bunjilaka/>

Where can I buy authentic Aboriginal resources?

- Contact your local Aboriginal co-operative
- In Melbourne
 - * Koorie Heritage Trust shop www.koorieheritagetrust.com
 - * National Gallery, Victoria (Federation Square) bookshop

As early childhood educators, it is our ethical and political responsibility to engage with, and embed local Aboriginal perspectives in our work with young children and their families. Ensuring that we engage respectfully with Aboriginal knowledges, we also need to carefully consider the resources that we use to support teaching and learning in early childhood education.

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