

MEMBERS' BRIEFING PAPER 12.3

Indigenous Pedagogies in Early Years Education and Care Settings in Victoria- A story of Indigenous self determination¹

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I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on today, the Wurundjeri people. I would also like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri Elders past, present and future.

Today I am honoured to share with you some of the results of my research "Indigenous self determination and early childhood education and care in Victoria"(2008) with specific emphasis on the role of Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services, within the journey to reclaim Indigenous self determination and Indigenous pedagogies.

Looking Back

Until the 1970s education for Indigenous students in Victoria, Australia including pre-schoolers, focused on assimilation(Mc Connochie & Russel, 1982) with Victorian Indigenous identities, cultures and knowledges dismissed as absent or functioning as part of a culture of poverty (Langton, 1981).

The 1970s saw a renewed movement of self determination within Indigenous communities across Victoria which highlighted the right of the Indigenous child to a positive and empowering Indigenous identity, an identity which could not or would not be supported in non Indigenous early childhood spaces. This movement saw the establishment of Aboriginal specific early childhood services across Victoria in the 1980s in the form of child care services or playgroups. It was these services which would eventually become the Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS). In 1987 under a Commonwealth funding initiative designed to support Aboriginal communities in fulfilling their diverse child care needs, the MACS being community owned, operated and governed were established. An example of such a service is Yappera which was established in Melbourne in 1980.

The 1979 application for a capital grant to establish Yappera (which means Belonging Place) states:

The Aboriginal child from an early age must understand his culture so that he can be proud to be an Aborigine, understand what Aboriginality means and be able to see himself as an Aboriginal person living in a multicultural society. Non-Aboriginal family/children's centres cannot provide a service based on Aboriginality for children and/or their parents. This service has to be provided by Aboriginal people utilizing

community resources. Aboriginal and associated factors must form the foundation not only for a children's service, but for all community development programs aimed at the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal people (Yappera Children's Service Co operative LTD, 1979, pp.3-4).

Self determination as reflected in this statement means that Indigenous people have the right to establish culturally appropriate and empowering early childhood education and care for our children and in spite of dispossession, we have a vision for our children built on our cultural strengths.

Yappera's current vision statement written over 30 years after the original application for its establishment remains true to its philosophy:

That all Aboriginal children have the opportunity to reach their potential through access to highest quality of care and enrichment in a rich cultural setting which strengthens their identity (Yappera Children's Service Co operative LTD, nd).

This rich cultural setting can be viewed through an Indigenous pedagogy broadly based on three interconnected principles: cultural experiences, community relationships and a holistic approach.

Approaches to Indigenous programming in the MACS

Approaches to a range of experiences within the MACS reflect the priorities of the Indigenous community in placing Indigenous culture at the centre of the programme. Often these experiences and activities are based on knowledges that have been eroded and discredited under colonisation and are now being honoured. Significantly, the local Indigenous Elders who were consulted during the research project highlighted the importance of young Indigenous children learning about clan, country, language and respect for the Elders as teachers.

The Elders and Indigenous early childhood practitioners and families consulted during the research process felt that such knowledge should be passed on using Indigenous pedagogies. Story based pedagogies, particularly in the form of Elders narratives, were emphasised as a central pedagogical practice. As Celine an early childhood professional and parent states:

Our Elders need to pass on their stories to encourage children to know who they are, their identity and to make their culture a lot stronger and to believe in themselves (Interview with Celine, 2003, p.1).

Nature based pedagogy also employed within the MACS can be seen as reinstating Indigenous knowledge through using natural materials in play, exploration and art, even for children living in highly urban areas.

As Anne an early childhood professional and parent notes:

There has been a lot of gum replanting around the centre to promote an environment for native birds and insects. This is a great opportunity to talk to the children about the traditional uses of these trees. For example the she oak tree was used by our people to make spears. My Aunty uses the needles from this tree to make mats in a contemporary basket coiling (Interview with Anne, 2006, p.135).

Although materials provided in the MACS are similar to those in all centres, they are selected with the aim of reinforcing a pride and knowledge of a contemporary urban identity and therefore reflect the lives and aspirations of Indigenous families in Victoria. Experiences within the MACS also represent and reinforce a contemporary urban Indigenous identity that has been challenged as inauthentic or unacknowledged by many mainstream early childhood services.

The diverse and positive images of Indigeneity in the MACS meet with parents expectations of seeing contemporary images of Aboriginality in early childhood services. Indigenous pedagogy within this framework of lived authenticity reflects the experiences of the Indigenous child and connects him/her strongly with his/her local community.

Relationships within the program

Central to Indigenous pedagogical practice is the framework of interconnectivity. Although the activities offered in the MACS are important, it is the relationships in which these activities are constructed that is the subtle strength of the MACS. The making or re-affirming of connections to people and place is highlighted by Heather, a parent of a child at the MACS centre:

The fact that our kids have gone through the centre with their relations and their families is absolutely the most important priority in terms of maintaining connectiveness of family, extended family as well as that opportunity for our kids to grow up with other Koorie kids and maintaining that

connectiveness with community is fundamental. And the fact that many of the workers know the families, too (Interview with Heather, 2004, p.109).

An Integrated Approach addresses children's rights

Such connectivity with community is a central principle of the MACS, reflected in the multifunctional or integrated approach at its foundation. Such an approach draws on the holistic basis of Indigenous pedagogy in addressing the rights of Indigenous children. Not only the right to culture, but to a range of culturally appropriate services that address the disadvantages that Aboriginal families often face.

The principle of Indigenous self determination within the MACS is demonstrated in Indigenous communities taking responsibility for addressing the effects of disadvantage (such as poorer health and poorer educational outcomes for Indigenous children) on a holistic, community level. Drawing on Indigenous networks such as Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations to provide dentistry, immunisations and hearing tests and providing parenting programs which are developed in consultation with parents according to their needs and interests are just two examples of this approach.

The local Indigenous community as Elders, artists, musicians and older Indigenous children from local schools who visit the MACS are also a source of a community of 'teachers'. Again this holistic approach is vital for young children as learners of culture and to enhance and build a strong and positive Indigenous identity. Within the MACS children lay within a community of support and within a network of learning.

Such a community approach to education is consistent with 'traditional' Indigenous pedagogies around the education of children which is often extended to the wider community, with children being a community responsibility.

Indigenous specific early childhood spaces such as the MACS are built around pedagogies that continue to be central to Indigenous identity and culture in Victoria today. Within the MACS learning and teaching experiences, around culture, kin, country and the local community are interwoven in a holistic way that support, stimulate and strengthen children and their families in both incidental and considered ways.

References

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1. This paper is based on a presentation delivered at the CFC Leaders Forum May 2012.

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