

Possum Skin Pedagogy: A Guide for Early Childhood Practitioners



'Women Drumming' by Annette Sax, Taungurung artist. This image reflects a special ceremony on Taungurung Country. Women are beating on their Walert Walert (possum skin drums).

Sue Atkinson

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this document contains the names of people who have passed on.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Aboriginal people of Victoria as the traditional custodians of the lands and rivers on which this document was written. This document is inspired by the voices of Elders past, guided by the voices of Elders present and aims to strengthen the voices of Aboriginal children as future Elders. In this we honour and acknowledge Aboriginal Elders past, present and future.

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Introduction

On the land and waters that is now known as Victoria, possum skins had a central place in Aboriginal society.

A possum skin was an Aboriginal child's first blanket. The underside of the skin was incised using a shell or stone with symbols that were significant to the clan group and connected the child spiritually to the land and the spirit ancestors. Over time pelts and symbols would be added so that the skin would grow with the child. During their lifetime, children would experience the many uses of possum skins in everyday and ceremonial life. At the end of life, people were often buried in the possum skin that had been their cloak, their mattress and their blanket, and significantly their link to their sense of place and the spiritual realm.

As Aboriginal people were dispossessed of their land, culture, language, their children and life itself, the possum skin was replaced by blankets distributed by the missionaries. These blankets did not provide the warmth and protection from the rain that the possum skins did and contributed to the ill health of Aboriginal people on the missions. The European blanket can be seen as a symbol of the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples in South Eastern Australia as its use parallels the forced decline in the making of possum skin cloaks with the cloak symbolising Aboriginal culture.

Against great odds Aboriginal culture has survived and the making of possum skin cloaks has been revived under the guidance of the Elders. In Victoria today, Aboriginal babies and young children are 'Welcomed onto Country' in ceremonies lead by Elders wearing a possum skin cloak who gift a possum skin to babies to begin their own cloak. Children may wear possum skins themselves at graduation ceremonies in Aboriginal early childhood spaces. Aboriginal children and young people have created cloaks at workshops lead by Elders and Artists, and Aboriginal children across Victoria have learnt more about their culture as Elders share with them the meaning of the symbols on their cloaks through story telling. In Wurundjeri culture, girls go through the Murrum Turukuruk ceremony, which is a Coming of Age ceremony where they are given two possum skins to create a belt that can either be worn at special occasions throughout their life, or while they dance. The revival of possum skin cloak making once again gives our children the opportunity to be wrapped in culture.



Kiella's Walert Walert by Annette Sax, Taungurung artist

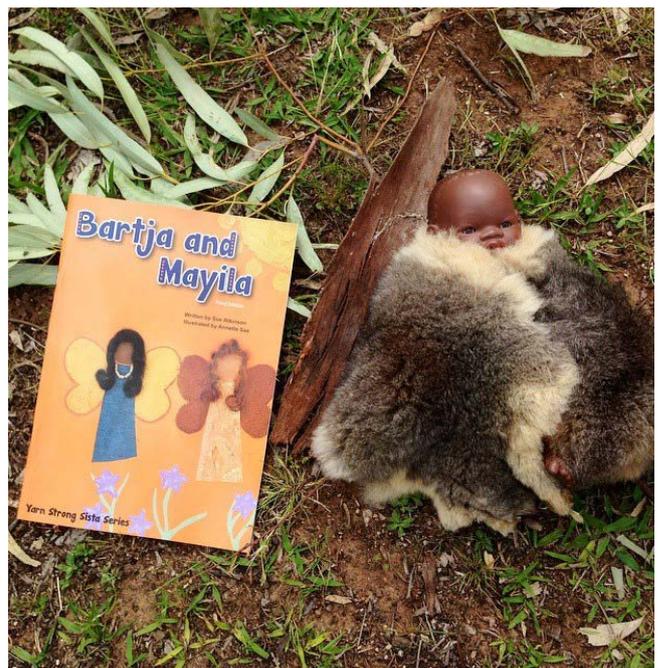


Image supplied by Annette Sax, Taungurung artist

Embedding Aboriginal perspectives in early childhood programs

As Aboriginal peoples in Victoria are on a proud and empowering journey to reclaim culture, many non-Aboriginal early childhood practitioners are also on a journey that may intersect with this revitalisation as they embed Aboriginal perspectives in their programs.

For many years a dedicated group of early childhood practitioners have been embedding Aboriginal perspectives into their programs across Victoria. More recently embedding Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum continues to grow as a mainstream movement as The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework recognises that ‘learning about and valuing the place of Aboriginal people will enhance all Victorian children’s sense of place in our community.’ (State of Victoria, Department of Education and Training, 2016, p. 4)

The Aboriginal early childhood community in Victoria has long called on non-Aboriginal early childhood practitioners to move beyond an Aboriginal inclusion that can be tokenistic and fleeting.



Artwork by Annette Sax, Taungurung artist, displayed at Boroondara Kindergarten

Embedding is a practice that suggests a position beyond inclusion in that Aboriginal perspectives are fixed firmly, deeply and centrally within the program. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal early childhood communities may be troubled by this concept. Aboriginal early childhood communities may be concerned about cultural appropriation or cultural theft as expectations of non-Aboriginal early childhood practitioners grow without the understanding of cultural protocols. Non-Aboriginal early childhood educators, aware of their lack of ‘cultural competence’, may be frozen into inaction in not ‘wanting to do the wrong thing.’

This raises uncomfortable and complex positions across the early childhood sector as a whole. It is also a recognition of the reflection involved in making ethical decisions when embedding Aboriginal culture in the program and the partnerships and protocols involved in its authentic application.

This document aims to address some of the complexities around embedding Aboriginal perspectives and provide a framework for a way forward. Most significantly this framework is constructed in consultation with Victorian Aboriginal Elders and other leaders of the Victorian Aboriginal community through the lens of a ‘Possum Skin Pedagogy’.

This is a timely topic, as teaching Aboriginal children about and through possum skin cloaks is re-emerging in Aboriginal communities across Victoria. Their use in ceremony – including births and deaths – signals the primacy of their spiritual significance in Aboriginal communities. This raises questions about the position of non-Aboriginal practitioners in teaching about spirituality through exploring possum skins and the limits and boundaries that the local Aboriginal community puts on this. Although the spiritual realm was an integral part of everyday life for Aboriginal people, teaching about this domain is central to the place of Aboriginal people as educators in early childhood spaces. For the purposes of this framework I have attempted to address Possum Skin Pedagogy from two interrelated positions: the secular/every day and the spiritual/sensitive.

Protocols and Aboriginal perspectives

Before moving onto the framework I would like to note the protocols that must inform the construction of embedding Aboriginal perspectives in early childhood programs.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

WITH THE LOCAL ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

CONSULT

WITH YOUR LOCAL ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

IN THE

PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

OF YOUR PROGRAM

RECOGNISE

THAT YOU ARE IN THE POSITION OF 'THE LEARNER' IN THESE CONSULTATIONS

BE AWARE

THAT CERTAIN TOPICS MUST BE DELIVERED WITH THE DIRECT INVOLVEMENT OF AN ELDER OR ANOTHER ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY LEADER

ACKNOWLEDGE

ABORIGINAL CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS

SEEK OUT RESOURCES

THAT HAVE BEEN CONSTRUCTED BY OR IN PARTNERSHIPS LED BY ABORIGINAL PEOPLE FROM SOUTHERN EASTERN AUSTRALIA IN GENERAL

AND

YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY IN PARTICULAR

The seven narratives of the framework

From my consultations with Victorian Elders and other leaders of the Victorian Aboriginal community I have identified seven overlapping narratives. The first three narratives are based on spiritual or sensitive material and must be presented with the direct involvement of an Elder or another Aboriginal community leader.

1

The narrative of journey and healing

(e.g. tradition, loss, survival and regeneration)

Knowledge that community members may wish to share with children at an age appropriate level:

- From skins to blankets, how possum skin cloaks were substituted for blankets after colonisation.
- How reviving the making of possum skin cloaks reconnects people to culture and helps heal communities affected by intergenerational loss.

Follow up activity

Looking at images of Aboriginal babies and children in cloaks with children, talk about the emotions and sensations these children may be experiencing.



Adrian and Loren, Taungurung girls.
Image supplied by Annette Sax,
Taungurung artist.

2

The narrative of ceremony/spirituality

(with emphasis on the ceremonial place of skins in Aboriginal communities, e.g. the place of skins in Welcome to Country, in births and deaths)

Experiences that community members may wish to explore with children

- Learning about totems and symbols of place and connection on cloaks.
- Exploring the place of possum skins in ceremonies such as Welcome baby to Country, and Aboriginal children's graduation from preschool.

Follow up activity

Find out about the traditional custodians of the land on which your centre stands and construct an Acknowledgement of Country with the children and use within the program.

The following example on page 12 is reproduced with the permission of Kylie Mc Lellan, St Peter's Early Learning Centre.

St Peter's Early Learning Centre Acknowledgement

*We acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and waterways
On which we live, learn, meet and play.*

Adapted from Wheatley Nadia, 2007, Going Bush

The philosophy of St Peter's Early Learning Centre (ELC) strongly influences the centre's pedagogy and practice. It gives a clear vision and direction, particularly the section "...value of respect for self, others and the environment; and to develop a strong positive self-image as well as the understanding of the rights and feelings of others" and "...integrated play-based programs...place(d) within our local as well as the Australian context".



From when the children commence in January they are immersed in an environment which is rich in experiences, offering a range of materials, resources and resonating opportunity to go deeper in understandings and learning, both for the children and adults, including educators.



One example is the Acknowledgement Card, showing the words (as above). This is displayed in the children's indoor environment. Educators hold daily 'Group Meetings' with the Kindergarten/3 Year Old Group and the Pre-Prep/4 Year Old Group. At a time that is relevant this is introduced to the younger, Kindergarten Group. This may be after they have begun to explore Aboriginal symbols in their play or following an incursion/excursion. The Acknowledgement is said prior to our meeting commencing. We explain the importance it holds, and is said before meetings as thanks from us to be able to be on this place, in this space and connected to this land.

We acknowledge to the children that the land we meet on is Boonwurrung land. That Boonwurrung people were the first people of this land. The children meet Aunty Fay Stuart Muir, Boonwurrung Elder, who shares stories and culture with our children and we acknowledge that Aunty Fay has given permission for our educators to continue to share this with our children throughout their time at the ELC.



The children acknowledge and use 'Womindjeka' as Boonwurrung language for welcome. In 2014 they created a Womindjeka sign which sits at the entrance of the centre to welcome everyone.



3

The narrative of Aboriginal literacy

(e.g. how children learnt the meaning of symbols through story telling)

Experiences that community members may wish to explore with children

- Reading the symbols on the cloaks; reading cloaks as a map.
- Learning what possums and other animals are called in the language of the local Aboriginal community.

Follow up activity

Sharing stories with children around possums by Aboriginal authors.



Image supplied by Annette Sax, Taungurung artist.

Children can make a 'cloak' from individual paper panels or pieces of paper bark joined together for display. The children can represent images from their environment that are important to them such as animals, people and places. If you intend to use ochre with the children check the protocols around its use (see Appendix 1).

The remaining narratives ideally involve the direct participation of Aboriginal people but could be considered to lay in the 'secular' realm. Non-Indigenous practitioners could explore these narratives after researching websites where they can hear the voices of the Elders in the virtual realm while waiting to connect with their local Aboriginal community.

4

The narrative of nature

(e.g. connections to Country, how our people got everything they needed from the land)

Suggested experiences

- Looking at possum skins as waterproof and warm in their use as blankets, cloaks and carrying babies. Looking at the variety of uses of possum skin such as drums. Exploring the life cycle of the possum. Exploring the habitats and lives of possums in urban/rural areas today.

5

The narrative of the family

(e.g. in the catching and uses of the possum skins in the roles of men, women and children)

Suggested experiences

- Taking children to Bunjilaka to view possum cloaks and the tools used in their production.
- Exploring the tracking skills employed in the hunting of possums by men and boys.
- Exploring the preparation of the skins; skinning, curing, stretching, drying and treatment with animal fats by men.
- Exploring the role of women in shaping, stitching and decorating the cloaks while being watched by young children of both sexes and girls of all ages.

6

The narrative of science and technology, continuity and change

(e.g. the use of tools in the construction of possum skins cloaks past and present)

Suggested experiences

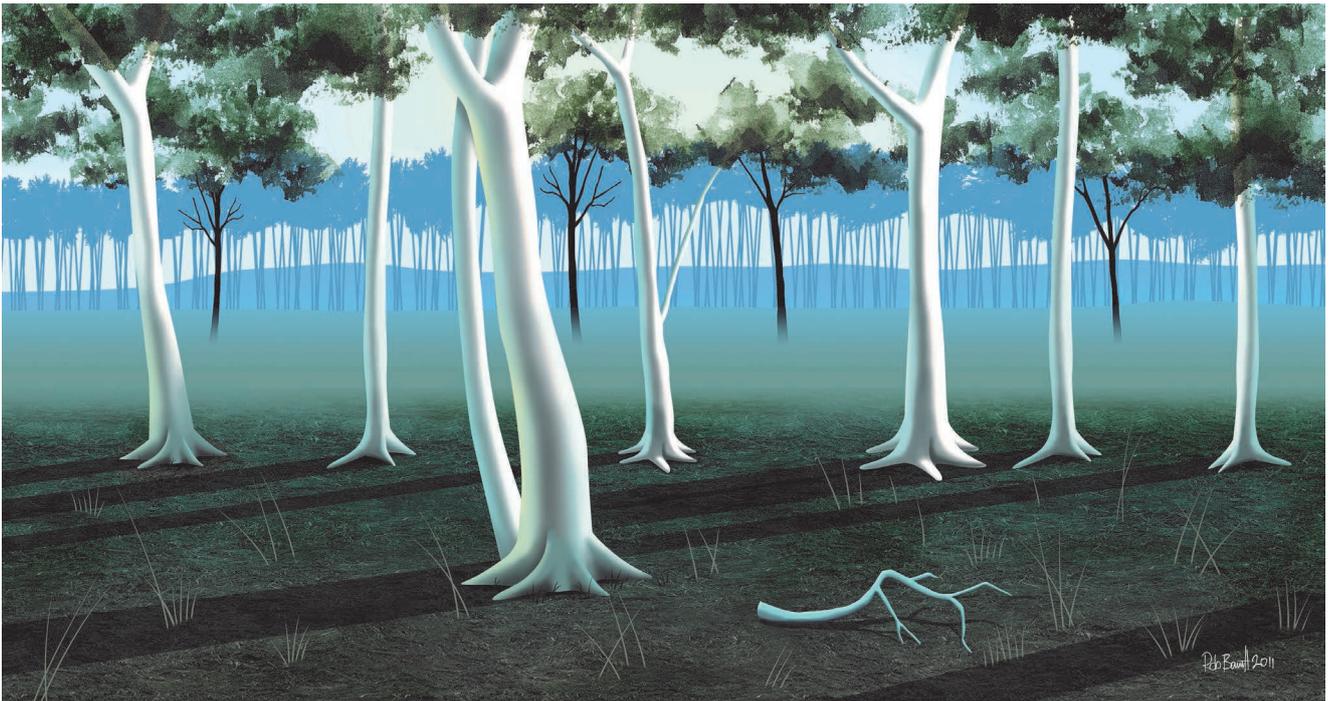
- How can we join panels of paper or paper bark together to make a 'cloak' for display? Experiment with natural materials in the playground that can be used to join paper or bark together. Experiment with 'man made' materials that can be used to join paper or bark together.
- Explore how possum skin pelts were joined together using sinews by Aboriginal people in the past. Explore what materials are used today such as linen thread.
- Explore how designs were etched on skins using shells, bones and stone tools in the past.
- Explore how designs are burnt into the skins today using wood burners.
- Experiment with mixing ochre with binding materials to make paint using natural materials such as wattle sap, water, honey and eggs yolks.
- Experiment with 'person made' materials such as PVA glue.

The narrative of recreation

(e.g. how Aboriginal children and adults constructed games for sport and education)

Suggested experiences

- Making/talking about possum skin balls and playing/talking about Marngrook, which means ‘game of the ball’ in Gunditjamara language. Do some research on ‘Deadly Questions you ask Aboriginal Victorian’s Answer’ website, i.e. Did Aboriginal people invent football?
- Talk about Aboriginal footballers. Link Marngrook into discussions around AFL. Watch The Marngrook Footy Show on NITV.
- Play traditional Aboriginal children’s games such as making and recognising the tracks of animals such as possums, recognising and imitating the sounds animals such as those possums make.
- Watch out for the Wurundjeri Traditional games day on their Facebook page.



Ghost Gums by Robert Barnett, Yorta Yorta artist.

**Questions you
may have about
this document**

Why do I need to build relationships with my local Aboriginal community in particular?

Aboriginal communities across Victoria are diverse in culture and language. What may be suitable to teach about in one area may differ from what is seen as appropriate in a neighbouring community.

How do I go about building relationships with my local Aboriginal community?

Contact the following organisations/people for advice:

- Your local Aboriginal Lands Council
- Your local Aboriginal Cooperative
- Your local Koorie Education Support Officer
- Your local Municipal Council may have an Aboriginal Liaison Officer
- In particular reference to advice on building partnerships around the teaching of Aboriginal languages, contact Aunty Fay Stewart Muir at the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL)

Ask practitioners who already have built these relationships in your community to introduce you to Elders and other community members.

Exercise patience, especially when building relationships with Elders as they have many ongoing commitments within the Aboriginal community as well as the non-Aboriginal community.

What can I do while I am waiting to make these contacts?

- Use materials developed by the Victorian Aboriginal community such as books, and always acknowledge the author and the clan to which they belong.
- Educate yourself by listening to the voices of Elders online (i.e. Culture Victoria website) as they talk about the significance and the making of possum skin cloaks.
- Implement parts of this pedagogy - as outlined above in the last 4 narratives – to develop your knowledge, skills and experience.

What do you mean by acknowledging Aboriginal Intellectual property rights?

For example, Aboriginal symbols are easily accessed on the internet often without acknowledging their origin. Instead, use symbols that you have been given permission to use by an Elder or other Aboriginal community leaders.

Purchase authentic resources as described in Appendix 2: Indigenous resources – Buying the real thing.

What do you mean by being in the position of the learner?

When consulting the Aboriginal community, you need to take the position of an active and respectful listener. This may mean that you need to change what you had initially planned or expected to do within your program.

How is the term pedagogy used in this document?

Broadly, this term is used as the practice of teaching along with the knowledges, philosophies and protocols that underpin it. The possum skin cloaks at the centre of the 'Possum Skin Pedagogy' embody this concept as practice, knowledge, philosophy and protocol in place.

Issues that may concern children

The concept of killing possums by clubbing may distress some children, especially as possums are often humanised in children's picture books.

You could explain there were no shops to buy meat or clothing so Aboriginal people took everything they needed from the land. Possums were killed quickly and humanely and nothing from the possum was wasted. Aboriginal people looked after possums while they were alive by making sure that they had a good place to live and healthy food to eat by looking after the bush they lived in.

Recommended resources and references

Resources with a focus on the themes identified in this project

Children's books

Deans Footy Song by Aunty Wendy. Blake Education, 2009.

Dreamtime at the 'G by Alinta Hayes & Andrew Nelson. Indij Readers, 2007.

Marngrook: The long ago story of Aussie Rules by Titta Secombe; illustrated by Grace Fielding. Magabala Books, 2012.

Possums on the Roof by Sue Briggs Pattison & Bev Harvey; illustrated by Elaine Russell. Scholastic Australia, 1998.

Scaly-tailed Possum and Echidna by Cathy Goonack; illustrated by Katrina Goonack, Marlene Goonack & Myron Goonack. Magabala Books, 2010.

Welcome to Country by Aunty Joy Wandin Murphy; illustrated by Lisa Kennedy. Black Dog Books, 2016.

What I Wanna Be, Indij Readers for Little Fullas: Series 3 by Chasity Prior, Kelli Mcintosh, Phillip Murray & Sharon Hughes; illustrated by Peter McKenzie. Indij Readers, 2007.

What We Count: Then and Now, Indij Readers for Little Fullas: Series 1 by Helen Empacher, Bianca Briggs, Tu Roper, Nioka Doolan & Ernie Blackmore. Indij Readers, 2003.

Yurri's Manung by Sue Atkinson & Annette Sax. Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages, 2013.

Adult books

Lady of the Lake: Aunty Iris's Story by Aunty Iris Lovett Gardiner. Koorie Heritage Trust, 1997.

Mildura Welcome Baby to Country: A strength based approach to Aboriginal community wellbeing, story told by Rose Gilby & Jill Antoine; edited by Karen Adams. Monash University, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Science, Gukwonderuk Indigenous Engagement Unit, 2015.

Wrapped in a possum skin cloak: The Tooloyn Koortakay collection in the National Museum of Australia by Amanda Jane Reynolds in collaboration with Debra Couzens, Vicki Couzens, Lee Darroch & Trehna Hamm. National Museum of Australia, 2005.

Additional resources

Children's books

Adventures of the Little Black Trackas resource kit (four books, poster and CD) by Hall, M & Saunders, G Neenann. SNAICC. VIC, Australia. N.D.

At the Billabong (2009), People and Places (2008), Animals (2008), small board books series written by Debbie Austin. Discovery Press.

Big Rain Coming by Katrina Germein; illustrated by Bronwyn Bancroft. Puffin Books, 2002.

Fair Skin Black Fella by Renee Fogorty. Magabala Books, 2010.

How the Murray River was made: A Bangerang Story by Irene Thomas & Robert Brown. The University of Melbourne's Early Learning Centre, 2007.

Kuppi's Clever Surprise Plan by J. Ruhle & N. Lewis. Brotherhood of St Laurence with the assistance of AXA, 2011.

Sorry Sorry by Anne Kerr. Boolarong Press, 2014.

The Hairy One by Wendy Notley; illustrated by Elaine Russell. Blake Education, 2009.

Wilam: A Birrurung Story by Aunty Joy Murphy Wandin and Andrew Kelly; illustrated by Lisa Kennedy. Black Dog, 2019.

Adult books

First People: The Eastern Kulin of Melbourne, Port Phillip and Central Victoria by Gary Presland. Museum of Victoria, 2010.

Koorie Plants Koorie People: Traditional Aboriginal Food, Fibre and Healing Plants of Victoria by Nelly Zola & Beth Gott. The Koorie Heritage Trust. VIC, Australia. 1992.

Meereng-An-Here is my Country: The Story of Aboriginal Victoria Told Through Art edited by Chris Keeler & Vicki Couzens. The Koorie Heritage Trust. VIC, Australia. 2010.

Myernila – Listen Continuously: Aboriginal Creation Stories of Victoria by Arts Victoria with Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages.

Nganga: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Words and Phrases by Aunty Fay Muir & Sue Lawson. Black Dog Books. NSW, Australia. 2018.

People of the Merri Merri: The Wurundjeri in Colonial Days by Isabel Ellender & Peter Christiansen. Merri Creek Management Committee. N.D.

The Aboriginal Early Childhood Practice Guide by Jessica Staines & Red Ruby Scarlet. MULTIVERSE Publishing, 2018.

The Little Red Yellow Black Book: An introduction to Indigenous Australia (Third Edition) by Aboriginal Studies Press, 2012.

The Melbourne Dreaming by Meyer Eidelson. Aboriginal Studies Press, 1997.

The People of Budj Bim by the Gunditjmara people with Gib Wettenhall. emPRESS Publishing, 2010.

The People of Gariwerd: The Grampians Aboriginal Heritage by Gib Wettenhall. Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, 1999.

Voices and Visions: Aboriginal Early Childhood Education in Australia edited by Karen Martin. Pademelon Press. NSW, Australia. 2016.

Welcome to Wurundjeri Country: The Wurundjeri History of Yarra by Emily Fitzgerald & Daniel Ducrou. Yarra City Council. VIC, Australia. 2014.

Where Were You? Book commemorating the National Apology by Link-Up Victoria. 2013.

General books for older children and adults

The Rabbits by John Marsden and Shaun Tan. Thomas, C Lothian Pty Ltd. VIC, Australia. 1998.

Took the Children Away by A. Roach & H. Hunter with P. Hudson. One Day Hill Pty Ltd. VIC, Australia. 2010.

Websites

Culture Victoria

www.cv.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/possum-skin-cloaks

Dadirri Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness

www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/about-dadirri

Days of Significance in the Indigenous Calendar - VAEAI Koorie Education Calendar 2018

www.org.au/-uploads/rsfil/000403-bdcc.pdf

Deadly Questions - You Ask, Aboriginal Victorians Answer

<https://deadlyquestions.vic.gov.au/>

Kooramook yakeen: possum dreaming by Vicki Couzens

www.cv.vic.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/possum-skin-cloaks/kooramook-yakeen-possum-dreaming-by-vicki-couzens

Little Long Walk

www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcHcmPKDLcs

Lou Bennett

<https://youtu.be/g5YhRhjOBo>

Marngrook Footy Show

www.sbs.com.au/nitv/marngrook-footy-show

Naghlingah Boorais: Beautiful Children

www.museumvictoria.com.au/bunjilaka/visiting/birrarung-gallery/artist-profiles/naghlingah-boorais-beautiful-children

Narragunnawali

www.narragunnawali.org.au

Story by Uncle Larry Walsh (Australian Centre for Contemporary Art)

https://soundcloud.com/acca_melbourne/story-by-uncle-larry-walsh

Tanderrum - 2018 Melbourne International Arts Festival

www.festival.melbourne/2018/events/tanderrum

The Eight-Way Frame of Aboriginal Pedagogy

<https://vickidrozdowski.files.wordpress.com/>

Yarn Strong Sista

2/88-96 Western Avenue, Westmeadows VIC | www.yarnstrongsista.com

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)

www.vacca.org/wrapped-in-culture-exploring-identity-through-possum-skin-cloak-making

Wurundjeri Traditional Games Day Facebook Page

<https://www.facebook.com/events/wurundjeri-traditional-games-day>

Organisations

Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Melbourne Museum

www.museumvictoria.com.au/bunjilaka

Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Childcare (SNAICC)

www.snaicc.org.au

State Government of Victoria, Department of Education and Training, Aboriginal Early Years Support

www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/aboriginal/Pages/aboriginalsupport.aspx

Koorie Engagement Support Officer (KESO)

www.education.vic.gov.au/about/contact/Pages/wannikregional.aspx

Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI), Early Childhood Unit

www.vaeai.org.au

Teaching resources

Koorie Heritage Trust

Levels 1 and 3, Yarra Building Federation Square, Melbourne VIC | www.koorieheritagetrust.com.au

Yarn Strong Sista

2/88-96 Western Avenue, Westmeadows VIC | www.yarnstrongsista.com

Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL)

70 Hanover Street, Fitzroy VIC | www.vaclang.org.au

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)

340 Bell Street, Preston VIC | www.vacca.org

References

State Government of Victoria (Department of Education and Training) Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework. 2016.

Appendix 1:

Protocols around using ochre

Ochre – an earth pigment – has been used for tens of thousands of years by Aboriginal Victorians in ceremonies and in art on bark, caves and possum skins. This tradition continues today as Victorian communities continue to practice their culture. An example of this is The Kulin Tanderrum, a revival of a ceremony practiced since time immemorial by the five clans of the Kulin Nation: the Wurundjeri, Boon Wurrung, Taungurung, Dja Dja Wurrung and Wadawurrung peoples. The ceremony is led by Elders of these clans and honours the Lore of Bunjil, the great creator spirit. Dancing is central to this ceremony, with young male dancers being ‘painted up’ with ochre by adult males and young female dancers ‘painted up’ by adult women. Dancers also wear ornamentation significant to such ceremonies on their heads and bodies.

In respecting the spiritual significance of ceremony, we ask that ‘mainstream’ early childhood centres do not paint children’s bodies with ochre or pretend to be Aboriginal children.

Using ochre in art is also built on respect for Aboriginal culture. Keeping in mind ochre’s spiritual connection with the land, ceremony and the arts, the gathering of ochre continues to reflect the protocols and respect with which it has been gathered over millennia.

Younger artists may be shown by their Elders the special places to gather

ochre on Country where their ancestors would have also gathered ochre. This is done sparingly in accordance with the principles of sustainability that guided our ancestors. Don’t expect Aboriginal visitors to your centre to share this knowledge with you, but you may be gifted ochre by an Aboriginal visitor to your centre. Please use sparingly when children are using this in their art and reflect on how the Aboriginal visitor worked with and spoke with the children about the ochre then apply this respectfully to your program.



Photo of Iluka dancing at Tanderrum Ceremony, by Ruby Gayle used with permission of Annette Sax.

Appendix 2:

Indigenous resources – Buying the real thing

Reproduced with permission of the author, Brian Newman University of Melbourne (2016).

As early childhood educators we work hard to find ways to make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures visible in our programs. This may often involve purchasing resources such as posters, puzzles, play mats and books with Aboriginal designs and motifs. But have you thought about whether the designs are the real thing?

Aboriginal art is important, both here and internationally, and the use of symbols and designs is an expression of aspects of culture significant to particular communities. Artists paint from their stories and often have to get permission from elders to use particular designs that tell particular stories. As the art and designs depict stories and have spiritual meaning, they remain important cultural symbols for Aboriginal people, and are not simple commodities to be traded or copied. It is not appropriate for anyone to steal these designs and particularly to use them for gain.

So when buying resources to use in your teaching about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia, do ensure that the resources you buy are authentic. This doesn't necessarily mean only buying things direct from Indigenous organisations, but only buying items that depict Aboriginal art and design when an Aboriginal artist has given permission – and has been paid – for their work to be reproduced or copied. Not only are you helping to establish economic independence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and communities, but you are also ensuring the integrity of your teaching resources.

On the other hand, don't simply assume that any 'Aboriginal' style item sold by a major company is not authentic. Companies will often do the right thing and buy licences from the original artists to use their art work on commercial products. For example, you can buy umbrellas depicting Aboriginal art that are properly licensed, and there are even mobile phone covers – produced from the US – that use authentic licensed art.

Indigenous art represents cultural history of Australia's First Peoples and should be displayed and used respectfully. In the same way that we have learned that getting children doing 'dot painting' or cutting out boomerangs may not be the most authentic way to present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to children, using unauthorised or unlicensed art work is cultural appropriation. The motifs and symbols used in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and design will hold special cultural significance to the artist and their community. These expressions of cultural heritage – including stories as well – belong to the community, who have the right to control their use. And there is added value as money raised goes back into communities, rather than to external parties.

Unfortunately there is no widely recognised symbol or tag that tells you whether Aboriginal art or designs used on goods are authentic. There have been efforts to establish a system, but so far with little success. The Indigenous Art Code is probably the most recognised accreditation system but it really only covers art and crafts, so when you are buying in the broader market there aren't signs to look out for. This means that we have to use our own judgement when buying resources, so here are a few pointers to guide your decisions:

- When buying equipment, if the designs are labelled as or 'look' like they are Aboriginal, see if an artist is acknowledged. If the artist and their country or clan is named it is more likely to be authentic and ethically used.
- Look for some indication that the use of the design is licensed.
- When buying books with Aboriginal designs, read the illustrator's biography.
- Buy from reputable sources, such as specialist organisations (e.g. SNAICC) or businesses that specialise in Indigenous education and resources (e.g. Yarn Strong Sista).
- Art gallery shops are often a good source of appropriately sourced books.
- Buy local resources. Try to find resources from your local area as stories, traditions, language and ways of living vary from place to place. For example, it is more relevant to focus on your local Aboriginal languages, whilst still using books that have other languages. In general, it's easier to find picture books in languages that are more used.
- If in doubt, ASK!

Don't be afraid to ask a stockist if something is authentic, and if it isn't, tell them why you won't buy it and suggest they do it correctly. It's a small step, but an important action to support the artists that have shared their stories with us. Here is an example of what you could write or say:

Thank you for your response. As the Aboriginal designs depicted on the equipment are not authentic, we will not purchase them. We ask you to withdraw this product from sale and consider engaging Aboriginal artists to design such equipment as the motifs and form of Aboriginal art is the cultural heritage owned by the various communities.

Having resources that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples, histories and cultures can help early childhood services embed Indigenous perspectives into our programs. Taking care when buying these resources not only helps us be more authentic in our work, but also contributes to the economic futures of Indigenous communities.

For more information about Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property:

www.artslaw.com.au/info-sheets/info-sheet/indigenous-cultural-and-intellectual-property-icip-aitb/

Reflecting on the Possum Skin Learning Project:

Journeys and Outcomes



Kiella walking along the Yea Wetlands on Taungurung Country (Image courtesy of Annette Sax, Taungurung artist).

Sue Atkinson

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- Dr Sue Atkinson (PhD Education)

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Epigraph



May the Aboriginal Elders

Lead you to walk respectfully with Aboriginal people

Lead you to see the wisdom in the earth, air and rivers

Lead you to hear their stories of life, land and being

May the Elders voices guide you in courage and wisdom

- Sue Atkinson Yorta Yorta

Uncle Colin Hunter Jr,
Wurundjeri Elder, at
Boroondara kindergarten.

Journey: A Narrative

During the final consultations with the Aboriginal Elders and other senior members of the Aboriginal community who were central to the writing of the *Possum Skin Pedagogy: A Guide for Early Childhood Practitioners*, it was recommended that the guide be supported by a focused professional development learning project to ensure its respectful and culturally appropriate implementation.

Consequently, Action on Aboriginal Perspectives in Early Childhood Education (AAPEC) reformed a subcommittee comprising Sue Atkinson, Annette Sax, Denise Rundle, Mindy Blaise, Brinda Mootosamy, Brian Newman, Melodie Davies, Catherine Hamm and David Ellis. In partnership with our auspicing body *fka* Children's Services, AAPEC was granted funding from the Association of Graduates in Early Childhood Studies (AGECS). This funding enabled the development and presentation of *The Possum Skin Professional Learning Project* in the form of four professional learning sessions in Semester 2, 2018. The journey and outcomes of the learning project were to be documented in a report *Reflecting on the Possum Skin Learning Project: Journeys and Outcomes*.

These learning sessions were led by Annette Sax, a Taungurung woman who has worked in Aboriginal early childhood and care with a passion and unwavering commitment for over 25 years. Denise Rundle, an experienced non-Indigenous early childhood practitioner of over 35 years who had embedded strong relationships with her local Indigenous community within her program, acted as co-presenter. Dr Sue Atkinson, a Yorta Yorta woman, also shared some of her knowledge and experience accumulated over her forty plus years in the early childhood profession.

Thirty-two early childhood practitioners were selected to participate in the learning sessions. These participants had a variety of qualifications and experiences but shared a commitment to enhancing their 'understanding, respect, knowledge, meaningful connections, authenticity and awareness' around embedding local Aboriginal culture into their programming as demonstrated in the selection process.

The first of the four sessions commenced on July 27, 2018. Annette, Denise, Sue and the participants were warmly Welcomed onto Country by Wurundjeri Elder Uncle Bill Nicholson Jnr.

Elders and senior members of the Aboriginal community whose knowledge was the basis of the *Possum Skin Pedagogy: A Guide for Early Childhood Practitioners* were invited as honoured guest speakers. In session two we were delighted to be joined by Aunty Fay Stewart Muir, a Boonwurrung Elder and language specialist from the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages. Aunty Fay shared her experience and knowledge of teaching young children about Aboriginal language.

Throughout the professional development, Annette, Denise and Sue structured the sessions around the *Possum Skin Pedagogy: A Guide for Early Childhood Practitioners* through seven interconnected narratives. These are:

1. The narrative of journey and healing (e.g. tradition, loss, survival and regeneration)
2. The narrative of ceremony/spirituality (with emphasis on the ceremonial place of skins in Aboriginal Communities, e.g. The place of skins in Welcome to Country, in births and deaths)
3. The narrative of Aboriginal literacy (e.g. how children learnt the meaning of symbols through story telling)
4. The narrative of Nature (e.g. connections to Country, how our people got everything they needed from the land)
5. The narrative of the family (e.g. in the catching and uses of the possum skins the roles of men, women and children)
6. The narrative of science and technology, continuity and change (e.g. the use of tools in the construction of possum skins cloaks past and present)
7. The narrative of recreation (e.g. how Aboriginal children and adults constructed games for sport and education)

In *Possum Skin Pedagogy: A Guide for Early Childhood Practitioners*, these narratives were expanded for the early childhood practitioner with suggested experiences, recommended resources and references. These recommended resources and references were expanded during the course of the professional development as they emerged, but the Possum Skin Pedagogy is much more than a list of experiences, resources and references.

The seven narratives raised questions of protocols around embedding Aboriginal perspectives into the program. For example, the protocol of Aboriginal community consultation is especially important in relation to the first three narratives. As they are based on spiritual or sensitive material they must be presented with the direct involvement of an Elder or another Aboriginal community member.

Underpinning the learning sessions was the exploration of such protocols with the identification of complexities, gaps and barriers around enacting them in early childhood spaces.

Protocols were introduced to the participants as being embedded in Aboriginal culture.

As Annette described:

People often feel uneasy when they hear the term protocol. As a Taungurung person I feel that protocols are about respectful ways. As Aboriginal people we have been guided by protocols for thousands and thousands of years. In a contemporary way I continue to be guided by protocols about respecting the ways of the traditional custodians such as Acknowledgement of Country and consultation with Elders and other community members. (2018)

Sue positioned herself as the custodian of the Possum Skin Pedagogy, 'as it is based on the knowledge of a group of Elders and other senior members of the local Victorian Aboriginal Community'. (2018)

Access to the full pedagogy document would be deferred until the training had been completed and the additional document *Reflecting on the Possum Skin Learning Project: Journeys and Outcomes* was constructed and then approved by the Elders and senior members of the community. Both documents would then be posted on the AGECS website.

Aboriginal pedagogy guided us as presenters in these sessions. We actively engaged with the importance of:

- listening to the local Aboriginal Elders
- sitting with, observing and listening to Country
- storytelling and yarning circles
- connecting with the local Aboriginal community
- using natural materials in the program

The descriptor 'slow professional development' arose from these sessions, with Denise speaking to the participants about the importance of reflection and deep listening. Denise described how in the earlier years of her practice she was an 'unguided missile of good intentions'.

Slowly acquiring the skill of deep listening to and reflecting on Aboriginal voices had lead her to:

- Listening without resisting
- Listening without trying to think up a solution or justification
- Listening and thinking before responding
- Listening without trying to place the information within her own context
- Sitting with the questions raised, even if uncomfortable

In between sessions participants were given ‘homework’ to enhance their skills of reflection and deep listening. For example, participants were asked to sit with nature at dusk. They were asked to bring their reflections to a Yarning Circle at the following session, along with an item of significance such as a leaf, flower or stone.

Participants were also asked to reflect on how the content of the themes explored impacted their philosophy and practice. They were asked to develop a question for themselves to answer over the coming months and develop 3 actions that reflected how the Possum Skin pedagogy influenced their learning programs. The following example illustrates the active and informed intent of one of the participants:

I will investigate opportunities to be involved in community activities and opportunities to connect with and listen to my local Aboriginal community in order to deepen my knowledge and to begin to forge relationships. I will be open to any chances to listen or observe, and to be guided by the community’s needs rather than those I perceive for myself or my kindergarten community.

Participants input and feedback received informally and formally by the training team was vital in strengthening the *Reflecting on the Possum Skin Pedagogy* document.

From the beginning, participants were positioned as part of a learning community lead by Annette Sax in partnership with Denise Rundle. In this community the participants were not only learners but teachers.

Outcomes: A Reflection

At the conclusion of the four sessions the participants were given time to reflect on their experiences and fill in a feedback form around how the possum skin professional training sessions informed their:

- Understandings of Victorian Aboriginal communities
- Forming and maintaining respectful relationships
- Understanding Aboriginal pedagogy
- Embedding Aboriginal perspectives
- Sharing knowledge with colleagues

All the participant's responses were positive. Participants demonstrated that their understandings and attitudes around embedding Aboriginal perspectives such as *Possum Skin Pedagogy: A Guide for Early Childhood Practitioners* had deepened. Some examples under each principle are quoted anonymously.

Understandings of Victorian Aboriginal Communities

“Possum Skin Pedagogy has piqued my interest to learn more about the Aboriginal culture and to then impart this knowledge to the staff, children and families at the service. I am on my own journey to connect with my Aboriginal ancestry (4 Greats generations ago) and their part in the history of Australia as we know it today. The more I learn about the treatment of Aboriginal people, the more distressed I become; but I am also so very impressed by the Aboriginal people’s natural skills of conservation and their great care of the land which has such a strong connection to them.”

“Before this project I was only really aware of the Queensland Aboriginal community. Now I have more understanding of the complexity of the Victorian Aboriginal community, the tribes, language bases and community members.”

“Possum Skin Pedagogy has also underlined the importance of language we use. I appreciate the reminder that Aboriginal culture should always be talked about in the present, as living and evolving. I think I feel more confident to advise others of this if I hear/read language that suggests otherwise.”

Embedding Aboriginal Perspectives

“It enabled me to implement what I learnt, allowed it to be considered, reflected upon, tweaked, discussed, adjusted to fit in with input from authentic sources.”

“Information about reading and resources has supported our reflection, discussion and ongoing self-education and will colour all future planning and management. I am fearful of making a “wrong step” or being tokenistic, and this has affected my confidence in including language, stories and materials in the past. Dr Sue Lopez Atkinson and Auntie Fay Scott Muir in particular have given me more confidence in using publicly available material from acknowledged sources in my program and planning and made me acutely aware of the need to seek permission and form better connections to my local Aboriginal community. The openness and generosity shown by presenters has enabled me to acknowledge my fears causing offence, of making missteps, or of being seen to be asking for something from a local community who has had so much taken from them or undervalued. The sessions have helped me to reflect on my cultural assumptions, my weaknesses, and my anxieties about my own lack of knowledge, of connection, and of appropriation or causing offence.”

Sharing Knowledge with Colleagues

“I need to embed my knowledge and confidence through connections and relationships further to ensure respectful sharing.”

“I have already agreed for the next years we are going to include all possum skin narratives into our program.”

“The other really important learning has been how with every piece of knowledge shared, be it a story, quote, phrase in language, song, the source needs to be acknowledged, and not just once but many times. I think saying the source, such as an author or speaker, as well as how that was shared and entrusted with you, is a good practice. This is the kind of learning I want to share with other educators.”

Understanding Aboriginal Pedagogy

“It has allowed me to think more deeply, to see beyond the surface of e.g. a story like Bartja and Mayila and reflect within a larger picture. It has moved me away even more from a specific activity focus and confirmed the importance of learning about and understanding Aboriginal pedagogy and perspectives.”

“The Possum Skin Pedagogy project has, very slowly, added new perspectives and ways of thinking into my personal thinking about our journey towards Reconciliation. Learning to understand that this Pedagogy comes from what the Aboriginal people want for their children and what is influencing their journey to be able to share their thoughts and ideas with us, before we can use their guidelines in our work.”

“Understanding we need to honor their journey towards wanting to share with us, taking what we are given with Respect and listening to their wishes in how they would like us to join this path...”

“The unchartered missile with good intentions was me... This year I have learned a lot and I have gone from “ticking of boxes” and being impatient, to creating better relationships and letting experiences flow from that, instead of guiding things along my own idea lines...”

“Following the flow of nature also has provided to be valuable and I am connecting more to Country... taking more time to be and reflect and notice... “

Forming and Maintaining Respectful Relationships

“I have had a lovely conversation with the Koorie Engagement officer around protocols and permissions. She was very happy that I had an awareness of these. She said she generally likes to act as a go between for requests (she is a traditional owner) but she thought I was capable of going straight to the owner group which I definitely wouldn't have been before.”

“Learning about respectful language I was always afraid that I would say the ‘wrong thing ‘I now know where to go to gain information that is correct, respectful and able to be shared.”

“Visiting the local Aboriginal Cooperative, spending time yarning, sharing ideas but not asking for anything as yet but letting them know what is happening at the service.”

Case Studies

The following case studies demonstrate in greater depth how the Possum Skin Pedagogy professional learning sessions have informed the philosophy and practice of eight participants who so generously volunteered to share their experiences. It is hoped that these case studies act as an inspiration for other practitioners when embedding Aboriginal perspectives into their programs.

The Voices of the Elders

Emma Kefford, Collingwood College

I loved from the beginning that we had time and being slow Professional Development was very helpful, it gave us the space to unlearn and learn. I had lived in Alice Springs and had worked alongside those communities. The training gave me more understanding of Aboriginal culture in Victoria and lead me to think in my role as a teacher how I could include Aboriginal content in my curriculum.

Learning what the Elders would like Aboriginal children to learn was a useful way to ground the training. Elders voices grounded learning in working with all children around these knowledges. For example, Aunty Fay Muir from the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages advised us on the Aboriginal language resources that were available and the protocols for including language in our teaching.

During the course I was teaching year one and two. We have weekly swimming excursions where we walk past a scar tree near the MCG. During the walk I thought about Uncle Bill Nicholson Jnr who welcomed us onto Wurundjeri land at the beginning of the training and talked about Wurundjeri identity, land, language and history. We looked at the scar tree on our walk and brought in the voice of the Wurundjeri people with the kids thinking more about this scar tree. We are also close to the Wurundjeri land council and we could strengthen our connections with them we hope to have a visit from a staff member in the future.

I did make up the following powerpoint presentation – a brief summary of what we were doing in the sessions – and presented this at a staff meeting. Exploring the protocols and principles around acting ethically was important when putting this together. This was emphasised during the training. Staff were receptive and interested and I felt that we could have talked longer. I also feel that there is more to do around co-coordinating Aboriginal perspectives across grade levels in the future.



Yarra River Pound Bend

Learning's from Possum Skin Pedagogy Training

Series of 4 PDs from July - November 2018

Presented at the Collingwood College Primary Staff Meeting, December 2018.

Acknowledgement of Country

At Collingwood College we meet on Wurundjeri land and pay our respects to Wurundjeri Elders of the past, present and future. We meet near an important site, the confluence of the Yarra River and Merri Creek.

Presenters of Possum Skin Pedagogy

- Annette Sax, Taungurung woman
Founded Yarn Strong Sista
Performs Possum Hunt Show, Aunty Iris Lovett's story
- Dr Sue Atkinson, Yorta Yorta woman
Author of PHD about early Childhood Aboriginal education.
Her research question asked Elders, "what do you want Aboriginal children to learn about Culture?"
The answers informed the Possum Skin Pedagogy
- Aunty Fay Muir, Boonwurrung Elder
Spoke on behalf of VACL (Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages)
- Denise Rundle, Early Childhood educator

Why the training for Educators?

- A 'curriculum' is being developed, the Possum Skin Pedagogy, intended to be released in Feb/ March 2019.
- Aunty Doris Paton suggested that educators needed to be trained on how to respectfully deliver a curriculum.
- There was an overriding feeling that Aboriginal content in Education had gone from no inclusion in the curriculum, to 'stereotypical' and generalized content (for example dreamtime stories or dot paintings without context).
- Instead Aboriginal education needs to recognize living cultures, local knowledge, involve or consult Aboriginal people, and properly acknowledge sources.
- The Possum Skin Pedagogies and PDs were hoped to be a starting point for this, with much more to come.
- They were planned as 'slow PDs' but I will try to give a glimpse here.

Where are we? What country/ies do we live on?

Begin by considering where you are, where you live, work and travel every day.

- The Wurundjeri-Willam and Wurundjeri-Balluk are clans of the Woi Wurrung language groups
- Wurrung means language or lip movement
- The Woi Wurrung is a shared language with different pronunciations
- Great resources at Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages

Protocols for including language

“We are just starting to reclaim and revive our languages. We need time to do this ourselves before sharing with the wider community.”

Aunty Fay Muir, Boon Wurrung, speaking to the Possum Skin Pedagogy Training, September 2018.

Aunty Fay Muir, Boon Wurrung

- Be aware and educate yourself of history – Indigenous languages were banned at missions and in schools.
- Words of common use, for example Wominjeka in Woi Wurrung, are able to be used. Still best to connect to the person or source. There is an app available from VACL.
- For other words: Contact a local Aboriginal group or VACL.
- Wait until they get back to you.
- If given permission, ideally get someone from that community to teach it or acknowledge sources.
- Connect to context and country – Yarn Strong Sista have native animal soft toys for kids to play with, or bring in part of country- gum leaves, flowers.

Possum Skin Cloaks

- The Pedagogy that is being produced will relate to learning about Possum Skin Cloaks among other aspects of South-East Aboriginal cultures.
- It is a story that is being reclaimed by Victorian Aboriginal people.
- Possum Skin cloaks are and were significant both practically and spiritually.
- There are only 5 cloaks remaining from pre-colonial times. Two of these are in the Melbourne Museum.
- The practice of making cloaks is being revived. Aboriginal people are re-learning the craft and there are a number of skilled cloak-makers.

Stay tuned for the Possum Skin Pedagogy and resources in 2019.

In the meantime we can consider what Collingwood College is currently doing, and could be doing, to include Aboriginal culture and content in respectful ways.

Resources - Websites

- VAEAI – Victorian Aboriginal Education Association
<http://www.vaeai.org.au/>
- VACL – Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages
<http://www.vaclang.org.au/>
- Yarn Strong Sista Catalogue (storybooks, soft toys and craft):
<https://yarnstrongsista.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/YSSCatalogue.pdf>
- Wurundjeri Tribal Land Council (located at Abbotsford Convent)
<https://www.wurundjeri.com.au/>
- Koorie Youth Council (on Youth Justice/Aboriginal Incarceration issues there is an instructive 2018 report), Ngaga-dji
<https://www.ngaga-djiproject.org.au/>
- Cultural Victoria
<https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/>
- Melbourne Museum
<https://museumsvictoria.com.au/bunjilaka/whats-on/first-peoples/>

Resources – Early Years Texts

- *Welcome to Country* by Aunty Joy Murphy
- *Bartja and Mayila* by Sue Atkinson; illustrated by Annette Sax
- *Yurri's Manung* by Sue Atkinson; illustrated by Annette Sax
- *The Southern Cross and Nerran the Moon* by Lynnette Solomon; illustrated by Rachel Mullet
- *Marngrook - The Long-ago Story of Aussie Rules* by Titta Secombe
- *Me and my Mum* by Anita Heiss and Jay Davis
- *People and Places* by Aunty Debbie Austin

Exploring and Learning Together; Signs, Symbols and Sharing

Robyn Brown, Kindergarten Teacher at Arnold's Creek Kindergarten

Forming and maintaining respectful relationships

I have strengthened my relationships with Kirrip, an Aboriginal organisation in Melton. After a few visits to this organisation and establishing relationships with the Elders I have now listened to their stories and have shared mine.

One of the staff from Kirrip will be coming up to visit my service. Normally I would have gone there and just expected them to come to the kinder but now I'm more aware of the importance of establishing relationships.

Embedding Aboriginal perspectives

We had been embedding Aboriginal perspectives prior to attending the Possum Skin Pedagogy sessions. For example, before the sessions began, I had introduced the children to the Aboriginal flag and talked about the meaning of the 3 colours.

We had been conducting an Acknowledgement of Country with the children:

Here is the land (touch the floor)

Here is the sky (arms up high)

Here are my friends (open arms)

And here am I (hug yourself)

We say thank you (hand to chin and move outwards)

To the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation

On whose land we play (palms up circular motion)

And learn (pointer finger to side of the brain)

Adapted from Staines, J and Ruby Scarlet, R (Edits) *The Aboriginal Early Childhood Practice Guide*, pg. 40, Multiverse Publishing, www.multiverse.com.au, 2018.

The actions listed above are Auslan signs that one of our educators brought back from an in-service she attended.



At the end of May for Reconciliation week the children made the flag with tissue paper or coloured it in.

We added in the signing for Wurundjeri people, as shown to our colleague at the in-service, by an Aboriginal woman who was one of the facilitators at this in-service. On both hands the thumb and smallest finger are tucked in. The left hand is held in a vertical position, while the right hand, in a horizontal position, touches fingertips with the left hand and then moves along in an up and down motion, depicting hills. This was to illustrate that the Wurundjeri people were from hill country.

After the sessions began, we changed our Acknowledgement of Country from just being on our blue carpet, to sitting in a circle around a mat of Aboriginal symbols provided to the service by the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated.

The children learnt about the symbols on the mat. We also brought in Australian native plants, some bark, the Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islands and Australian flags and sat everything on a piece of hessian on the mat to symbolise bringing Country inside.

We have been sharing Aboriginal language we were taught at the sessions. We taught the children the Aboriginal Hokey Pokey. They remembered all the Aboriginal words for the body parts.

Sharing knowledge with colleagues

During the Melton Learning Festival, I attended a session on “Wurundjeri’s Cultural Heritage of the Melton Area”, based on a book written by Uncle Bill Nicholson and Mandy Nicholson and facilitated by Annette Vickery, Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer with the Melton City Council. I also attended a “Storytelling and Yarning” session with Annette. I was then able to share this book and my learning with my colleagues, who then shared this learning with their kindergarten children and families. Annette also gave me additional copies of the book so that each of our Aboriginal families at the service could have their own personal book.

We are engaging in slow learning, really slowing down and learning about Aboriginal culture. I have learnt that it’s not about ‘ticking the boxes’ it’s how we can be respectful and build relationships and having people come in and share their knowledge with us.

Embedding Aboriginal Perspectives

Susan McNally, The Joey Club

In my centre there seemed to be some reluctance towards embedding Aboriginal perspectives in the program. We decided we wanted to go to the professional development to gain more knowledge of Aboriginal culture. We wished to share this with the staff and make them more culturally aware and make our centre a culturally safe place.

Celebrating Marngrook

During the training Annette asked us to research the story of Marngrook or Game Ball. The children and families at our centre love football. We looked at what Marngrook means and found that AFL was definitely influenced by Marngrook. We shared a big display in the foyer and emphasised pictures and information around Marngrook. We used images from the Marngrook Footy Show and Aboriginal football players, along with football overall.

These people are Aboriginal role models and there are many Aboriginal football players. One staff member brought her family in to show them the display, her children wanted to see the Possum skin football. A couple of the parents commented on how wonderful it was. The display was shared on 'Storypark', a digital portfolio for parents.



Part of the Marngrook display.

Making our own Marngrook

The Aboriginal family who attends our centre loaned us their 2 little boys' possum skins and kangaroo skin and we learnt how the possum skins were stuffed with charcoal then sewn together with kangaroo tail sinew to make a Marngrook football. We rolled up the possum skin and stuffed it with tiny pinecones in the middle to give it filling, then tied it together with tussock grass.

Marking National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day

I did another display for August the 4th 2018, when we celebrated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day in my room. I began by setting up a display to inform educators, families and children about the important background behind the Stolen Children being given the same day for their birthday.

I set up a timeline with photos and posters of a number of Children's Day themes, along the top there was printed information from the fact sheets. 2018 is the 30th anniversary for the day and the theme was Spread the Word.

I added a pad of sticky notes and a pen for everyone to write a message to the children to celebrate their birthday. A number of staff and one family contributed. The children listened to a very brief



Part of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day display.

explanation of the day while I drew pictures of two children representing both groups who were taken from their families and placed with other families but no one knew their birthdays so they were all given the same day, the 4th of August, for their new birthdays.

The children were between 2 and 3 years of age so we kept it brief and simple. They then helped ice the patty cakes in the colours of the flags and later they blew out the candle on their cake after singing happy birthday to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The children were able to identify the colour of the flag they chose and the meaning of the colour on the flag while we ate. Later two of those children scribbled their message on a sticky note and their mum scribed their message, 'a cake'.



The staff and children responded positively to this display and the activity in my room. I feel the cultural awareness is building and at the same time the walls that were up around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives are little by little coming down. The staff in my room said the activity was simple and enjoyable.

I am currently finding out more about the Stolen Generations in doing an assignment on the topic for my Bachelor of Education.

Sitting with Country, Connecting with Nature

Denise Rundle, Boroondara Kindergarten

For Denise the major impact of the training was learning to sit with Country. As one of the presenters who spoke with participants about slowing down and sitting with Country she found it ironic as she came to the realisation that she needed to do this too. She now feels more aware of her connection to the Country on which her centre sits and consequently the deeper level in which she embeds Aboriginal perspectives in her program.

In one of the sessions the story of Bartja and Mayila was shared by Annette. For Denise the image of Uncle Ambrose talking with Bartja by Dungala (the Murray River) as he advised Bartja 'to sit quietly by Dungala and the answer will come to you' made a big impact.

While listening to this story she was reminded of the moments when she and the children had connected with Country. Some of the examples she shared were:

- Arriving at kindergarten and going outside. We started to look for signs that other creatures had been in the garden – on Wurundjeri Country – when we were at home. This meant that children were noticing and thinking about Country.
- Laying down and looking at Sky Country – listening, breathing, being still – a new understanding for me that Country is not only land and waters.
- Exploring the links of the Wurundjeri people to the Manna gum tree.
- Observing the Manna gum tree in our Kindergarten, leaves, colours, movement in the wind looking for marks in the trunk left by possums.
- Walking to find other Manna gum trees in the area.

Denise was led to think more deeply about sitting with Country and not just being in Country especially when exploring the narrative of connecting with nature as presented in the training.

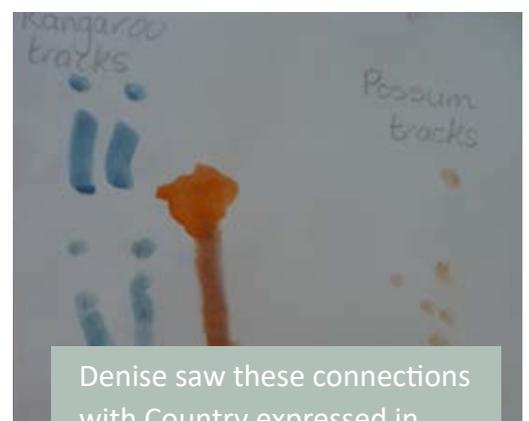
Denise shared the following story with me 'that would not have happened had I not being involved in Possum Skin Pedagogy.'



A mural by Annette Sax at Boroondara Kindergarten, inspired by the story of Bartja and Mayila.



Denise looking at Sky Country.



Denise saw these connections with Country expressed in children's art, conversations and stories.

A dead pigeon

One day we found a dead pigeon before the children arrived. Previously, I would have buried it before the children arrived (even though I knew that it could be a learning experience for children, but I didn't want to go there). This time, I waited for some of the children to arrive, we talked about what could have happened and then we buried it and said goodbye to the pigeon.

At the same time, we had been reading "Little Black Trackas" and 2 children decided to make a similar book using the Australian animals as models for their drawings. One child's book diverged into a story of a dead Waa (in hindsight, I think this child thinks that Waa is the Woi-wurrung word for all birds). He retold the story of burying the dead pigeon and it included how it happened on Wurundjeri land.

One week later... a dead Waa the crow

Yes, in exactly the same place, we found a dead crow. This time I covered it over and waited until all the children have arrived - about one and a half hours. All the children knew about the dead crow and when it was time, we set about paying our respects. Co-incidentally, one of the Aboriginal families arrived and I asked the mother (who is from Western Australia) about her relationships with crows. She said, "One is OK but more than one means death." I told her what had happened and what we were going to do - she came out and joined in by observing. Later she said, "I liked how you did that - you got the children to say thanks and show respect." (This was an unexpected validation from this parent).

What we did...

The children talked about the dead pigeon and now the dead crow; we all speculated as to what had happened. The children wanted to have a closer look so I held the bird and children looked at it closely - many were a bit afraid, especially when they saw the claws and beak.

It was decided that it looked like an old Waa the crow, that there had been a big storm last night (true) and maybe it hadn't been able to hold on to the branch anymore.

We dug a hole near the pigeon and buried the crow. I told them when my dad died, we all put some dirt in his grave to say thanks and goodbye. All the children did this, with many saying thanks to Waa for looking after us as the Protector. One child made a sign so that all the children would know that Waa the crow was there. Another child was very worried that there would be no more Waa the crows to look after us and Country. He then noticed some other crows around and decided that this was a good thing. It was a big talking point for the next few days and many parents asked me about what had happened.

So... from that starting point, a big change has happened for me, my colleague (who had been very uncomfortable with talking about this with children) and the children.

Bartja and Mayila, Atkinson, S. and Sax, A., Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages. 2013.

Little Black Trackas, Hall, M. and Saunders, G., Neenann. 2015.

Our Path to Reconciliation

Marieke Lutterberg, Tyabb Village Children's Centre

In 2018 we officially commenced our Reconciliation Action Plan when we signed up for Narragunnawali, the tool for Reconciliation in schools and early childhood education.

The Village feels it has a role to play in building a pathway for Reconciliation from the start of children's education. Therefore, we must have a good understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, history and contemporary issues.

As part of building this understanding I took part in the in the Possum Skin Pedagogy Professional Learning Project. This project is a collaboration project designed by Sue Lopez Atkinson, Annette Sax and Denise Rundle and this project aims to create connections between Aboriginal Elders, their communities and Early Childhood Educators and will become a guide for Early Childhood services in Victoria.

The pedagogy addresses seven narratives:

- Journey and Healing
- Ceremony and Spirituality
- Aboriginal Language and Literacy
- Nature
- Family
- Science and Technology
- Recreation

At this stage my response to the training has been very much personal and reflective. I haven't embedded that much in practice. I'm still trying to make sense of the training. I have changed the way of thinking about embedding Aboriginal perspectives: it's not just ticking the boxes; I need to step back and reflect. I need to think deeply about what the Possum Skin Pedagogy means for the values, vision, philosophy and practices in my Early Childhood service. I need to identify a pathway which represents who we are, who we want to become, where we are going on this journey and who might guide us along the way.

As Denise Rundle, Kindergarten teacher and one of the presenters stated "it's sometimes easy to act like an unguided missile of good intentions. As Aboriginal communities work to revive culture and language it is their choice to decide what aspects of this they wish to share."

I am learning to let go of preconceived ideas that I have around Aboriginal communities. I have a deeper knowledge now and have broadened my understanding of the Aboriginal way of living and identity, respect for the land, and family. The more information I have the more that I can share. I hope that the children I teach will take this knowledge into the primary years and beyond. I hope I can inspire the children to stand up and have a voice, which can lead to acceptance, inclusion and reconciliation. I have learnt that Aboriginal people come from many mobs, all which may have differing opinions and ideas about what Aboriginal perspectives look like.

My question is how do you work out a position between different opinions?

I am still learning how to put this knowledge into practice and convey this to my team. Relationships with the Aboriginal community and Elders will be the guide for this part of the journey.

Connecting with Boonwurrung Elder Aunty Fay Stewart Muir

One of the actions of the RAP is making connections with the local Elders. The Boonwurrung and Bunurong people, who are the traditional custodians of the land Tyabb Village Children's Centre is on, have two prominent female Elders: Aunty Fay Stewart Muir (Boonwurrung) and Aunty Caroline Briggs (Boonwurrung).

Aunty Fay Stewart Muir was one of the speakers at the training. We connected with Aunty Fay and she kindly accepted our invitation to come and visit Tyabb Village all the way from Geelong!

She joined the children's Monday group at their Bush Kinder session in our little forest and showed us a boomerang, clap sticks, a coolamon and a musical instrument made from a baobab tree. She then shared with us the story of the possum skins. Aboriginal children are wrapped in possum skin cloaks, made of 6 skins sewn together, with special markings burnt into the leather back. Over the course of a life time, the cloak will be made to fit by adding additional skins and more markings to document a life's story. At the end of life, the owner is buried wrapped in this cloak.

There are only five traditional historical cloaks remaining: two are in the care of the Museum Victoria Collection and the other three are held overseas are in international collections. The art of making possum skin cloaks is now being revived and many Aboriginal children will now participate in a Welcome Bubup to Country ceremony, where they will receive their own!

We thanked Aunty Fay for sharing her time, patience and knowledge with us. The children gifted her with a beautiful bush bouquet, made from flowers and greenery the children and educators brought in from their home gardens.

As a children's centre, we are looking forward to strengthening our relationship with Aunty Fay, building mutual trust and respect to continue our journey together towards reconciliation.



Aunty Fay Stewart Muir

Storytelling and the Seasons

Jane Evans, Ballarat Steiner School and Kindergarten

The training has given me greater confidence and determination in following the direction I had begun to follow when I arrived in Ballarat in 2013. The Steiner curriculum for early childhood is intimately linked to nature, the seasons, and meaningful adult work. When I moved here from Melbourne I decided to use the local Indigenous weather and seasonal knowledge as the basis for my term's planning, with the European seasonal picture as a secondary influence in the form of domestic work, gardening, and cooking. I experienced a lot of difficulty making formal connections with the local Aboriginal organisations, but the training reinforced the importance of establishing these. It connected me to Aunty Fay, who encouraged me to include language and storytelling using publicly available resources when local connections were not forthcoming.

Oral storytelling and the rich use of language linked to movement in song, gesture games and rhymes, are central parts of any Steiner program. We write our own stories, songs, and rhymes, and choose traditional folktales and children's stories, games, rhymes and songs from the country in which our program is based, and reflecting the cultural backgrounds of the children who attend.

Steiner saw the process of human development mirrored in different stages of world history, or epochs, and the school curriculum takes children through the mythologies and imaginative pictures of many different times and cultures. In Australia most of our resources for the early childhood curriculum have come from Steiner kindergarten teachers in Europe and England, where the education has been established longer than here in Australia, but many of us have felt the importance of introducing Aboriginal culture to children in their first seven years of life.

Of course for Aboriginal children themselves this is vital, but for all young children here there seems to be a "rightness" of fit between the Aboriginal understanding of the world and traditional tasks of daily life, and the deeper needs of young children. The training has given me more courage to pursue this, and to deepen my existing knowledge and connections. I can now call Aunty Fay with questions and speak with her about Aboriginal languages, and I use the Aboriginal language apps available through Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL).

The app I use is Wadawurrung, which gives an introduction to the languages of the region that encompasses the Geelong and Ballarat areas of Victoria: Uncle Bert Fagan, Sean Fagan and Tammy Gilson speak the Wadawurrung words and phrases on the app, giving the user a guide to the correct pronunciation. Words are arranged alphabetically, both in English and in Wadawurrung, or can be found using a pictorial link, or from categories in English, such as 'actions', 'body', 'ceremonial', and so on. The content was produced in partnership between the Wathaurong Aboriginal Corporation and VACL. The not for profit Miromaa Aboriginal Language and Technology Centre developed the technology behind this and other Aboriginal language apps as part of its work to document, conserve and disseminate traditional Aboriginal languages.

Our local language is Wadawurrung. We honour the Wadawurrung people by using their language in conversation with the children about the things we see in our garden and natural surrounds, in rhymes and songs in our morning circle, and in our stories. I have been reluctant to use Aboriginal stories in the kindergarten without express permission from those whose stories they are, so instead I have composed

my own nature stories using Wadawurrung language wherever I can, with a focus on Aboriginal seasonal knowledge, animals, plants and traditional activities. The training has altered the way I look at the natural world around me and given me a new foundation to consider around oral storytelling. I have a much deeper connection to the subtle seasonal changes, and to the local plants and what they would have been used for. The children have always collected and chewed the sap from our wattle trees, for example, and now I can tell them what other things this would have been used for, and is still being used for by local Aboriginal artists and dancers. This added richness has been a gift for me, and I hope, for the children. Once your consciousness has been opened, you can never see things in the same way again: Indigenous perspectives have become a fundamental starting point in my intentional teaching.

We look first to the children in front of us, and their particular needs as a group, but then go immediately to the changes that are appearing in the environment for inspiration and research stories, rhymes, and work tasks for the term to fit with seasonal pictures and the traditional human activities within the environment.

So many things that would have occupied the traditional owners of the land are deeply meaningful to young children, in work or in play; the need for shelter, safety and protection; to gather and hunt food; to gather materials and makes tools (or weapons!); to decorate and celebrate community, seasons, games, beliefs... the children dig clay to make vessels; pull bark from logs to hold the plant materials and gather play “food”, or real fruit, berries and herbs for our meals.

They make shelters from bush materials, and draw on the rocks using the coloured clay, charcoal from the fire, and wattle sap. And the adult work of gardening, harvesting, and so on has been enriched by drawing on knowledge



Playing with clay.

of tasks that others have done on this land for thousands of years before us: for example, we pull reeds from the side of the dam and collect the grasses to make twine and baskets that the children can use in play. In all our work and stories the adults reflect upon how others have lived on this land before us and performed so many of these tasks before us, and I believe the children learn from, and flourish in, the attitudes of respect and reverence that arise from such reflection.

We use open-ended natural materials wherever possible and have worked outdoors to make a beautiful environment to encourage nature back into what was once farmland. Native bees are feeding and nesting in the log garden borders and insect hotel; lizards and frogs share the same logs and the sandpit; we have wrens and thornbills and honeyeaters in the native shrubs. We watch the pair of wedge-tailed eagles hovering above the kindergarten as they hunt, and we see Waa chase him away, or court his own reflection in our glass doors in spring, and then bring his fledglings to learn to steal our bantam eggs from the chook house.

At the end of each term we celebrate a seasonal festival and for the winter festival, held at night close to the solstice, the children work over several weeks to make paper lanterns and lead their family in an evening walk, ending in our kindergarten with a story by candlelight.

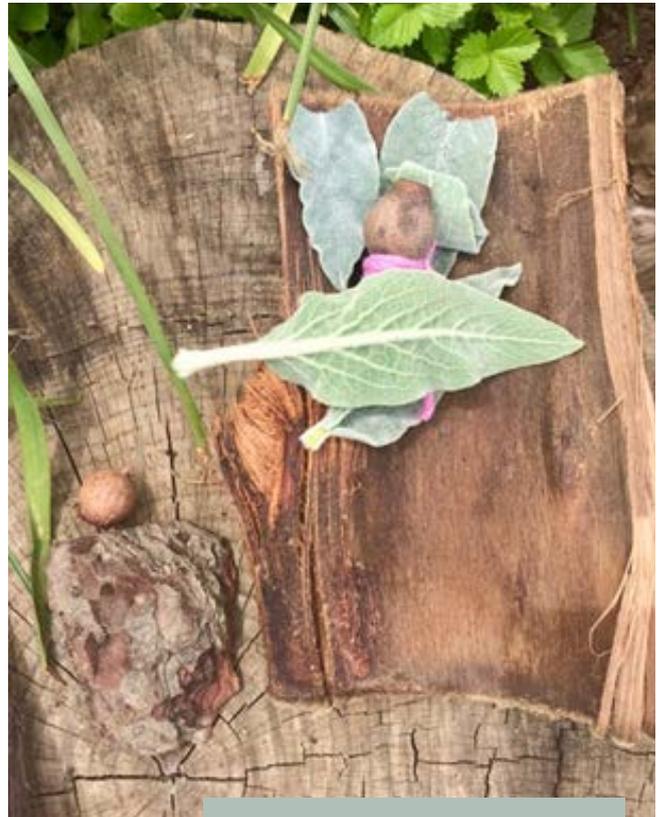
After beginning the training I wrote a story for the festival that set our own time and small place in a larger picture of Aboriginal knowledge of astronomy, talking about the emu visible in the night sky over the school at that time of year, using Wadawurrung language, and telling a nature story about barnong, the ringtail possum we have seen on the nesting in the gums over the kindergarten fence. My sister made a possum puppet for me and we constructed a possum nest in the kindergarten from gum branches and leaves. At the end of our lantern walk the children and their families sat in the light of the paper lanterns while a colleague moved the puppet through the branches and leaves, out of its family nest and into its own little nest that we wove as I told the story.

The dual threads of our kindergarten culture and the Aboriginal culture were worked into the story, and I am now trying to weave these dual threads through the program all the time. In the warmer months we talk about blackbirds and wrens nesting; we make crab apple jelly and herb tea but the children collect the herbs in the coolamon, and create their own from bark in the garden to use in their play.

At Christmas there are white lilies and red roses alongside the callistemon in Christmas colours, and bunches of native gasses take over late in summer once the flowers are spent.

Before I began the training I felt a need to honour Country and its peoples, but I was reluctant to make a mistake or to risk causing offence. The training gave me the courage to make mistakes and to learn from them, and helped me to connect with people who encouraged that learning. It stoked a deep desire to learn more and to forge meaningful connections with Country and Aboriginal people wherever I might go in the future. I feel convinced of the worth of making mistakes, and that there is greater risk in doing “nothing”.

I have rewritten the philosophy of the centre to reflect cultural safety. It gives me a starting point in conversation with Indigenous parents and I feel more confident in asking them what they want for their children at our centre and in seeking their input and support for the program for all of the children. I am also more conscious of opportunities to take part in artistic events in the local community and in Melbourne. There has been an Indigenous artist working with the children in the primary school and it would be wonderful to invite an indigenous artist, musician or storyteller into the kindergarten to work over time, or to work with those with local knowledge to reintroduce bush food plants to the land around our dam. I will also try to go to any workshops that focus on Aboriginal culture. This is the first time I’ve had such an opportunity in Victoria. It’s been incredibly enriching and strengthening. I am so grateful to those who have worked to bring it together, and for the generosity shown by Aboriginal elders and community in sharing their time and knowledge.



Gum nut baby in Coolamon.

A Journey of Learning

Kathy Skinner, Uniting Pascoe Vale South Kindergarten

While Aboriginal perspectives have always been in the curriculum it's become a lot more embedded and innate. We always have had objects around the kinder but now we are more aware that they are discussed. We are being more consistent and less stereotypical.

I feel more immersed in the culture and more aware. I feel confident that I am on a journey of learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and able to impart my knowledge to the children and their families. We have had some parents come in to find out what their children are talking about and ask many questions.

We use some words that we were taught in the training throughout our programs. We engage in the hokey pokey using Aboriginal words, that was a wonderful learning tool during family occasions; beginning conversations about culture and how/what we are endeavouring to teach the children.

I have been proactive in sharing what I have learnt with my co-educators. As a result, we feel that as a team we have expanded our teaching about culture, our knowledge of where to appropriately purchase resources, engage in respectful conversations and practices.

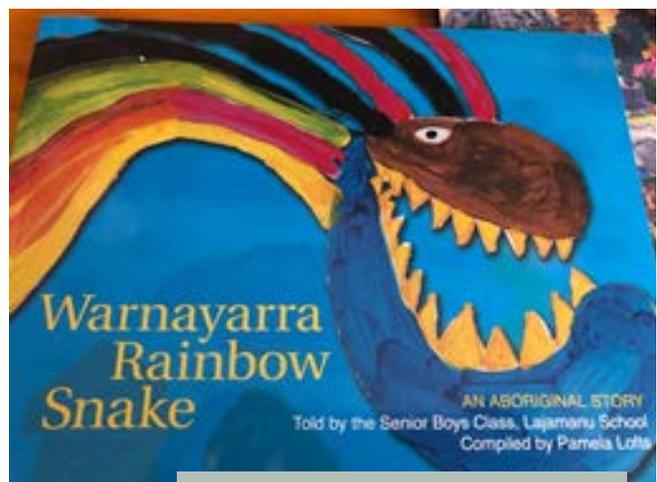
We have been speaking to our Parents Advisory Committee about a Welcome to Country ceremony later this year. We have reached out to a couple of local kindergartens to discuss combining the event to share costs and build relationships between kindergartens, local tribes and the community.

We are hoping to engage in an incursion later this year with the Wurundjeri Tribe Council.

The gift of story

Some of the children have been interested in Australian Aboriginal stories. This year for the first time we gave the children Aboriginal Dreaming Stories as Christmas gifts.

One family from America was particularly excited to receive their book as the mother had the same book as a child growing up in Australia. The family had always embraced Aboriginal culture and had been aware of keeping Aboriginal Australian culture strong. Reading the book was one of the ways that they had done this and kept their links to Australia.



Warnayarra Rainbow Snake, based on a story told by the Senior Boys Class at Lajamanu School.

Final reflections and continuing the journey

Feedback from the participants and these case studies illustrate the strength of their understandings as they journey towards embedding the possum skin pedagogy in early childhood programs.

These journeys have been sign posted by the narratives, Aboriginal pedagogies, knowledges and respectful communications between practitioners and the traditional custodians of the land on which they educate and care for young children.

While the interconnection between knowledges, ethics and protocols was established we could not explore all of the narratives as two of our guest speakers were unfortunately unable to attend. Therefore, the following narratives – which are based on spiritual or sensitive material and must be presented with the direct involvement of an Elder or another Aboriginal community leader – require further exploration.

1. The narrative of journey and healing (e.g. tradition, loss, survival and regeneration)
2. The narrative of ceremony/spirituality (with emphasis on the ceremonial place of skins in Aboriginal Communities, e.g. The place of skins in Welcome to Country, in births and deaths)
3. The narrative of Aboriginal literacy (e.g. how children learnt the meaning of symbols through story telling)

Although the participants feel more informed and confident they also acknowledge the complexity of this journey. Marked by pauses for reflection, dealing with feelings of doubt and ongoing questions about the ways forward. It can be a circular journey as one participant noted:

I feel as though I'm back at the start of the journey. I'm questioning and reflecting.

Therefore, feedback from the participants also reflect their aspirations around deepening their understandings, enhancing respectful connections with the local Aboriginal community and authentically implementing Aboriginal pedagogies.

Consequently, AAPEC would like to continue this journey with the original participants by applying for funding to further these aspirations and provide the opportunity to explore the remaining narratives with Elders and senior members of the Victorian Aboriginal community.



Aunty Lee Darroch Echuca Biganga at Melbourne Museum.

Appendix 1:

The Aboriginal Hokey Pokey

Substitute the English words of hand, foot, bottom and body with the following shared Language Words of Woi Wurrung, Boon Wurrung and Daung Wurrung (Kulin Nation).

- Hand: Marnong
- Foot: Djinang (silent d - Geenung)
- Bottom: Mum (Moom)
- Body: Marram (roll the r)

Words shared by Annette Sax, from Yarn Strong Sista (Taungurung), with permission by Aboriginal language specialists from Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL): www.vaclang.org.au.

It is recommended that this song is shared and taught on the lands of the nations above.

Appendix 2:

What does Victoria's Indigenous community expect from early childhood services?

A paper based on a seminar presented by Dr Sue Atkinson Lopez at Melbourne Polytechnic Preston, 2016.

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

My people are Yorta Yorta people whose traditional homelands radiate out from the junction of Goulburn and Murray rivers in Northern Victoria. I was born and raised on Wurundjeri land and I would like to thank the Elders of both the Wurundjeri and Boon Wrung nations for their support and guidance over the last 31 years in which I have worked as an early childhood professional on their lands.

As some of you may know the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community recently celebrated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day on August 4th. The theme for this year, 2016, is "My Country, Our Country, We all Belong."

It's hard to envision that this will ever be a reality for all Indigenous children considering the recent accounts of abuse of Indigenous children in juvenile detention in the Northern Territory. This is just one example of the racism that many of our children face in institutions across Australia.

But the hope and the challenge for us in the early years sector is to double our commitment to the right of Indigenous children to an education that is empowering and based on the principles of Indigenous self-determination and social justice. In Victoria, too many of our children are in juvenile detention and I believe that in giving our children the best early years education possible we are part of addressing some of the root causes of a high representation of our children in the system.

The Australian Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) is based on the themes of Belonging, Being and Becoming. The questions you need to reflect and act on as posed by an Indigenous parent are, 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? (Atkinson, 2012)

In Melbourne, many early years practitioners are slowly moving towards a more socially just society by embedding local Indigenous perspectives in their programs. But it has been a long road.

In reflecting on my own early education in the 1960s it was not about belonging, it was about being marginalised, being subjected to racism and becoming assimilated.

An example of one of the books used in Victorian schools in the 1960s describes Aboriginal people as:

Rather ugly, have dark skins and wear very few clothes. And they are not very clever for they do not know how to grow food or to look after animals or how to build good houses. At certain times of the year they paint themselves with great splashes of red, white and yellow. When painted like this they get very excited and do many strange dances. I should not like to be the child of one of these people would you?

- (Hornblow, 1953)

Imagine being an Aboriginal child hearing this from their teacher. What sort of message do you think is being conveyed here?

To me the message given here is that Aboriginal people are ugly, stupid, primitive and consequently bad parents. It is this type of thinking that informed the removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities.

The other colonial concepts of Aboriginality I recall from my education as a young child were:

- Captain Cook discovered Australia
- Aboriginal people did not resist invasion
- Aboriginal people were nomadic
- There are no Aboriginal people in Tasmania

I recall being told that Aboriginal people got depressed during ‘settlement’ and sat under trees and died. Although I knew intuitively that these things were untrue I had no counter reference as my mother had been raised largely outside of the Aboriginal community after the death of her own mother. It was many years later when I gained an education from Aboriginal Elders such as the late Aunty Iris Lovett Gardiner that I had an informed framework from which to challenge these and other concepts.

Some of the concepts that have been particularly persistent in early childhood, which are a reflection of society in general are:

- The absence of or total assimilation of Aboriginal Victorians
- Real Aboriginal people as black and living in remote communities not cities like Melbourne.

Therefore, teaching about Aboriginality has frequently been informed by “looking north” in constructing the curriculum or programming. Ignoring the local Indigenous community and thereby reinforcing stereotypes.

Constructing an Indigenous inclusive program essentially means building respectful relationships with your local Indigenous community and actively engaging with their diverse voices.

Today I would like to share with you some of the results of my PhD research 'Indigenous self determination and early childhood education and care in Victoria' (2008). This research is based on the voices of 33 members of the Victorian Indigenous early childhood community; Elders, parents, early childhood professionals and children from Melbourne and three regional centres of Victoria.

One of chapters in my research 'Decolonising the mainstream' specifically explores the experiences and aspirations of Indigenous families and Koorie Early Childhood Field Officers (KECFOs) whose role now comes under the role of KESOs (Koorie Engagement Support Officers) participating in non-Indigenous early childhood services, predominantly kindergartens.

Most Indigenous people send their children to preschool for similar reasons as other Australians, such as school readiness, building social skills and knowledge, but would like to see this occur in an Indigenous inclusive environment. An environment built in partnership with Indigenous families, the KECFOs/KESOs and the broader Indigenous community.

Molly, a KECFO, expressed the Indigenous communities' expectations around preschool as:

Giving Indigenous children the same start as mainstream preschoolers offering them the same chance to develop in all areas of early childhood development but in a setting where being Indigenous is something to be proud of and they are learning about their culture.

- (Interview with Molly 2003, p.16)

Up until quite recently many Indigenous families only felt comfortable sending their children to Indigenous centres such as the MACS (Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services) confident that their children's identity and culture would be respected there as one parent stated:

As there weren't any Koorie services out there were our children were made to feel good about themselves and their identity and so that was one of the reasons that the MACS were set up.

- (Interview with Anne, 2003, p.15)

But not all Indigenous families had access to services such as a MACS in Victoria, so the majority of our children are enrolled in 'mainstream services'. Looking at my research the Indigenous community had several key expectations in regard to these 'mainstream' early childhood programs. 7 main points stood out from my research, these are:

1. A welcoming environment

Marylyn, a KECFO, who is also a grandmother explained:

I've been into the pre schools that have the ATSIC posters and for Koorie or Indigenous women and mothers I think this is inviting and saying 'come in'...If we had the flag up at all the preschool providers the mothers are going to say 'wow'. For more than two hundred years we have been alienated. It's about the invitation to say 'come in we are Koorie friendly'.

- (Interview with Marylyn, 2003, p.50-51)

Displaying the Aboriginal flag, for example, signals a respect for Indigenous peoples and cultures and invites Indigenous participation in the program. A welcoming environment is foundational in beginning partnerships with Indigenous families as some families may be reluctant to identify themselves as Indigenous. If the centre hasn't signalled openness to inclusion they may feel they are risking exposing themselves and their children to racism.

Molly, a KECFO, explained:

I think some people would be reluctant to identify 'cos it would make them stick out, they would not want to be the only Koorie family there. Past experiences with racism have taught Koorie people to put up and shut up.

- (Interview with Molly, 2003, p.17)

She feels people would identify themselves if the centre first identified itself as a Koorie friendly service.

The foyer of one centre was constructed in consultation with a local Indigenous Elder and Indigenous families at centre. Here, parents were greeted by:

- The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags. Posters of Indigenous people including local Indigenous people. This meant that Indigenous children often saw images of people that they knew, thereby strengthening connections with the centre.
- Books written by Indigenous Elders for parents and staff to read, such as the late Aunty Iris Lovett Gardiners autobiography *The Lady of the Lake* (1997).

2. Staff that ask about cultural identity with respect

As Primrose, an Indigenous parent of a fair skinned child, remarked with irritation:

When I ticked the Koorie box on the enrollment form they rang up and asked if that was right because they said sometimes parents tick the wrong box.

- (Interview with Primrose, 2004, p.122)

The appropriate response could have been 'I noticed you ticked the box letting us know that you are Indigenous, can we have a conversation about how you would like your culture to be included in our program?'

Asking with respect means not asking how Aboriginal are you or how far back does it go or saying you don't look Aboriginal I thought you were Greek or similar remarks that challenge a person's identity. Many Aboriginal parents talked to me about the stereotypes they and their children often faced when interacting with early childhood professionals who challenged their identity as one parent stated:

I think some people have a limited and very stereotypical understanding of Aboriginal people. I think if you don't have really dark skin, they don't see you as being a real Aboriginal, if you live a contemporary way of life they don't see you as a real Aboriginal.

- (Interview with Anne, 2003, p.15)

CDs such as Aunty Wendy's *Mob* (Notely 1996) are popular at Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS). There are songs about the values many Aboriginal people see as important such as the Aboriginal flag, Aboriginal pride and identity, the extended family and learning about the land. The CD can be used to raise and discuss issues of identity with children. For example, 'There was a man' (Notely) a song which focuses on culture rather than colour when exploring Aboriginality. The song places the socio emotional cultural construction of identity rather than a particular lifestyle or degree of descent at its centre.

3. A program that reflects the lives of their children

Karen, a parent of an Indigenous child, was collecting posters and books to take into her child's centre. When I asked her what sort of things she was focusing on she said:

Contemporary images, we want to move away from the lap lap kind of deal, contemporary images that had a bit of a Victorian focus. He's a Victorian kid so I want him to see his own image around him. His skin is quite light so for him to have lots of photos of Aboriginal people with very dark skin would be hard for him to identify with.

- (Interview with Karen, 2003, p.76)

Donna, a non-Indigenous kindergarten teacher, agreed:

You need to find links with people that are real, like contemporary images of people, not showing someone living in the desert, which is still a valid image but not to represent (Aboriginal) culture in all its forms.

- (Interview with Donna, 2003, p.68)

When I started, teaching 'traditional' images of Aboriginal people in Dreaming stories was all that was available in books for young children. These stories are very important, especially stories from your local area that guide children in learning about culture, spirituality and caring for the land and each other. But I believe they can be problematic as the only introduction to Indigenous culture for young children in 'mainstream' early childhood settings. For non-Indigenous children they may reinforce stereotypes, for Indigenous children they may also be problematic as they don't reflect the way they live in urban centres such as Melbourne.

There are now books available such as the *Indij Readers* that reflect the lives of Indigenous children as they live today, yet highlight the values that Indigenous people see as important. I describe these books as narratives of the ordinary, as children visit the zoo for example, but demonstrate that colonisation has not erased Aboriginality in urban areas.

For example, in the story of *What I wanna be* by Prior, C., McIntosh, K., Murray, P., Hughes, S., and McKenzie, P. (2007) the focus is on young Indigenous children's ambitions for the future. On a deep reading the relationship between Indigenous culture and these ambitions emerge. These are: respect for the Elders, the place of the extended family, using Koorie English, being part of a collective for the common good, engaging with symbols of Aboriginality such as the flag, the place of women and girls, the role of young Indigenous girls and boys as activists and the rights of the Indigenous child.

4. An Indigenous inclusive program that is ongoing, not just for NAIDOC week but throughout the year

Anne, a parent who travelled out of her area to take her child to kindergarten, explained:

I choose this kindergarten because her Koorie programming was something that was part of the everyday program it wasn't something that was just for Aboriginal week, his culture is definitely respected there.

- (Interview with Anne, 2003, p.96)

This programming is reflected in the centre philosophy for example:

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 our kindergarten program this is displayed through photos, art, stories, natural materials, activities, songs, games, cooking and dancing.

- (Interview with Maryla, 2006, p.126)

For Indigenous Inclusion to be authentic it needs to move beyond token gestures around themes such as Aboriginal week then be ignored for the rest of the year. Having a special emphasis during NAIDOC week or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Children's day of course is very appropriate.

5. A program that encourages all children to value Indigenous culture and challenges stereotypes

Anita, a KECFO, stressed:

An Indigenous aspect to the program is important for services that have Indigenous children but for services that have non Indigenous children to educate all of Australia that the thing that makes multi culturalism different from any were else in the world is Aboriginal people, and for pre schoolers to start to value this... and at the preschool level will have the chance to change non Indigenous children's views at that early age about Indigenous people.

- (Interview with Anita, 2003, p.12)

Even very young children can hold biased ideas around Aboriginality and exclude Indigenous children from their play. In my own study I found that dark skinned Indigenous children were sometimes rejected by their peers at preschool and wished they had lighter skin.

As Angel, a parent, reports:

I know another non-Aboriginal mother who has an Aboriginal child in preschool and the daughter says to her "I don't want to be black I want to be like you mummy"

- (Interview with Angel, 2003, p.64)

Celine reported a conversation she had had with her 3 year old son whose skin is fairer than hers:

My son says 'you've got to get brown like me; I say I am brown I'm black' No mum you're black, you've got to get brown like me.

- (Interview with Celine, 2003, p.3)

In both of these examples you can see how whiteness is desired and blackness is desired as children judge themselves and their families. I also found that light skinned Indigenous children could be challenged by being denied their identity by non-Indigenous children. As David, a parent, comments:

If one of the kids say they're Aboriginal and they (non-Aboriginal children) say 'You can't be you're not black' and that sort of thing. Or they might go home and say something to their parents and come back and say 'Mum says you're not (Aboriginal)'

- (Interview with David, 2004, p.87)

The early years of education and care are vital in challenging such stereotypes and biased behaviour by building new knowledge with children as Maryla, a kindergarten teacher, states:

Sometimes there has been a remark from the non-Indigenous children that they (Indigenous people) live in the desert where it's really hot and they don't wear clothes and they paint their bodies and those sorts of things or Aboriginal people are black... Hopefully we are able with the resources that we use and the way we discuss things and present things to show that's not the case...

- (Interview with Maryla, 2006, p.126)

6. Early childhood professionals that learn about the history of Indigenous people and its impact on families today

Anne, a parent, explained:

Many non-Indigenous people if they don't know about past polices, the stolen generations and those sorts of things that really affect our community, then they don't have a great understanding of how parenting skills may not be passed on.

- (Interview with Anne, 2003, p.16)

The removal of children from their families and communities also had a devastating effect on the teaching of Indigenous culture as the teaching generation was separated from the learning generation.

When inviting Indigenous parents to contribute to your program don't assume for example that they can share a Dreaming story from their culture with the children. If they would like to contribute to the program, ask them how they would like to do this.

Although the 10 non-Indigenous early childhood professionals interviewed for this study had little or no education around Indigenous inclusion as pre service teachers, they actively sought to educate themselves about Victorian Indigenous culture.

They spoke about:

- Talking to Indigenous families and the local (KESO)
- Attending cross cultural workshops
- Attending NAIDOC week celebrations
- Visiting the Koorie section at the museum where you can talk to Indigenous people and hear the voices of the Elders
- Accessing websites such as Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) who have numerous publications, research and resources around Indigenous early childhood education and care.

Jack, a non-Indigenous person working in an Indigenous children's service, especially highlights the voices of the elders in his education:

I think it's the best way of getting the message across that Aboriginal culture is a living being and its continued to grow and transform and adapt to the context of a colonized country and that it has connections back to pre-colonial times and the best way for people to understand that is to meet and talk to the Elders.

- (Interview with Jack, 2004, p.124)

Although it's not always easy to meet and talk to local Elders, reading the oral histories of our local Elders is a personal and culturally appropriate way of learning about Victorian Indigenous history and culture. For example, the late Aunty Iris Lovett Gardiner's autobiography *The Lady of the Lake* is very accessible.

Although I only interviewed four Indigenous Elders, all the Indigenous participants in the study felt the Elders voices and stories were important in the education of Indigenous children. Celine, an Indigenous early childhood professional, put it this way:

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)

More specifically, Indigenous Elders want Indigenous children to learn:

- About their clan group and their totem
- About their traditional language
- About their traditional land
- About their natural world

The Inclusion of the voices of Indigenous Elders in the program is a central pedagogical practice in constructing authentic local Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum.

Although the Elders themselves may be unable to be directly involved in the centre younger Indigenous people can tell their stories or tell their own stories that have been inspired by the Elders knowledge and experience.

An example of such a story which addresses those areas of knowledge that the Elders see as important is *Bartja and Mayila* (Atkinson and Sax, 2013). These are:

- Learning Aboriginal language
- Decision making as a community process
- Consulting with the Elders
- The connection between nature and the spiritual realm
- Using materials from the environment to create arts and crafts
- Learning about animals' food sources
- Indigenous pedagogy being still, observing, listening and waiting
- The intergenerational skill of story telling

As this knowledge is usually learnt within the Indigenous child's family or Indigenous specific early childhood centres such as the MACS, non-Indigenous early childhood professionals should consult with Indigenous families and communities around inclusion.

7. Good communications with Indigenous families and the local Indigenous community were seen as foundational for inclusive practice by the Indigenous early childhood community, as they build knowledge and authentic local Indigenous perspectives through partnerships.

As Anita, a KECFO, described:

Teachers need to talk to families about what culture means to them and keeping that communication open... and purchasing those resources that the family feels are appropriate or getting in community people the family feels are appropriate (in) supporting that child's and family's cultural identity in the service.

- (Interview with Anita, 2003, p.13)

Talking to Indigenous families about 'what culture means to them' acknowledges that Aboriginality is marked not only by commonality but diversity and takes on different expressions from area to area and from family to family. Some families may be articulate and confident in forming partnerships in the early childhood service, others for a variety of reasons may be less so, as Molly explains:

Some parents may not be approaching the preschool teacher to have a program to cater for their child as they may not know themselves. They may be Indigenous people who have not grown up in that community they may be fostered or adopted.

- (Interview with Molly, 2003, p.17)

Some families may be learning about their Aboriginality themselves. Even those people who have grown up in their communities may not have access to resources to share such as traditional stories due to dispossession.

As Maryla, a non-Indigenous preschool teacher, reflects:

I think one of the things I presumed and I don't know why I presumed it was that Aboriginal people would know stories and those sort of things. And often they don't and that just reinforces displacement and you need to think why those stories haven't been handed down.

- (Interview with Maryla, 2003, p.63)

And for others it may be difficult to explain something that is part of your everyday life and taken for granted. As Angel, a parent, explains:

When you are part of a Koorie family you don't explicitly teach Koorie culture, it's just around them and part of them.

- (Interview with Angel, 2003, p.63)

As families shouldn't be the only source of information around Indigenous inclusion, early childhood practitioners should draw on their wider Indigenous community for guidance and support.

Valuing Indigenous culture within the early childhood sector and more broadly means recognising the expectations of Indigenous parents intersects with the rights of Indigenous parents, their children and communities to:

- Culturally appropriate and empowering early childhood education and care for their children. In spite of dispossession, we all have a vision for our children built on our cultural strengths.
- Exercise decision making in the planning and implementation of Indigenous perspectives in early childhood services.
- Expect that racism and bias will be challenged in the early childhood curriculum/program.
- Expect that the early childhood education sector will be a partner in dealing with the effects of colonisation and dispossession.

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