

## MEMBERS' BRIEFING PAPER 10.3 2011

### Reflecting on National Aboriginal and Islanders Day 2011

Dr Sue Atkinson Lopez, Honorary Research Fellow, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne

National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day (NAICD) was celebrated on August the 4<sup>th</sup> across Australia. The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) which is the national non-government peak body representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, has organised this event since 1988. This year's theme 'From Small to Big: Growing Stronger Every Day' according to Frank Hytten SNAICC's Chief Executive Officer speaks to the understanding that:

Children who grow up strong in culture will, research shows, be more likely to be better functioning as adults, thus enhancing communities and becoming parents and adults who then raise children in safe and culturally positive ways, as well as become role models and provide leadership in their own and the 'mainstream' community. In this way, SNAICC wants to encourage the idea that given the solid supports, especially in relation to their own cultural identity, children will grow stronger every day, as they grow from small to big (Hytten, F., personal communication, September 23, 2011).

For non Indigenous early childhood practitioners NAICD is a good time to reflect on how Indigenous cultural identity is represented within their programs. Narratives of Aboriginality that are presented in early childhood programs are often underpinned by colonial understandings of Aboriginality which position Indigenous people around dualisms such as assimilated/traditional and black/white. As Annette Sax an Indigenous Early Childhood consultant relates:

I went to a non Indigenous centre that had booked me for storytelling and face painting over two days, which fell on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Children's day. I told the story of 'The Possum Hunt' but the teacher was unhappy because it wasn't traditional. They wanted traditional dancers and a didgeridoo player (Sax, A., personal communication, September 6, 2011).

Aunty Iris' story of the 'Possum Hunt' (Lovett cited in Atkinson, Lovett, & Elkner, 1991, pp.11-14) is 'traditional' in that it is a story of hunting and gathering, and is set in the Victorian bush of the 1940s but it could just as easily be set in 2011. In its

understated way the 'Possum Hunt' highlights the tenacity of Victorian Aboriginal culture in that it represents as alive a set of ancient skills and knowledges such as tracking as practiced by Aunty Iris and her brother Charlie. But Aunty Iris' story meets with resistance when colonial understandings of Aboriginality persist when early childhood practitioners reject an Indigenous standpoint which does not conform with an 'authentic' Aboriginality as they know it.

Reconceptualising Aboriginality within a contemporary multiplicity and a cultural continuity within the lived reality of urban spaces is central in respecting and supporting Indigenous children's identity. Within such a reconception non Indigenous children are challenged to reconceive their own concepts of Aboriginality which are emerging in the early years of education and care. As Kylie Smith Co-director of Swanston Street Children's Centre describes:

I had been talking with children in Spider Room about their understandings of Aboriginal people and their culture. For many children their discussions involved Aboriginal people as living in the past and their culture in traditional, historic and in some cases 'exotic' ways. There were sentences that started with "A long time and go..." or "In the old days...". For some of the children they talked about Aboriginal people as eating kangaroo as a 'primitive' activity and again in the past. I reflected on the resources that the centre has and the discussions that I engage with children to challenge these 'colonial' understandings of Aboriginal people. I wanted to consider how I could provide contemporary understandings of Aboriginal people. In my search I found a children's picture book called 'Shake a leg' written by Boori Monty Pryor & Jan Ormerod. This book tells a story about some young children who go to a pizza shop in Darwin where they meet an Aboriginal man who works at the shop making pizza. In the story the reader is introduced to the person's family within a contemporary context. The man tells stories about his life and his multiple identities as an Aboriginal person. He works in a pizza shop, he is part of a family with brothers and

sisters, and he is a part of a dance group. When I first read the story with the children they all were surprised that the person worked in a pizza shop and that he had a sister who was a nurse. The book opened up spaces for me to talk about contemporary understandings of Aboriginal people and challenge 'colonial' ideas that 'other' Aboriginal people (Smith, K., personal communication, September 9, 2011).

The children at Yappera Children's Service, a multifunctional Aboriginal children's service celebrated NAICD in a way that reflects how staff and children construct their subjectivities as Indigenous people. A subjectivity that is informed by multiplicity as well as the uniformity that informs the dynamic of Indigenous culture.

Stacey Brown the Chief Executive Officer at Yappera described it this way:

We had a very busy day and the children had lots of fun. Yappera hosted a theme pyjama day for all the children at Yappera. The staff also dressed in PJs. Hey de Ho music visited to perform a concert for the children in the morning. We also had an animal farm visit in the afternoon. Uncle Robert Bamblett did some traditional dance activities with the children. The staff, children and families enjoyed pizza, pasta and salad for lunch and throughout the day enjoyed other activities including boomerang painting. As you can imagine, all the children were very tired in the afternoon when their parents/caregivers arrived to collect them after such a busy day (Brown, S., personal communication, September 12, 2011).

Amongst the PJs, pizza and pasta of multicultural Anglo Australia lay the continuities with Indigenous tradition such as the visit from the Elder bringing ancient narratives to life through dance. In this lived experience of postcolonial Aboriginality the Indigenous child's culture and identity is nurtured.

Decolonizing 'mainstream' early childhood programs is a process of reflecting on and critiquing colonial concepts of Aboriginality. Through such critiques the inclusion of more authentic Indigenous perspectives in the program should evolve, addressing the right of Aboriginal children to an early childhood experience that strengthens their culture and identity.

## References

Atkinson, S., Lovett, I., & Elkner, B. (1991). *Story Music and Movement: Aboriginal Child Care Support Materials*. Fitzroy: Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency.

Pryor, B. M., & Ormerod, J. (2010). *Shake a leg*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.

## Further Information

<http://www.snaicc.asn.au/>

-----  
**© Equity and Childhood Program, September 2011.** *The Equity and Childhood Program is happy for any or all of this paper to be distributed for information and study purposes, provided that any such distribution acknowledges that the material originated in the Equity and Childhood Program, Youth Research Centre.*