

Reconciliation Seminar 3: Closing the Gap

Transcript from the Reconciliation Series 1 2022

• 0:00 – 0:37

Hi welcome to the workshop seminar on close the gap. Early childhood education. Before I do start, I just want to acknowledge traditional land as the land that I'm currently meeting on. I'm here on the land of the Wurundjeri people, I'm in Kew. I pay respect to the elders past, present, and emerging. And I'd like to extend that to lands that you are currently on at the moment and pay respect to elders past and present. I'd also like to take that a step further and acknowledge the traditional owners, the lands where you grew up that might have been somewhere completely different, maybe not even Australia. I'd like to acknowledge them and they, and they shape who you became, who you are today.

• 0:38 – 1:07

In my own language, we actually say Yama, which means welcome, and you've come with a purpose today. My name's AJ, AJ Williams. My background's Wiradjari and Wotjobaluk. So, my family come from Dimboola, Horsham, Dubbo and the Wellington area of New South Wales. I've been involved with AGECS for the last three years, helping them design their RAP and running a number of projects including the seminar series that this one is part of.

• 1:09 – 1:49

So today I'm just talking a bit about, the National Close the Gap Day and what it is and what it's about and what the gaps actually are, that we should be considering. And some strategies or some techniques or tips, things about how you can actually help close the gap. So, what exactly is close the gap day and when is it held? Well, national Close the gap day is observed on the third Thursday of March every year. This year it falls on the 17th of March and it advocates for health equity, Australia's indigenous people and educating the public about the health issues and barriers to wellbeing faced by indigenous people.

• 1:50 – 2:13

Since 2007, the National Closed the Gap Day brings together Australians from all over the country to advocate for health equity and to take meaningful action to create better and more equitable conditions for indigenous people. The campaign encourages people and organisations to plan events that draw attention to the health issues of indigenous

Australians and to support legislation and programs for the improvement of those conditions.

• 2:17 - 2:47

But what are the actual gaps? What are we talking about? What are the gaps that Aboriginal people face? Well, the Closing the Gap report, which came out in 2020, actually looks at, 16, key targets. And I'm not going to read the targets, word by word cause you can actually look at close the gap report yourself, but you can see that it's around close the gap in life expectancy. It's about baby and healthy birth weights. It's about early childhood education.

• 2:48 - 3:15

It's about getting children developmentally on track. It's about attaining year 12 equivalents. It's about completing tertiary qualifications. It's about employment in education and training. It's about employment. It's about over overcrowded housing. It's about incarceration of adults. It's about young people in detention. It's about reducing the children in out of home care. It's about the reduction in violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Women and children.

• 3:16 - 3:47

It's about significantly reducing suicide in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It's about land rights and it's also about the languages spoken. So, these are the 16 new close the gap targets between 2008 and 2020 targets were set by the Australian government they were not achieved. In fact, no target was achieved.

• 3:47 - 4:09

The two that were on track were starting to get the kids in year 12 and the immunisation of young kids. But all the other gaps had not been met. And these gaps were actually written in co-design with Aboriginal communities in order to actually narrow down exactly what it is that we are now looking at.

• 4:11 - 4:45

The two major ones that come from here are around early childhood education and around early children, is to increase the proportion of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in early childhood education to 95% by 2025, and to increase Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all the five domains that is in physical health, wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and communication and general knowledge, in line with the Australian Early Development Census.

• 4:46 – 5:23 And they wanted to get that to 55% by two 2031. So, there the two gaps that we're really looking at in terms of early childhood education but take into account that we need all the gaps to reduce, or we need all the gaps kind of heal in order to ensure healthy children and healthy adults into the future. So, what are some barriers that actually prevent, indigenous children from participating in early childhood education?

• 5:24 – 5:58

And the major ones are things like, lack of confidence in the value of early childhood education. Does the community understand the education system and what early childhood develop childhood centres are trying to achieve in terms of that development to meet the five domains, it's about limited awareness of what services are available out there, lack of local services, the out-of-pocket costs or the perceived out of pocket costs that Aboriginal families have to manage.

• 5:58 – 6:32

Money is often an issue for Aboriginal families, especially with the extended family. So even the cost of childcare comes to that. Administrative complexities, the fear of racism, the lack of transport to get there, poor child health and also poor health in families and mental health. So, there's some of the barriers that, , have been documented in research in early childhood development and aboriginal working with aboriginal kids as some of the major barriers that are impact.

• 6:33 – 7:04

But what does our current 2020 statistics actually show us in relation to aboriginal health and wellbeing? Well, the first thing that we might need to look at is a bit about the age or age of people. I'm not sure if you are aware of this, but 54% of the indigenous population is under the age of 25. Yep. 54% of the population's under 25. So, in this age group here, this makes up 54% of the indigenous population.

• 7:05 – 7:53

34% is actually under the age of 15. As you can see from this data that aboriginal kids actually make up from zero to four, make up 11.3% of the total indigenous population, but only makes up 6.1% of the non-indigenous population. And at five to 14, it's 27% of the indigenous population compared to 12% of the non-indigenous population, which is showing you that we've got very high rates of young aboriginal mob that are actually in that particular age bracket, especially around, the zero-to-14-year level, and especially in early childhood education at the zero to 4/5 age range.

- 7:54 – 8:30

We've also got that nearly 80% of the indigenous populations under the age of 44. And if you're looking at the data after that, from 45 to 64, indigenous people make up 17% of their population. But non-indigenous people make up 25% of their population near a quarter. And at 65 and above that, aboriginal people make up 4.8% of their population. But non-indigenous people make up 16 point, nearly 16% of population. This data also shows you that aboriginal people are dying at great levels at 45 and above.

- 8:32 – 9:08

So, when you look at the population again to think about that in zero to 24 age range, which is under the 25 population, there's often also two generations of people. What does AJ mean by that? It's often that Aboriginal women will have their first kid before they turn 23. So, the national statistical data shows that the majority of Aboriginal majority of women had their first kid before the age of, you know, 28, if not a little bit later in some places, but for aboriginal people, they're still having kids earlier.

- 9:09 – 9:44

So, in that zero to 25 age range, your centre or your service might actually be dealing with a young mum and a young dad and including the child themselves. So yeah, there's those two generations that actually sit in that 54% age range. So, what else do we know? Well, we know what the, in the current indigenous children's data, we know that one out of 10 indigenous people speak their own indigenous language at home.

- 9:45 – 10:27

We know that housing that's 38% of families own their own house compared to 50% of s people. We know that aboriginal babies continue to be born more than twice as likely to be of lower birth weight compared to all of Western Australian foreign babies. That's when the research was done used in Western Australia, but that's nationally as well that 35% of indigenous children were deemed to be developmentally on track compared to 57 of non-indigenous people. So, you can see that big difference between that, that aboriginal women are significantly more likely to smoke during pregnancy and the non-Aboriginal women that young aboriginal young people are twice as like the suffer ear diseases and hearing problems.

- 10:28 – 10:42

I mentioned the teen fertility rate, the Aboriginal women age between 15 to 19 has increased in the last decade. We know the median age of Aboriginal women who give birth is 24 more than five years lower than any other mothers.

• 10:43 - 11:17

We've got hospital rates that aboriginal children consider be more likely to be hospitalized for injuries than non-indigenous kids, that aboriginal kids are 10 times more likely to experience interpersonal violence than the non-indigenous counterparts. That indigenous children age zero to 12, almost seven times more likely to be a subject of a sensation notification for child protection. Normally for abuse and neglect that aboriginal kids are eight times more likely to be in child protection and 15 times more likely to be in juvenile justice settings.

• 11:18 - 11:37

And between the ages of 10 to 14, aboriginal kids are 36 times more likely to be in detention than non-indigenous kids. That's not real proud data that you share with you. It is trying to paint a picture of exactly the gaps that we are trying to break.

• 11:39 - 12:16

Now, we've also got parent health and grandparent health that is still huge barriers for the care of children and the participation of children in early childhood education. So, what do we know about health conditions in general? Will we know that 15% of all indigenous deaths are caused by heart disease and one out five aboriginal people at the age of 17 will have an indicator of a heart disease? We know that dementia rates are quite high. About one out of 10 Aboriginal people aged 25 and above will actually have a diagnosis of diagnosis of dementia.

• 12:16 - 12:35

We know diabetes is four times more common, the second leading cause of death. The dental and oral health report talks about more cavities, two loss and periodontal diseases. Cancer rates 45% more deaths, kidney diseases, eight times more hospitalization rates, and one out five at the age of 18.

• 12:36 - 13:19

Notice under 18, we've got one out of five that have got a heart condition indicator and one out of five actually have a kidney disease indicator. We know that sexually transmitted diseases still remain high gonorrhoea, syphilis, HIV. We know that asthma will affect about 50% of Aboriginal people will be diagnosed before the age of 15 and 30% will have a long-term respiratory condition for the age of 28. We know that about 85% of people that are harder hearing by the age of 50 by the age of 50, 40% of Aboriginal and Torres Islander people, plus 85% of people are already hardly hearing by the age of 50.

• 13:21 – 13:34

It's the same one. Mental health that 2.5 out of five currently have a diagnosis of a mental illness. Normally anxiety and depression and two out of five are walking around in high psychological distress. Most of the time.

• 13:36 – 14:07

The median age of indigenous person in Australia is 23 years of age. And as you can see that suicide is the leading cause of indigenous adolescent death. But also, the rates triple for non-indigenous counterparts for non-indigenous people compared to the non-indigenous counterparts at the 15 to 24 and 24 to 34 age range and double the rate at 35 to 44 age range. Now, beyond blue has said if you've got any one of those chronic conditions, you're prone to anxiety and depression.

• 14:07 – 14:30

You live in a household with anybody with any of these conditions. Your prone to anxiety and depression. If you're a carer or in a caring role, your prone to anxiety and depression. And, if you are in this age group here and you are going to community and family funerals of people in this age group in here, your prone to anxiety and depression.

• 14:32 – 15:13

So, all these health conditions, both of, young people and of adults can actually be a barrier for participation. When we talk about close the gap, right? Both sides of parliament have actually said has been bipartisan agreement over the next few decades. We are trying to help close these gaps and notice that I said over the next few decades, because that's what it's about. Close the gap is not about actually trying to fix things as what was tried to be done between 2008 and 2020 where these were the objectives and this is what was, this is what was supposed to be already closed.

• 15:14 – 15:41

What they're actually saying now is these gaps are much deeper, much trauma involved in them, and it's going to take more, sometimes more than one generation in order to help close those gaps. So, close the gap now is really about making sure that this age group here, the zero- to 16-year-olds and even the 15, 24 year olds, can actually get into the 65 plus age bracket.

• 15:42 – 16:29

Because as you can see at the moment in this bracket, we only want to, we only make up 4.8% of our population. We want to have nearly 54% of our population at the age of 65 and above in the next 30 to 40 years. And that's what close the gap is really about now. It's

about making sure that those areas of health, education, employment, early childhood, juvenile justice settings, child protection, that we have decreases in the amount of, either people dying younger, increasing birth weights of making sure that kids are developmentally on track so that they are ready for school, that they do finish year 12, that they can get jobs or go to university afterwards.

• 16:30 – 16:37

And it's going to take more than one generation might take the next, as I said, 20 to 30 to 40 years.

• 16:44 – 17:14

So how does this relate to early childhood education? Well, the National Quality Standards in Early Childhood Education and Care, mandates the values of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. And there are a couple of areas that you're actually looking at and even though it may not mention specifically in that area or that descriptor being Aboriginal, it is about making sure that we are child-centered.

• 17:14 – 18:00

That there is intentional teaching that is powerful and meaningful and purposeful. It's about making sure that child directed learning does occur. It's about the health and wellbeing and understanding the health issues of young Aboriginal kids and their families. It's about encouraging those healthy lifestyles. It's about ensuring safety. It's about understanding family dynamics. It's about the, staffing arrangements in terms of looking at employing more Aboriginal people as staff members so that aboriginal people, aboriginal kids can see the black faces within the, in the organisations in the childcare services

• 18:01 – 18:43

It's about looking at the positive interactions. So actually, having cultural awareness training to understand how to actually engage with aboriginal young people and their families. Because some of the models that we're actually taught don't actually reflect when you're actually working with the kids and their family members. And so, you've got the, as I said, the National Quality Standards, but you've also got the Code of Ethics for Early Childhood Australia's code of ethics, which acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and the ways of being caring for children as informed by the principles in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of indigenous young people as well.

• 18:44 – 18:48

So, we've also got some code of ethics and a Declaration of Rights.

• 18:50 - 19:34

Another document to have a look at is the one through VAEAI and VAEAI will be talking in one of the other seminars that we'll be doing in the future. But it's looking at the walking together, which is, is about welcoming Aboriginal Torres families and children to your service. It's about increasing educated family and children's knowledge and understanding Aboriginal trust and people histories, cultures, perspectives, and contemporary context. And it's about contributing to reconciliation and counting racism, discrimination in all areas from everything from access to participation to staffing and employment, to professional development, and to assisting the exit of an Aboriginal family from your service.

• 19:38 - 20:17

So, what can I do to support close the gap in my early childhood service? And that's kind of an interesting little topic to think about. But one thing that you should do, and the staff should do is kind of all have a good understanding about where you actually come from. Now, even though you might not be Aboriginal, it is about identifying exactly where you were born and acknowledging who the traditional owners were. And if you haven't weren't born in Australia and you're born overseas, you might want to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land that you're currently living on, or if you live in different parts of Australia before, whose land has it been that we have been living on.

• 20:19 - 20:25

And you can even extend that further back sometimes where, you know, where were your parents born and who were nutritional owners and at the time.

• 20:27 - 21:01

So, it is about acknowledging the history and getting kids and families to identify where they were born and grew up as well. It's also about introducing, you know, traditional indigenous games into practices. Now, I quite like this particular book it's called, Yulunga which is traditional indigenous games. And it actually has a whole heap of different games that you can play that give you instructions about what you can do.

• 21:01 - 21:29

And they've kind of modified it a little bit for 2020 to make sure that I'm pretty sure they didn't have skill bottles like that, but they might have looked at playing it different ways. But they also provide a background of exactly where these games come from. Remember that you, if you're not indigenous, you cannot teach indigenous culture, but you can

provide a perspective and you can provide a little background about where some of these games were actually initiated and, and started.

- 21:31 - 22:03

It's about making sure that your service is actually quite representative of actually having indigenous toys, indigenous books, indigenous play tools, and not just for the Aboriginal kids, but for all kids. Cause I think it's a really great way of learning. So, there's some dolls there. It's about block playing and thinking about different ways of how you can incorporate the culture into particular practice.

- 22:04 - 22:34

And it doesn't necessarily, as I'm saying, playing with blocks. It's also about let's show different ways of life that aboriginal people experience. And they can do that by inviting elders in having conversations with people. It's about doing, for example, I just went outside and got all the kids to pick up some sticks and twigs from inside, from outside.

- 22:34 - 23:00

I got them to bring it in. I got red cellophane paper and put within the, in the twigs to make it look like fire. And we actually sat around the fire and read a indigenous story. So, I was actually kind of playing with them and showing them this is exactly what would happen when Aboriginal people would come together from different communities to come around the fire and have those conversations.

- 23:03 - 23:41

You might also, things you might want to do is run a parent video night. And I'll just show 'em, grab two videos there. The Australian Dream and the Sapphires, but you can choose whichever aboriginal video that you want. And it might be a good way of introducing indigenous culture into not just with the kids at school, but with the parent group as well and getting them on board. It might be to make sure that your, that all your acknowledgement plaques are up to date. That the staff know, what the aboriginal flag means, what the Torres Strait Islander flag means.

- 23:41 - 23:53

Cause you don't want tokenism either. And what I mean by tokenism is that if you're going to put the flags up even on a sign, make sure all the staff actually know what they mean. Cause you put them up to make me feel culturally safe.

- 23:54 - 24:36

How would I feel if I found out that three quarters of staff didn't know what they meant? So, it's about actually having the very, not making some of the symbols tokenistic. It might be that you want to, start collecting indigenous books, for example. And there's many out there. It's really important to collect these from indigenous businesses that actually might sell some of these stuff. And always check that the indigenous story has a bit of a brief about who, whose story does it belong to, because not all, aboriginal stories have actually been told by an Aboriginal perspective.

• 24:38 – 24:59

It's also about making sure the staff are up to date with their information. So, there's a couple of books there that I would recommend telling the Truth about Aboriginal History by Brian Atwood. Marcia Lincoln's, welcome to Country, Kate Price's, Aboriginal Torres Islander Education. And these are books for staff and sometimes books for parents as well.

• 25:01 – 25:37

So, there's some things that you can do, but it's about creating a, celebrating the day, but also creating something that's meaningful to you and your service. People often ask, well, AJ what do you do to help close the gap? And so, I do quite, a number of different things. I run some mentoring programs in schools, where I take kids to play some indigenous games, which is what we did in that video day. We train them in, team Mental Health and Deadly Thinking program. We do artwork, we went on an excursion to Bunjilaka, at the museum.

• 25:39 – 25:59

We also do cultural awareness training with some of the Aboriginal students, because some of the students don't know history that well and we were participating down there in the wall painting and, community indigenous flavor to a school when they're doing their renovations.

• 26:01 – 26:39

So I do, mentoring them in about three schools. It's about, I also do work in remote communities, so I don't just spend my time in the city. I will say my remote community work has been down a little bit because there's a virus going around called Covid that you may not have heard of and that's prevented me from actually getting out. But as you can see, I actually do some really remote work. We actually fly in some of the communities, some there for a week or two, delivering, mental health training and undertaking research for a number of organisations I'm doing research with.

- 26:40 – 26:59

Yep. So, getting to know the remote communities. I do a lot of cultural awareness in schools within early childhood services within, public and private sectors. And there's me doing a bit of a smoking ceremony with Aunty Di her down there.

- 26:59 – 27:35

There's now a panel talking. I also do mental health first aid workshops around aboriginal young people and mental health in youth as well. So, there's some training photos. And the other thing that I've been doing is working on my YouTube channel. And the YouTube channel is a place where aboriginal stories are being told by Aboriginal people, talking about how to work with Aboriginal people or the sharing of, Aboriginal experiences. during lockdown of 2020.

- 27:36 – 28:06

During lockdown of 2020 I lost most of my work being a consultant, so I decided to put the YouTube channel together with the support of three schools, Scott's College Camberwell Grammar and Woodley School, where we interviewed, the young people to, to hear their stories, to hear what their views are on many, many indigenous issues. And as you can see, they're in playlists. So, the major playlists I would recommend checking out is that the elder stories are on playlist one.

- 28:07 – 28:43

Playlist three is quick fact faults, which have the young Aboriginal boys at Scotts College and Camberwell Grammar, breaking down stereotypes and explaining different factual things to you. Playlist nine is about Willy School's indigenous mentoring program. And the kids we interviewed, for half an hour, times two. So, two different sessions are they interviewed half an hour and we took their best answers from both, put them together, play List 10 was about Scott's college's mentoring program. And Campbell College at number 11, and these boys were actually interviewed over a two-year period.

- 28:43 – 29:07

And then we went into lockdown after 18 months. So, what we decided to do is record often a big video with them and then we use their responses over the last two years to intersect into their story. So, all up, we've got, we've got about 147 videos up there from Aboriginal people talking about Aboriginal issues.

- 29:08 – 29:42

Playlist five and playlist four and five playlists four are aboriginal workers that work in the field, not predominantly in childcare, but work with aboriginal people in health and they

share some tips about working with Aboriginal people. So, it's worth looking at series four and series five, , is about 10, I think it's about 14 videos up there now of non-indigenous allies who share their experiences about working with Aboriginal people. And the YouTube channel actually got highly commended at the Heart Awards, which is right there.

• 29:42 – 30:19

They're the other thing that I do is a lot of research. So, I've been doing research, with the Butterfly Foundation and the National Eating Disorder collaboration, looking at, body image and eating disorders within Aboriginal communities. Been involved in the review of the Quit aboriginal quit line. I'm doing, other research now with looking at with the Cube group doing research around aboriginal education programs designed by background on their learning platform.

• 30:20 – 31:01

So, I do a lot of research as well. And, I have won a couple of awards for the work that I've been doing. Not that I do it for the awards and the recognition, but I do it because I actually really love what I do. But, 2016 I got the, fellowship of Indigenous Leadership, gave me the Emerging Leader Award. 2019 I got the community award for NAIDOC the Mornington Peninsula area. I was the individual distinction finalist in the HESTA Awards last year and late last year in November, I won the 2021, social work with the year award.

• 31:02 – 31:20

So, the recognition of what I do is being recognised by my peer's cause all these were peer awards. So that's what I do in terms of close the gap. Remember close the gap now is everybody's responsibility.

• 31:20 – 31:54

Close The gap is about making sure that our young mob actually get to become older. So, if you've got a young student, a young student in your class, help guide support, make sure they get on developmental on track because that early stage will be able to shape the rest of their life. We also know that if you've got any aboriginal workers that are working in your early childhood services, think about them as well.

• 31:54 – 32:17

Often, they are, this is, this is still the first generation of aboriginal kids that often get into year 12, which means it's still, the first generation of aboriginal young people that are going to university and going to TAFE to get some qualifications. So as much support as possible in helping them achieve those goals. Because you never know you can start to be closing some of the gaps within families.

• 32:19 - 32:55

Now I'm just going to leave the presentation right now and say thank you for hanging with me. This was really about just starting you to think about close the gap and what you and your service might be able to do. In my language, we often don't say goodbye. We actually often say, Madang Uway, which means I will see you again soon and I will see you again soon because we're running a number of series throughout the year with AJ. And we'll catch you when we do so on behalf of AGECS and you're being the consultancy I say thank you.