



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in early childhood education and care

The *National Quality Standard* (NQS) makes it essential for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services and educators to understand, and help children learn about, the history, culture and contemporary lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This is because the guiding principles that support the NQS state—simply, but powerfully—that ‘Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are valued’.

As with all components of the NQS, the ways in which ECEC services value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures will depend on their particular circumstances, and on their level of knowledge. In this area of the NQS, educators’ prior experience in the sector might not have provided them with the knowledge required to create programs and experiences about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. In fact, one of the most frequently asked questions in the interactive forums run by the NQS Professional Learning Program is: ‘How do I acknowledge and incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in my program?’

In this series, we talk to two educators—one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous—about why valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures matters so much and about how ECEC services might go about embedding respect for these cultures in their programs.

Case study No.1

Adam Duncan, Preschool Teacher

Wiradjuri Preschool and Child Care Centre, University of Canberra, ACT

Located in the middle of campus at the University of Canberra, the Wiradjuri Preschool and Child Care Centre has been proudly wearing its name—taken from one of Australia’s largest Aboriginal language groups—for nearly 21 years. Today, Aboriginal educator Adam Duncan is a preschool teacher at the centre, working with three- to six-year-olds in an environment where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have become deeply embedded in the program.

Adam says that the decision to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures as one of the guiding principles of the NQS was ‘really significant.’ ‘I found it really inspiring that the people involved in the development of the Framework felt it necessary and important to include it,’ Adam says. ‘It’s really good to see it emphasised in a way that will, hopefully, encourage other educators to step up and embrace it in their programming.’

At the Wiradjuri Centre, the process of ‘valuing’ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures has become closely woven into everyday practices and learning experiences. ‘We acknowledge Country with the children every day,’ Adam explains, ‘but in a way that’s very different to the way you often see it done within institutions across Australia. Our focus is very much on the history that children have had on this country, and relating the history of the land to the experiences of children.’ The acknowledgement of Country is often led by a non-Indigenous educator at the centre, which spreads the work around and ensures that Adam is not automatically assigned ‘cultural tasks’ because of his Aboriginality.

The centre also hosts regular smoking ceremonies, performed by an Elder based on campus, and presented ‘in a way that speaks to children.’ ‘By no means is it a watering down of content,’ says Adam, ‘it’s simply presenting it in a way that kids really seem to latch on to. And that’s a focus on taking away bad dreams, because the smoking ceremony is a cleansing ceremony.’



Adam has also been developing stories in the Dreaming tradition, ‘exploring with the children the idea that Dreaming and Dreaming stories aren’t static narratives that are read from books.’ He says the children don’t always accept that oral storytelling involves freely-flowing and changing narrative. ‘There have been some quite humorous moments where I’ve been telling a story and the kids say, ‘No, that’s not how it goes! You’re telling it wrong!’ And I have to stop and explain that, however the story goes at the time I’m telling it, is the way it can go—it doesn’t have to be the same every time!’

Adam describes these experiences as a way of making Aboriginal culture modern and immediate, 'a really interesting way to kind of pull apart the concept that Aboriginal culture is something to be viewed as historical.'

For non-Indigenous educators seeking to incorporate knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures into their curriculum, Adam says there's one essential step: inform yourself first. 'A big part of it is actually engaging with the culture, as adults, as educators,' he says. 'The idea that we can get a book, or we can have someone to come in and tell us how to do it, without having any personal connection or understanding of the culture, is a very shallow way of approaching it.'

Adam is a strong proponent of educators understanding—and using—contemporary and dynamic social, political and cultural events as a basis for their teaching. One example is a program that educators regularly run at the Wiradjuri Centre, about the story of Vincent Lingiari and the Wave Hill walkout, utilising the songs of Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody. 'It's provided us with an inlet into the exploration of racial inequality and social and political policies of the past,' Adam explains. 'It has opened up discussions with children immensely around why they felt things were the way they were at that time.'

Through his experiences presenting professional development courses, Adam is well aware of the concerns expressed by many non-Indigenous educators about 'getting it wrong' or being 'tokenistic' in their programming. In response, he says that the most important thing is to make a start—and then keep going. National events like NAIDOC Week are 'a good opportunity, and provide educators who are feeling a bit uneasy an opportunity to start that learning,' he says. 'In terms of 'tokenism', I think it's so much about respect and intent. If you want to start in NAIDOC Week because it's the easier way to do it, as long as you keep walking forward from that, I think it provides a good foundation.'



The NQS emphasises the importance of early childhood services forming partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities—in practice, not all services are confident about doing this. Adam says there's no one right way to go about it. A lot depends on pre-existing relationships within and among communities, which can vary greatly around Australia. Adam says that 'perseverance and going through proper avenues' are important, along with 'building a sense of good faith'. 'We're still talking about potentially engaging with a generation that was let down by the education system,' he explains. 'It's all about conversations. It's important to remember that we are all just people—there's not a hard and fast separation in the way we treat each other. And the attitude that there is, is one of the hurdles in building relationships.'

Adam is confident that the efforts of educators today will pay enormous dividends in the future, in terms of achieving Reconciliation in Australia. 'As idealistic as this may sound, I think we shape the thoughts and attitudes of the children that we work with, in such a way that the intellectual side of Reconciliation is going to solve itself' he says. 'If we can foster in the children a curiosity and, to some level, an understanding of the elements that I'm saying teachers need to be exploring, if we can get that spark, the kids will hopefully follow that throughout their educational career.'

In the next article in this series, we talk to the Manager of an Aboriginal-owned centre in remote Western Australia.



An Australian Government Initiative

The NQS Professional Learning Program is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.



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