



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

In this article about an Aboriginal-owned early childhood centre in remote Western Australian, we continue our exploration of how—and why—we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in early childhood education and care.

Case study No.2

Bree Wagner, Centre Manager

Baya Gawiy Buga yani Jandu yani u Centre (Fitzroy Crossing Children and Family Centre),
Fitzroy Crossing, WA

On the banks of the Fitzroy River, 400 kilometres east of Broome, lies Fitzroy Crossing, the main township in a region that is home to four different Aboriginal language groups. Construction of the town's Baya Gawiy Buga yani Jandu yani u Centre (Fitzroy Crossing Children and Family Centre) was completed at the end of 2012, as part of the National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development.

The Manager of the Baya Gawiy Centre is Bree Wagner, a non-Indigenous teacher who moved from Perth five years ago, initially to take a teaching position at the local district high school. She jumped at the chance to manage the new centre, which is operated by an Aboriginal corporation. With a long day care centre and health and community facilities operating under the one roof, the Baya Gawiy Centre offers a wide range of services for the local community, including antenatal care and a playgroup, with a minibus providing transport.

The children, educators and staff at the centre come from a range of cultures and backgrounds, but most of them are from the local Aboriginal community. 'The main philosophy for the centre is 'Indigenous ways of knowing and doing', so we'll put that at the forefront of everything that we do,' Bree explains. 'Because we're in a remote Aboriginal community, and there are the four main language groups in the Fitzroy Valley, it's really important to be providing a culturally appropriate program for the children, and that their

language and culture are valued and strengthened from the early years. It leads to better outcomes for them as they head into school and later in life, if they're feeling strong and proud of their culture.'

The early childhood program also provides the non-Indigenous children at the Baya Gawiy Centre with a rich experience of Aboriginal culture, something that Bree describes as 'very, very important, because it forms the basis of our Australian history—it's important for children to understand the Australian context and the context in which they live'.

Non-Indigenous educators, too, have an important role to play in Fitzroy Crossing. At the moment, none of the Indigenous educators at the centre holds a Diploma or higher qualification, meaning that some positions must be filled by educators from out of town. But Bree makes it clear that the Indigenous educators are



not considered 'unqualified': 'We team our Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators together in what's called a two-way teaching team, so that the Aboriginal staff member brings knowledge about the community, the culture and their language and provides the expertise in that area, whilst the non-Aboriginal educator provides the more traditional or Western forms of child development knowledge, so that the two can work together—it's very much forming a partnership of respect for both world views.'

In creating their program at the Baya Gawiy Centre, the educators draw on the advice of an expert panel, made up of representatives of each of the four language groups in the region. The corporation's board also provides input into decision-making and policy reviews, and other Elders and artists within the community are invited in for specific projects. Bree's advice to educators who want to form partnerships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is to 'get out there and introduce yourself, find out what level of input people would like to have.'

While the community and the context at the Baya Gawiy Centre are quite different to those of most early childhood settings around Australia, Bree says there are lessons to be learned. 'For non-Indigenous educators, it's definitely a matter of building relationships with Indigenous people in their community and groups within their community,' she says.

'If Indigenous culture is something that you're wanting to incorporate, maybe that's a position that you create in your centre, where you might have someone that provides that knowledge and background. Or if that's not possible, then definitely form some partnerships in your local community—find out about the language groups and the activities that go on and celebrate those so that they're embedded, as opposed to something that you celebrate just on Sorry Day or NAIDOC Week.'

When it comes to national occasions like NAIDOC Week, Bree says that the outcomes depend on the intent. 'Those events are important in a similar way to how we celebrate other events within early childhood services, whether they be Easter or Christmas or Mother's Day,' she says, 'NAIDOC Week provides an opportunity to bring other members of the community into the centre and celebrate Aboriginal culture in a really positive way. But it can't just be something that's just a one-off in the year, just to tick off on the calendar.'

'It's about embedding it,' Bree says, 'it's not something that you do as a one-off event. You're valuing and respecting the culture of the traditional owners of the area you're living in on a regular basis, and involving them in the decision-making, and making those families feel welcome in using the service.'



An Australian Government Initiative

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



Brought to you by

Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children