



● training + recruitment

Working with educators from diverse backgrounds

BY KATARZYNA WIECZOREK-GHISSO,
EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIALIST AND UNIVERSITY LECTURER

It almost goes without saying that Australia is a country with high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity. In fact, data collected in the 2011 census confirmed that a quarter of all Australians speak a language other than English at home, and more than 200 languages are spoken across Australia, including more than 60 languages spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (ABS 2013). With a commitment to supporting a culture of equity, inclusion and diversity in the workplace, the Fair Work Ombudsman launched its Workforce Diversity and Inclusion strategy in 2013, recognising gender, age, ethnicity, background and religious beliefs as factors that impact an individual's life and work experiences.

Culture is defined as the interplay between people's beliefs, values, customs and behaviours, and it is the lens through which we view the world. Interwoven in a complex system, cultural practices evolve over time, and influence our relationships and decision-making. Culture is not static; rather, it is highly influenced by our daily experiences. It is therefore important not to assume that members of a particular culture will always act in a certain way consistent with their cultural background. The diversity of people's identities is very much guided by their education, gender, family configuration, sexuality, social history, ethnic identity, political orientation, religion and spiritual values (National Centre for Cultural Competence 2006).

The Early Years Learning Framework refers to culture in several ways, compelling us to act in a way that acknowledges the diversity in our surrounding community, and not just that of families and children. It challenges us to consider our own values and develop culturally sensitive practices in a way that validates the educators in our teams. To do this effectively, workplace organisations must be proactive, have clearly defined principles and encourage

collegiality, which promotes knowledge sharing. Often when an authentic approach to diversity is facilitated in a forum where everyone is encouraged to discuss their opinions, biases and assumptions, our personal barriers, once considered, present themselves as opportunities for deep reflection and personal growth.

Many years ago, I came across an educator called Aeysha who reminded me of what it means to embrace diversity in an authentic way. Our paths crossed briefly in a workshop that we both attended on what was then titled, 'Being Multicultural in your Centre'. As the facilitator presented content, Aeysha leaned over to me and said, 'I don't know what the big deal is about. We all have to eat, we all have to sleep and we all live our lives. How we do each of those things is just different, and there's nothing wrong with different'. I found myself reflecting on her pearls of wisdom at a deeper level, recalling a personal experience that significantly impacted my own sense of belonging.

Together with my parents and sister, I immigrated to Australia in the 1980s and entered formal schooling knowing virtually no English. It was in my first week of adjusting to a foreign environment that I was called to the principal's office to discuss how well I was settling into the classroom. It was obvious that he struggled with my name. 'Kata, Kata...' he mumbled. Now, I know that pronouncing 'Katarzyna' still poses challenges for most, but regardless, it is still my name. 'It simply won't do; it's too hard', he said. 'From now on, you will be called Kathy,' and in that split second, my identity changed, and this was reflected on all of my school records that followed. As an eight-year-old child, I realised that to fit in I had to change everything that made me stand out, including relinquishing my mother's delicious sourdough salami sandwiches for plain sliced cheese on toast, which I hated. My sister and I also stopped our 'wog talk' in the playground,

ashleyinstitute
of training

**BE INSPIRED
BY OUR TRAINERS**

- CHC50113 Diploma of Early Childhood Education & Care
- CHC30113 Certificate III in Early Childhood Education & Care

ENROL NOW 1300 274 539 ash.edu.au

ASH PTY LTD
RTO 20749

MEET ELLIE
on page 16



and tried to only converse in English as was then recommended. I remained 'Kathy' right up until I successfully passed my driving test and was required to provide several forms of identification for my licence photo. Ten years later, Katarzyna was reborn, and so were the sourdough sandwiches.

Respecting others and valuing multiple perspectives is not merely a moral consideration for us as people. For educators, there is a deeper responsibility and legal obligation that must come through in our teaching. Now, guided by the National Quality Standards, respect for diversity in the workplace and an environment of collegiality (Quality Area 4) is mandated. Specifically, this requires laying the foundations for relationships based on 'mutual respect, equity and fairness'. In practice, this means understanding each other and building on the strength of collective knowledge. To guide our actions, the National Quality Standards make recommendations for us to reflect on:

- the service philosophy and ways it respects differing views, beliefs and values
- the ways that educators acknowledge the strengths of others, and encourage respectful dialogue that validates knowledge and life experience
- the nature of educator relationships and ways they relate to children, families, co-educators, coordinators, managers and leaders
- opportunities for educators to engage in collaborative dialogue, where discussions support the development of their skills and improve practice
- professional development opportunities whereby issues related to the educational program and implementation are raised and debated
- how well the service promotes a positive environment and facilitates opportunities for rapport building

- an understanding of ethical principles as documented in the Early Childhood Code of Ethics, and the frequency with which they are reviewed and updated
- the processes in place to positively resolve ethical issues that may arise in the workplace.

Engaging with people from diverse cultures and backgrounds extends beyond acceptance. It's about understanding people as people who exist in an environment, and understanding that their environment comprises unique circumstances and a unique family. Human beings possess a variety of strengths, many of which we have no knowledge of as colleagues. Avoid clashes and frustrations, and listen to your colleagues' stories. Make the effort to get to know their special strengths, gifts or talents, and be receptive to creatively embedding them in your daily program. Culture needn't be glorified on special occasions or key events on the yearly calendar. Culture happens every day, when an educator shares a family story, their love of dance, their passion for music or their talent for nurturing others, just to name a few. Culture is multifaceted, but regardless, there must be a commitment to unpacking what truly makes us who we are in a way that is transparent and honest.

People come in and out of our lives every single day in the workplace environment. We can choose how we relate to others, whether we consider their differences as barriers, or focus on characteristics as strengths. For me, concepts of belonging, principles of diversity and cultural competence practices aren't merely things to refer to in documentation. They are decisions, attitudes and opportunities that remind me of the responsibility I have as an educator to influence others in a positive way. In my interactions, I am guided by humble people like Aeysha, and I regularly share her pearls of wisdom. Now so can you! 