

Sky juice, rock painting and the belonging wall

Immersed in Indigenous perspectives: one centre's journey

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In a career spanning more than 20 years, I have always taken much interest in engaging early childhood educators to embrace complex issues in the sector, one of which includes the topic of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Despite the fact that the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) considers embracing Indigenous perspectives in early childhood programs as paramount, I find it interesting that we have to navigate tense waters when broaching the subject. Identified as a key initiative in the OECD Thematic Review (2009), many services appear to struggle with direction in this area. Essentially, it comes down to a review of attitudes and an appreciation that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures hold a unique place in Australian history.

Australian Aboriginal cultures are the oldest living cultures in the world. Dating back some 80,000 years, the survival of these cultures is attributed to their ability to change over time. For Aboriginal people, cultural heritage is passed down from one generation to another, kept alive by passing on knowledge through arts, dance and the use of culturally significant objects. That is why learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander cultures is an important way in which we can not only preserve our eldest cultural heritage, but also understand the impact of colonisation on all our communities now, and for generations to come.

Prior to the EYLF, explicit guidelines to encourage the engagement of these concepts were by no means readily available. Termed as 'cultural competence', the framework pays special attention to encouraging educators to make appropriate decisions regardless of the absence or presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in their services. In my experience, however, there appears to be a real tension between what is known and unknown, and what is generally 'comfortable'. This is largely due to a genuine fear of making cultural blunders and/or offending Indigenous community members.

A culturally competent organisation that values and respects diversity helps everyone to feel that they belong. A strong emphasis on building cultural knowledge in early childhood contexts – which, to a larger extent, refers to the ways we respond to, and acknowledge, others – enriches us all. Unfortunately,

when it comes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, this sometimes results in quite narrow approaches being implemented, such as dot painting, boomerang making and flag painting, which by no means explores our unique heritage in an authentic manner.

I was fortunate enough to recently share in the journey of one centre that was on a quest to not only overcome significant cultural challenges in its community, but, that had also committed to embracing Indigenous perspectives in a meaningful way. What initially began as a process of sourcing resources soon led to the development of a broader long-term strategy. Realising that they lacked knowledge and understanding, the centre staff sought to engage an Indigenous educator to better facilitate the process. After months of arduous effort and numerous phone calls, along came Uncle Lex.

Uncle Lex, a unique Aboriginal educator passionate about engaging with children and families, came to the centre at a time when it needed him most. As part of his engagement, it was important that he immersed himself in the centre's teaching as much as its staff members needed to immerse themselves in his. The centre not only welcomed Uncle Lex with open arms, but it opened its heart to his stories, all of which exposed employees, the children and their families to new ways of thinking and knowing. Spontaneous in nature, Uncle Lex engrossed himself in children's play, and through meaningful conversations, he developed rapport. On that basis, the program began to grow, with branches sprouting in all sorts of directions. From a simple conversation about rain, 'sky juice' was born and authentic dialogue followed. Sky juice, as Uncle Lex explained, was what many Aboriginal people would say instead of 'rain'. The children looked up and allowed 'sky juice' to hit their faces. As they did, Uncle Lex began to tell dreamtime stories. It was priceless. Over the days that followed, any water or water-related activities were referred to as 'sky juice', a clear indication that children understood and respected this cultural reference. Similar experiences followed when Uncle Lex visited again. This time it was about making yarn bangles out of bark, which he had brought in the back of his ute. As with sky juice, yarn bangles gained much meaning, and paint exuded from a rock along the veggie patch path, which Uncle Lex used to paint his and the children's faces.

One of my most memorable moments, however, was that of the 'belonging wall'. Equipped with natural-coloured paint, Uncle Lex visited again. He spent much time yarning with the children, explaining



that the artwork they were creating, along an old brick wall at the rear of the centre, represented the community in which they all belonged. One by one, children painted their hands as Uncle Lex painted a serpent alongside, humming Aboriginal tunes. I observed at a distance the immediate change in the breakdown of barriers of earlier reluctant educators. What was once thought of as a difficult process resulted in an openness to explore. To me, it was evident that this centre was getting it right. It was authentic and meaningful, and the centre employees and children openly immersed themselves in his stories, and so did the families. This entire experience defines what the EYLF refers to as 'respect for diversity' and 'cultural competence'. It is all about what came to be from that experience, and how it continues to evolve.

Since that experience, I've reflected on why Uncle Lex moved me so. After all, he was just another educator, with a colourful background sharing his story, while I was a bystander observing the response of participating children, educators and families. The fact is that he challenged me, my views and my way of being, and for that I will be eternally grateful. Uncle Lex flew to New Zealand recently to help a family member in need. I cannot wait for his return. 

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