

Sharing cultures in early childhood settings ... Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives

Aunty Denise Proud and Rosalie Raciti



Aunty Denise Proud is a proud Aboriginal woman born on Wakka Wakka Country in the South Burnett, the youngest of ten children. With a background in early childhood Aunty Denise has also worked in the corrective services with youth, women and men inside maximum security prisons. She spent several years living in Denver in America, loves sharing her culture through art, has spoken at a number of international conferences and written papers relating to her life's work.



Rosalie Raciti graduated as a Kindergarten teacher in 1964, has worked at Palm Island Aboriginal Community on two separate occasions, and travelled throughout Queensland as a preschool adviser for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities. Rosalie is passionate about cultural understanding and sharing across cultures and as a retiree is now encouraging the concept of reconciliation with a particular interest in the early childhood sector.

Getting to know your community

When working with Aboriginal children and their families, it is imperative that you get to know the community in which the children are living. You may feel out of your comfort zone. You may have preconceived notions about what to expect. You may have stereotypes that influence your thinking about the families of those children. There may be a lot of hurt and pain from past experiences with some non-Indigenous people and with various government policies. However, if you reach out to these families, you can build a trust with them that will establish the building blocks on which to build your relationship.

Initially you need to visit families accompanied by someone that the families trust, such as a community education counsellor, an Aboriginal teacher-aide or a local Elder. This person can introduce you and be the link between you, the newcomer, and the families of the children you will be teaching.

Listen and learn from these families, from the Elders, and from Aboriginal people working in the school and the community.

Whether you are in an urban setting, a rural setting or an Aboriginal community setting, the cultural protocols will be similar.

Respect the community

It may take a very long time to learn about the cultural issues that are integral to the community. By listening to those around you, you will learn. It is important to give people time to get to know and trust you, and to allow for silences in your communication with people.

Time is an important factor in the development of relationships. Sometimes people will need to consult with others and think about your discussions. They may not want to reply to your questions right away. They may prefer not to respond to direct questioning and you may

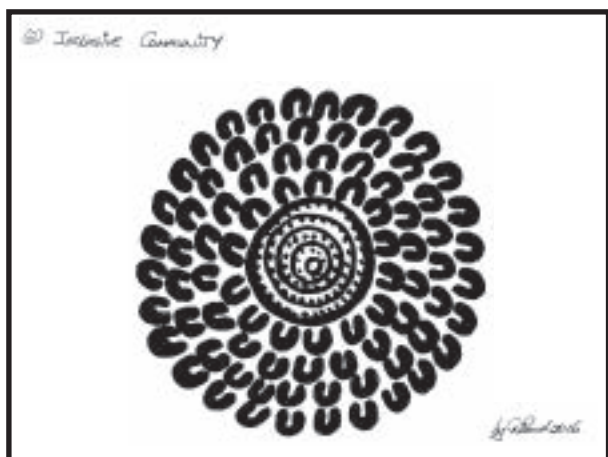


Understanding community connections
Artwork Denise Proud

need to consider using a more indirect means of gathering information.

Being a part of the community is a positive step towards gaining trust. Attending the local weekend football matches, barracking for the right team, wearing the colours, chatting to families in the queue for a hamburger or visiting local gathering places. All of these indicate that you are trying to get to know the community at a deeper level, that your interest is not just superficial and limited only to school/centre-related issues.

Recognising the local dialect, learning some of the local language/s, becoming familiar with the history of the area and learning the names of the local language groups and learning the genealogy of your families are all things to do.



Inclusive Community. Artwork Denise Proud

Aboriginal people usually know exactly where they fit within their community and can tell you their place within this community. Some of these stories can be quite complex and the extended family relationships can be quite confusing to an outsider. Aboriginal people have a strong sense of place and of relationships within this place. In some remote communities, non-Aboriginal people can be given an honorary place within this community. If this happens, the rules of family apply. Such an honour must be taken very seriously.

Meeting families

There is a tendency in the non-Aboriginal system of schooling to rely on enrolments, on parents coming with their children into the school grounds, on the written newsletter or on



Meeting on equal terms Aboriginal way
Artwork Denise Proud

notes to give parents information, directions or instructions. Many parents do not communicate effectively in this way, and a verbal invitation or explanation will be far more useful. Parent/teacher relationships are so important. Home visiting can provide valuable feedback.

Many schools do not encourage home visiting. Our own experiences with kindergarten children and their families, leads us to believe that visiting children in their own homes, having a cuppa at the kitchen table, and admiring the bedroom where they sleep, can strengthen the teacher/child/family relationship considerably. Parent interviews at the beginning of the year and throughout the year might be conducted somewhere away from the centre/school, maybe at a local medical centre, at a coffee

shop, at the local library or somewhere else where the parent feels comfortable. They might want an aunty or uncle to come along too. Having extended family present may make them more comfortable and you may be able to learn more about the family by having additional people at the meeting.

Resources

All children should be learning about the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the history of this country. They should have access to appropriate resources. You could invite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visitors to the centre to read to the children, to tell stories of their childhood, to play musical instruments or to share their cultural dances.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art work can be displayed at the centre, children can learn some of the elements used in traditional Aboriginal paintings and they can learn from Aboriginal artists about the traditional painting methods once used and the change to more contemporary interpretations. It is important

to recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are different.

It is important to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of doing and being within the curriculum. To be valued, this acknowledgement needs to be there all the time and not simply brought out during Reconciliation Week and NAIDOC Week. Employment of Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander staff members can be an excellent start to the embedding process.

Conclusion

Learning about and respecting each others' cultures is the focal point for reconciliation. Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are learning about and embracing the cultures of the First Australians. We need to walk together as Australians.

We need to acknowledge the history of the past and we need to walk the journey together towards a harmonious future.



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