

Possum Skin Pedagogy: A Guide for Early Childhood Practitioners



'Women Drumming' by Annette Sax, Taungurung artist. This image reflects a special ceremony on Taungurung Country. Women are beating on their Walert Walert (possum skin drums).

Sue Atkinson

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this document contains the names of people who have passed on.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Aboriginal people of Victoria as the traditional custodians of the lands and rivers on which this document was written. This document is inspired by the voices of Elders past, guided by the voices of Elders present and aims to strengthen the voices of Aboriginal children as future Elders. In this we honour and acknowledge Aboriginal Elders past, present and future.

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Introduction

On the land and waters that is now known as Victoria, possum skins had a central place in Aboriginal society.

A possum skin was an Aboriginal child's first blanket. The underside of the skin was incised using a shell or stone with symbols that were significant to the clan group and connected the child spiritually to the land and the spirit ancestors. Over time pelts and symbols would be added so that the skin would grow with the child. During their lifetime, children would experience the many uses of possum skins in everyday and ceremonial life. At the end of life, people were often buried in the possum skin that had been their cloak, their mattress and their blanket, and significantly their link to their sense of place and the spiritual realm.

As Aboriginal people were dispossessed of their land, culture, language, their children and life itself, the possum skin was replaced by blankets distributed by the missionaries. These blankets did not provide the warmth and protection from the rain that the possum skins did and contributed to the ill health of Aboriginal people on the missions. The European blanket can be seen as a symbol of the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples in South Eastern Australia as its use parallels the forced decline in the making of possum skin cloaks with the cloak symbolising Aboriginal culture.

Against great odds Aboriginal culture has survived and the making of possum skin cloaks has been revived under the guidance of the Elders. In Victoria today, Aboriginal babies and young children are 'Welcomed onto Country' in ceremonies lead by Elders wearing a possum skin cloak who gift a possum skin to babies to begin their own cloak.

Children may wear possum skins themselves at graduation ceremonies in Aboriginal early childhood spaces. Aboriginal children and young people have created cloaks at workshops lead by Elders and Artists, and Aboriginal children across Victoria have learnt more about their culture as Elders share with them the meaning of the symbols on their cloaks through story telling. In Wurundjeri culture, girls go through the Murrum Turukuruk ceremony, which is a Coming of Age ceremony where they are given two possum skins to create a belt that can either be worn at special occasions throughout their life, or while they dance. The revival of possum skin cloak making once again gives our children the opportunity to be wrapped in culture.



Kiella's Walert Walert by Annette Sax, Taungurung artist

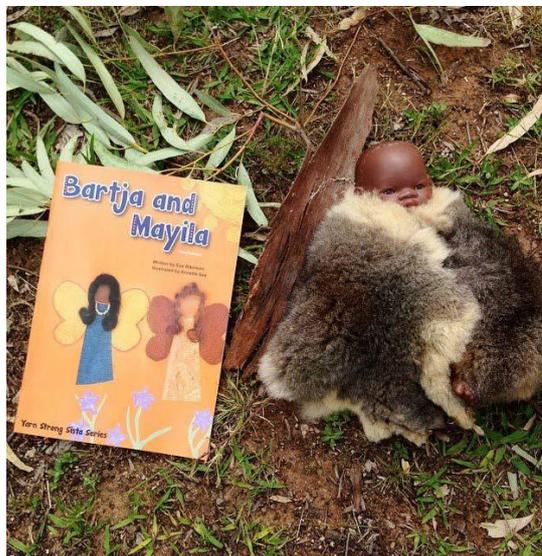


Image supplied by Annette Sax, Taungurung artist

Embedding Aboriginal perspectives in early childhood programs

As Aboriginal peoples in Victoria are on a proud and empowering journey to reclaim culture, many non-Aboriginal early childhood practitioners are also on a journey that may intersect with this revitalisation as they embed Aboriginal perspectives in their programs.

For many years a dedicated group of early childhood practitioners have been embedding Aboriginal perspectives into their programs across Victoria. More recently embedding Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum continues to grow as a mainstream movement as The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework recognises that ‘learning about and valuing the place of Aboriginal people will enhance all Victorian children’s sense of place in our community.’ (State of Victoria, Department of Education and Training, 2016, p. 4)

The Aboriginal early childhood community in Victoria has long called on non-Aboriginal early childhood practitioners to move beyond an Aboriginal inclusion that can be tokenistic and fleeting.

Embedding is a practice that suggests a position beyond inclusion in that Aboriginal perspectives are fixed firmly, deeply and centrally within the program. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal early childhood communities may be troubled by this concept. Aboriginal early childhood communities may be concerned about cultural appropriation or cultural theft as expectations of non-Aboriginal early childhood practitioners grow without the understanding of cultural protocols. Non-Aboriginal early childhood educators, aware of their lack of ‘cultural competence’, may be frozen into inaction in not ‘wanting to do the wrong thing.’

This raises uncomfortable and complex positions across the early childhood sector as a whole. It is also a recognition of the reflection involved in making ethical decisions when embedding Aboriginal culture in the program and the partnerships and protocols involved in its authentic application.

This document aims to address some of the complexities around embedding Aboriginal perspectives and provide a framework for a way forward. Most significantly this framework is constructed in consultation with Victorian Aboriginal Elders and other leaders of the Victorian Aboriginal community through the lens of a ‘Possum Skin Pedagogy’.

This is a timely topic, as teaching Aboriginal children about and through possum skin cloaks is re-emerging in Aboriginal communities across Victoria. Their use in ceremony – including births and deaths – signals the primacy of their spiritual significance in Aboriginal communities. This raises questions about the position of non-Aboriginal practitioners in teaching about spirituality through exploring possum skins and the limits and boundaries that the local Aboriginal community puts on this. Although the spiritual realm was an integral part of everyday life for Aboriginal people, teaching about this domain is central to the place of Aboriginal people as educators in early childhood spaces. For the purposes of this framework I have attempted to address Possum Skin Pedagogy from two interrelated positions: the secular/every day and the spiritual/sensitive.



Artwork by Annette Sax, Taungurung artist, displayed at Boroondara Kindergarten

Protocols and Aboriginal perspectives

Before moving onto the framework I would like to note the protocols that must inform the construction of embedding Aboriginal perspectives in early childhood programs.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

WITH THE LOCAL ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

CONSULT

WITH YOUR LOCAL ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

IN THE

PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

OF YOUR PROGRAM

RECOGNISE

THAT YOU ARE IN THE POSITION OF 'THE LEARNER' IN THESE CONSULTATIONS

BE AWARE

THAT CERTAIN TOPICS MUST BE DELIVERED WITH THE DIRECT INVOLVEMENT OF AN ELDER OR ANOTHER ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY LEADER

ACKNOWLEDGE

ABORIGINAL CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS

SEEK OUT RESOURCES

THAT HAVE BEEN CONSTRUCTED BY OR IN PARTNERSHIPS LED BY ABORIGINAL PEOPLE FROM SOUTHERN EASTERN AUSTRALIA IN GENERAL

AND

YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY IN PARTICULAR

The seven narratives of the framework

From my consultations with Victorian Elders and other leaders of the Victorian Aboriginal community I have identified seven overlapping narratives. The first three narratives are based on spiritual or sensitive material and must be presented with the direct involvement of an Elder or another Aboriginal community leader.

1

The narrative of journey and healing

(e.g. tradition, loss, survival and regeneration)

Knowledge that community members may wish to share with children at an age appropriate level:

- From skins to blankets, how possum skin cloaks were substituted for blankets after colonisation.
- How reviving the making of possum skin cloaks reconnects people to culture and helps heal communities affected by intergenerational loss.

Follow up activity

Looking at images of Aboriginal babies and children in cloaks with children, talk about the emotions and sensations these children may be experiencing.



Adrian and Loren, Taungurung girls. Image supplied by Annette Sax, Taungurung artist.

2

The narrative of ceremony/spirituality

(with emphasis on the ceremonial place of skins in Aboriginal communities, e.g. the place of skins in Welcome to Country, in births and deaths)

Experiences that community members may wish to explore with children

- Learning about totems and symbols of place and connection on cloaks.
- Exploring the place of possum skins in ceremonies such as Welcome baby to Country, and Aboriginal children's graduation from preschool.

Follow up activity

Find out about the traditional custodians of the land on which your centre stands and construct an Acknowledgement of Country with the children and use within the program.

The following example on page 12 is reproduced with the permission of Kylie Mc Lellan, St Peter's Early Learning Centre.

St Peter's Early Learning Centre Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and waterways On which we live, learn, meet and play.

Adapted from Wheatley Nadia, 2007, Going Bush

The philosophy of St Peter's Early Learning Centre (ELC) strongly influences the centre's pedagogy and practice. It gives a clear vision and direction, particularly the section "...value of respect for self, others and the environment; and to develop a strong positive self-image as well as the understanding of the rights and feelings of others" and "...integrated play-based programs...place(d) within our local as well as the Australian context".



From when the children commence in January they are immersed in an environment which is rich in experiences, offering a range of materials, resources and resonating opportunity to go deeper in understandings and learning, both for the children and adults, including educators.

One example is the Acknowledgement Card, showing the words (as above). This is displayed in the children's indoor environment. Educators hold daily 'Group Meetings' with the Kindergarten/3 Year Old Group and the Pre-Prep/4 Year Old Group. At a time that is relevant this is introduced to the younger, Kindergarten Group. This may be after they have begun to explore Aboriginal symbols in their play or following an incursion/excursion. The Acknowledgement is said prior to our meeting commencing. We explain the importance it holds, and is said before meetings as thanks from us to be able to be on this place, in this space and connected to this land.

We acknowledge to the children that the land we meet on is Boonwurrung land.

That Boonwurrung people were the first people of this land. The children meet Aunty Fay Stuart Muir, Boonwurrung Elder, who shares stories and culture with our children and we acknowledge that Aunty Fay has given permission for our educators to continue to share this with our children throughout their time at the ELC.



The children acknowledge and use 'Womindjeka' as Boonwurrung language for welcome. In 2014 they created a Womindjeka sign which sits at the entrance of the centre to welcome everyone.



3

The narrative of Aboriginal literacy

(e.g. how children learnt the meaning of symbols through story telling)

Experiences that community members may wish to explore with children

- Reading the symbols on the cloaks; reading cloaks as a map.
- Learning what possums and other animals are called in the language of the local Aboriginal community.

Follow up activity

Sharing stories with children around possums by Aboriginal authors.

Children can make a 'cloak' from individual paper panels or pieces of paper bark joined together for display. The children can represent images from their environment that are important to them such as animals, people and places. If you intend to use ochre with the children check the protocols around its use (see Appendix 1).

The remaining narratives ideally involve the direct participation of Aboriginal people but could be considered to lay in the 'secular' realm. Non-Indigenous practitioners could explore these narratives after researching websites where they can hear the voices of the Elders in the virtual realm while waiting to connect with their local Aboriginal community.



Image supplied by Annette Sax, Taungurung artist.

4

The narrative of nature

(e.g. connections to Country, how our people got everything they needed from the land)

Suggested experiences

- Looking at possum skins as waterproof and warm in their use as blankets, cloaks and carrying babies. Looking at the variety of uses of possum skin such as drums. Exploring the life cycle of the possum. Exploring the habitats and lives of possums in urban/rural areas today.

5

The narrative of the family

(e.g. in the catching and uses of the possum skins in the roles of men, women and children)

Suggested experiences

- Taking children to Bunjilaka to view possum cloaks and the tools used in their production.
- Exploring the tracking skills employed in the hunting of possums by men and boys.
- Exploring the preparation of the skins; skinning, curing, stretching, drying and treatment with animal fats by men.
- Exploring the role of women in shaping, stitching and decorating the cloaks while being watched by young children of both sexes and girls of all ages.

6

The narrative of science and technology, continuity and change

(e.g. the use of tools in the construction of possum skins cloaks past and present)

Suggested experiences

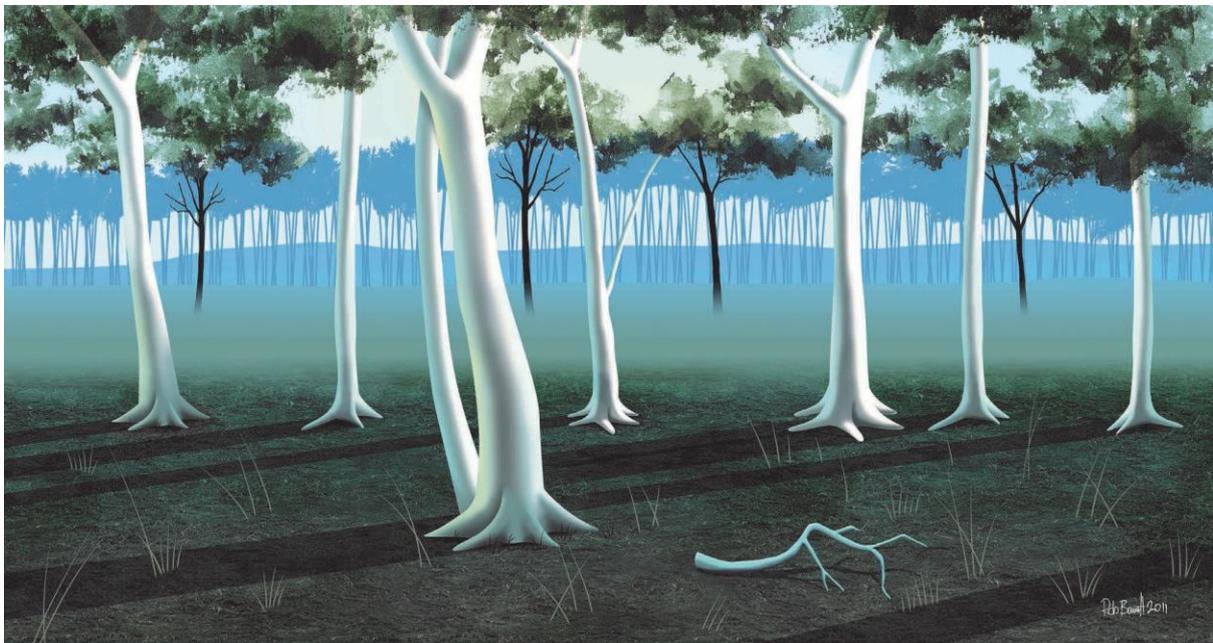
- How can we join panels of paper or paper bark together to make a 'cloak' for display? Experiment with natural materials in the playground that can be used to join paper or bark together.
Experiment with 'man made' materials that can be used to join paper or bark together.
- Explore how possum skin pelts were joined together using sinews by Aboriginal people in the past. Explore what materials are used today such as linen thread.
- Explore how designs were etched on skins using shells, bones and stone tools in the past.
- Explore how designs are burnt into the skins today using wood burners.
- Experiment with mixing ochre with binding materials to make paint using natural materials such as wattle sap, water, honey and eggs yolks.
- Experiment with 'person made' materials such as PVA glue.

The narrative of recreation

(e.g. how Aboriginal children and adults constructed games for sport and education)

Suggested experiences

- Making/talking about possum skin balls and playing/talking about Marngrook, which means ‘game of the ball’ in Gunditjamara language. Do some research on ‘Deadly Questions you ask Aboriginal Victorian’s Answer’ website, i.e. Did Aboriginal people invent football?
- Talk about Aboriginal footballers. Link Marngrook into discussions around AFL. Watch The Marngrook Footy Show on NITV.
- Play traditional Aboriginal children’s games such as making and recognising the tracks of animals such as possums, recognising and imitating the sounds animals such as those possums make.
- Watch out for the Wurundjeri Traditional games day on their Facebook page.



Ghost Gums by Robert Barnett, Yorta Yorta artist.

Questions you may have about this document

Why do I need to build relationships with my local Aboriginal community in particular?

Aboriginal communities across Victoria are diverse in culture and language. What may be suitable to teach about in one area may differ from what is seen as appropriate in a neighbouring community.

How do I go about building relationships with my local Aboriginal community?

Contact the following organisations/people for advice:

- Your local Aboriginal Lands Council
- Your local Aboriginal Cooperative
- Your local Koorie Education Support Officer
- Your local Municipal Council may have an Aboriginal Liaison Officer
- In particular reference to advice on building partnerships around the teaching of Aboriginal languages, contact Aunty Fay Stewart Muir at the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL)

Ask practitioners who already have built these relationships in your community to introduce you to Elders and other community members.

Exercise patience, especially when building relationships with Elders as they have many ongoing commitments within the Aboriginal community as well as the non-Aboriginal community.

What can I do while I am waiting to make these contacts?

- Use materials developed by the Victorian Aboriginal community such as books, and always acknowledge the author and the clan to which they belong.
- Educate yourself by listening to the voices of Elders online (i.e. Culture Victoria website) as they talk about the significance and the making of possum skin cloaks.
- Implement parts of this pedagogy - as outlined above in the last 4 narratives – to develop your knowledge, skills and experience.

What do you mean by acknowledging Aboriginal Intellectual property rights?

For example, Aboriginal symbols are easily accessed on the internet often without acknowledging their origin. Instead, use symbols that you have been given permission to use by an Elder or other Aboriginal community leaders.

Purchase authentic resources as described in Appendix 2: Indigenous resources – Buying the real thing.

What do you mean by being in the position of the learner?

When consulting the Aboriginal community, you need to take the position of an active and respectful listener. This may mean that you need to change what you had initially planned or expected to do within your program.

How is the term pedagogy used in this document?

Broadly, this term is used as the practice of teaching along with the knowledges, philosophies and protocols that underpin it. The possum skin cloaks at the centre of the 'Possum Skin Pedagogy' embody this concept as practice, knowledge, philosophy and protocol in place.

Issues that may concern children

The concept of killing possums by clubbing may distress some children, especially as possums are often humanised in children's picture books.

You could explain there were no shops to buy meat or clothing so Aboriginal people took everything they needed from the land. Possums were killed quickly and humanely and nothing from the possum was wasted. Aboriginal people looked after possums while they were alive by making sure that they had a good place to live and healthy food to eat by looking after the bush they lived in.

Recommended resources and references

Resources with a focus on the themes identified in this project

Children's books

Deans Footy Song by Aunty Wendy. Blake Education, 2009.

Dreamtime at the 'G by Alinta Hayes & Andrew Nelson. Indij Readers, 2007.

Marngrook: The long ago story of Aussie Rules by Titta Secombe; illustrated by Grace Fielding. Magabala Books, 2012.

Possums on the Roof by Sue Briggs Pattison & Bev Harvey; illustrated by Elaine Russell. Scholastic Australia, 1998.

Scaly-tailed Possum and Echidna by Cathy Goonack; illustrated by Katrina Goonack, Marlene Goonack & Myron Goonack. Magabala Books, 2010.

Welcome to Country by Aunty Joy Wandin Murphy; illustrated by Lisa Kennedy. Black Dog Books, 2016.

What I Wanna Be, Indij Readers for Little Fullas: Series 3 by Chasity Prior, Kelli McIntosh, Phillip Murray & Sharon Hughes; illustrated by Peter McKenzie. Indij Readers, 2007.

What We Count: Then and Now, Indij Readers for Little Fullas: Series 1 by Helen Empacher, Bianca Briggs, Tu Roper, Nioka Doolan & Ernie Blackmore. Indij Readers, 2003.

Yurri's Manung by Sue Atkinson & Annette Sax. Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages, 2013.

Adult books

Lady of the Lake: Aunty Iris's Story by Aunty Iris Lovett Gardiner. Koorie Heritage Trust, 1997.

Mildura Welcome Baby to Country: A strength based approach to Aboriginal community wellbeing, story told by Rose Gilby & Jill Antoine; edited by Karen Adams. Monash University, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Science, Gukwonderuk Indigenous Engagement Unit, 2015.

Wrapped in a possum skin cloak: The Tooloyn Koortakay collection in the National Museum of Australia by Amanda Jane Reynolds in collaboration with Debra Couzens, Vicki Couzens, Lee Darroch & Treaahna Hamm. National Museum of Australia, 2005.

Additional resources

Children's books

Adventures of the Little Black Trackas resource kit (four books, poster and CD) by Hall, M & Saunders, G Neenann. SNAICC. VIC, Australia. N.D.

At the Billabong (2009), People and Places (2008), Animals (2008), small board books series written by Debbie Austin. Discovery Press.

Big Rain Coming by Katrina Germein; illustrated by Bronwyn Bancroft. Puffin Books, 2002.

Fair Skin Black Fella by Renee Fogorty. Magabala Books, 2010.

How the Murray River was made: A Bangerang Story by Irene Thomas & Robert Brown. The University of Melbourne's Early Learning Centre, 2007.

Kuppi's Clever Surprise Plan by J. Ruhle & N. Lewis. Brotherhood of St Laurence with the assistance of AXA, 2011.

Sorry Sorry by Anne Kerr. Boolarong Press, 2014.

The Hairy One by Wendy Notley; illustrated by Elaine Russell. Blake Education, 2009.

Wilam: A Birrurung Story by Aunty Joy Murphy Wandin and Andrew Kelly; illustrated by Lisa Kennedy. Black Dog, 2019.

Adult books

First People: The Eastern Kulin of Melbourne, Port Phillip and Central Victoria by Gary Presland. Museum of Victoria, 2010.

Koorie Plants Koorie People: Traditional Aboriginal Food, Fibre and Healing Plants of Victoria by Nelly Zola & Beth Gott. The Koorie Heritage Trust. VIC, Australia. 1992.

Meereng-An-Here is my Country: The Story of Aboriginal Victoria Told Through Art edited by Chris Keeler & Vicki Couzens. The Koorie Heritage Trust. VIC, Australia. 2010.

Myernila – Listen Continuously: Aboriginal Creation Stories of Victoria by Arts Victoria with Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages.

Nganga: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Words and Phrases by Aunty Fay Muir & Sue Lawson. Black Dog Books. NSW, Australia. 2018.

People of the Merri Merri: The Wurundjeri in Colonial Days by Isabel Ellender & Peter Christiansen. Merri Creek Management Committee. N.D.

The Aboriginal Early Childhood Practice Guide by Jessica Staines & Red Ruby Scarlet. MULTIVERSE Publishing, 2018.

The Little Red Yellow Black Book: An introduction to Indigenous Australia (Third Edition) by Aboriginal Studies Press, 2012.

The Melbourne Dreaming by Meyer Eidelson. Aboriginal Studies Press, 1997.

The People of Budj Bim by the Gunditjmara people with Gib Wettenhall. emPRESS Publishing, 2010.

The People of Gariwerd: The Grampians Aboriginal Heritage by Gib Wettenhall. Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, 1999.

Voices and Visions: Aboriginal Early Childhood Education in Australia edited by Karen Martin. Pademelon Press. NSW, Australia. 2016.

Welcome to Wurundjeri Country: The Wurundjeri History of Yarra by Emily Fitzgerald & Daniel Ducrou. Yarra City Council. VIC, Australia. 2014.

Where Were You? Book commemorating the National Apology by Link-Up Victoria. 2013.

General books for older children and adults

The Rabbits by John Marsden and Shaun Tan. Thomas, C Lothian Pty Ltd. VIC, Australia. 1998.

Took the Children Away by A. Roach & H. Hunter with P. Hudson. One Day Hill Pty Ltd. VIC, Australia. 2010.

Websites

Culture Victoria

www.cv.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/possum-skin-cloaks

Dadirri Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness

www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/about-dadirri

Days of Significance in the Indigenous Calendar - VAEAI Koorie Education Calendar 2018

www.org.au/-uploads/rsfil/000403-bdcc.pdf

Deadly Questions - You Ask, Aboriginal Victorians Answer

<https://deadlyquestions.vic.gov.au/>

Kooramook yakeen: possum dreaming by Vicki Couzens

www.cv.vic.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/possum-skin-cloaks/kooramook-yakeen-possum-dreaming-by-vicki-couzens

Little Long Walk

www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcHcmPKDLcs

Lou Bennett

<https://youtu.be/g5YhRhjOBo>

Marngrook Footy Show

www.sbs.com.au/nitv/marngrook-footy-show

Naghlingah Boorais: Beautiful Children

www.museumvictoria.com.au/bunjilaka/visiting/birrarung-gallery/artist-profiles/naghlingah-boorais-beautiful-children

Narragunnawali

www.narragunnawali.org.au

Story by Uncle Larry Walsh (Australian Centre for Contemporary Art)

https://soundcloud.com/acca_melbourne/story-by-uncle-larry-walsh

Tanderrum - 2018 Melbourne International Arts Festival

www.festival.melbourne/2018/events/tanderrum

The Eight-Way Frame of Aboriginal Pedagogy

<https://vickidrozdowski.files.wordpress.com/>

Yarn Strong Sista

2/88-96 Western Avenue, Westmeadows VIC | www.yarnstrongsista.com

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)

www.vacca.org/wrapped-in-culture-exploring-identity-through-possum-skin-cloak-making

Wurundjeri Traditional Games Day Facebook Page

<https://www.facebook.com/events/wurundjeri-traditional-games-day>

Organisations

Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Melbourne Museum

www.museumvictoria.com.au/bunjilaka

Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Childcare (SNAICC)

www.snaicc.org.au

State Government of Victoria, Department of Education and Training, Aboriginal Early Years Support

www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/aboriginal/Pages/aboriginalsupport.aspx

Koorie Engagement Support Officer (KESO)

www.education.vic.gov.au/about/contact/Pages/wannikregional.aspx

Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI), Early Childhood Unit

www.vaeai.org.au

Teaching resources

Koorie Heritage Trust

Levels 1 and 3, Yarra Building Federation Square, Melbourne VIC | www.koorieheritagetrust.com.au

Yarn Strong Sista

2/88-96 Western Avenue, Westmeadows VIC | www.yarnstrongsista.com

Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL)

70 Hanover Street, Fitzroy VIC | www.vaclang.org.au

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)

340 Bell Street, Preston VIC | www.vacca.org

References

State Government of Victoria (Department of Education and Training) Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework. 2016.

Appendix 1:

Protocols around using ochre

Ochre – an earth pigment – has been used for tens of thousands of years by Aboriginal Victorians in ceremonies and in art on bark, caves and possum skins. This tradition continues today as Victorian communities continue to practice their culture. An example of this is The Kulin Tanderrum, a revival of a ceremony practiced since time immemorial by the five clans of the Kulin Nation: the Wurundjeri, Boon Wurrung, Taungurung, Dja Dja Wurrung and Wadawurrung peoples. The ceremony is led by Elders of these clans and honours the Lore of Bunjil, the great creator spirit. Dancing is central to this ceremony, with young male dancers being ‘painted up’ with ochre by adult males and young female dancers ‘painted up’ by adult women. Dancers also wear ornamentation significant to such ceremonies on their heads and bodies.

In respecting the spiritual significance of ceremony, we ask that ‘mainstream’ early childhood centres do not paint children’s bodies with ochre or pretend to be Aboriginal children.

Using ochre in art is also built on respect for Aboriginal culture. Keeping in mind ochre’s spiritual connection with the land, ceremony and the arts, the gathering of ochre continues to reflect the protocols and respect with which it has been gathered over millennia.

Younger artists may be shown by their Elders the special places to gather ochre on County where their ancestors would have also gathered

ochre. This is done sparingly in accordance with the principles of sustainability that guided our ancestors. Don’t expect Aboriginal visitors to your centre to share this knowledge with you, but you may be gifted ochre by an Aboriginal visitor to your centre. Please use sparingly when children are using this in their art and reflect on how the Aboriginal visitor worked with and spoke with the children about the ochre then apply this respectfully to your program.



Photo of Iluka dancing at Tanderrum Ceremony, by Ruby Gayle used with permission of Annette Sax.

Appendix 2:

Indigenous resources – Buying the real thing

Reproduced with permission of the author, Brian Newman University of Melbourne (2016).

As early childhood educators we work hard to find ways to make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures visible in our programs. This may often involve purchasing resources such as posters, puzzles, play mats and books with Aboriginal designs and motifs. But have you thought about whether the designs are the real thing?

Aboriginal art is important, both here and internationally, and the use of symbols and designs is an expression of aspects of culture significant to particular communities. Artists paint from their stories and often have to get permission from elders to use particular designs that tell particular stories. As the art and designs depict stories and have spiritual meaning, they remain important cultural symbols for Aboriginal people, and are not simple commodities to be traded or copied. It is not appropriate for anyone to steal these designs and particularly to use them for gain.

So when buying resources to use in your teaching about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia, do ensure that the resources you buy are authentic. This doesn't necessarily mean only buying things direct from Indigenous organisations, but only buying items that depict Aboriginal art and design when an Aboriginal artist has given permission – and has been paid – for their work to be reproduced or copied. Not only are you helping to establish economic independence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and communities, but you are also ensuring the integrity of your teaching resources.

On the other hand, don't simply assume that any 'Aboriginal' style item sold by a major company is not authentic. Companies will often do the right thing and buy licences from the original artists to use their art work on commercial products. For example, you can buy umbrellas depicting Aboriginal art that are properly licensed, and there are even mobile phone covers – produced from the US – that use authentic licensed art.

Indigenous art represents cultural history of Australia's First Peoples and should be displayed and used respectfully. In the same way that we have learned that getting children doing 'dot painting' or cutting out boomerangs may not be the most authentic way to present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to children, using unauthorised or unlicensed art work is cultural appropriation. The motifs and symbols used in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and design will hold special cultural significance to the artist and their community. These expressions of cultural heritage – including stories as well – belong to the community, who have the right to control their use. And there is added value as money raised goes back into communities, rather than to external parties.

Unfortunately, there is no widely recognised symbol or tag that tells you whether Aboriginal art or designs used on goods are authentic. There have been efforts to establish a system, but so far with little success. The Indigenous Art Code is probably the most recognised

accreditation system but it really only covers art and crafts, so when you are buying in the broader market there aren't signs to look out for. This means that we have to use our own judgement when buying resources, so here are a few pointers to guide your decisions:

- When buying equipment, if the designs are labelled as or 'look' like they are Aboriginal, see if an artist is acknowledged. If the artist and their country or clan is named it is more likely to be authentic and ethically used.
- Look for some indication that the use of the design is licensed.
- When buying books with Aboriginal designs, read the illustrator's biography.
- Buy from reputable sources, such as specialist organisations (e.g. SNAICC) or businesses that specialise in Indigenous education and resources (e.g. Yarn Strong Sista).
- Art gallery shops are often a good source of appropriately sourced books.
- Buy local resources. Try to find resources from your local area as stories, traditions, language and ways of living vary from place to place. For example, it is more relevant to focus on your local Aboriginal languages, whilst still using books that have other languages. In general, it's easier to find picture books in languages that are more used.
- If in doubt, ASK!

Don't be afraid to ask a stockist if something is authentic, and if it isn't, tell them why you won't buy it and suggest they do it correctly. It's a small step, but an important action to support the artists that have shared their stories with us. Here is an example of what you could write or say:

Thank you for your response. As the Aboriginal designs depicted on the equipment are not authentic, we will not purchase them. We ask you to withdraw this product from sale and consider engaging Aboriginal artists to design such equipment as the motifs and form of Aboriginal art is the cultural heritage owned by the various communities.

Having resources that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples, histories and cultures can help early childhood services embed Indigenous perspectives into our programs. Taking care when buying these resources not only helps us be more authentic in our work, but also contributes to the economic futures of Indigenous communities.

For more information about Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property:

www.artslaw.com.au/info-sheets/info-sheet/indigenous-cultural-and-intellectual-property-icip-aitb/

Reflecting on the Possum Skin Learning Project: Journeys and Outcomes



Kiella walking along the Yea Wetlands on Taungurung Country (Image courtesy of Annette Sax, Taungurung artist).

Sue Atkinson

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- Dr Sue Atkinson (PhD Education)

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Epigraph



May the Aboriginal Elders

Lead you to walk respectfully with Aboriginal people

Lead you to see the wisdom in the earth, air and rivers

Lead you to hear their stories of life, land and being

May the Elders voices guide you in courage and wisdom

- Sue Atkinson Yorta Yorta

Uncle Colin Hunter Jr,
Wurundjeri Elder, at
Boroondara kindergarten.

Journey: A Narrative

During the final consultations with the Aboriginal Elders and other senior members of the Aboriginal community who were central to the writing of the *Possum Skin Pedagogy: A Guide for Early Childhood Practitioners*, it was recommended that the guide be supported by a focused professional development learning project to ensure its respectful and culturally appropriate implementation.

Consequently, Action on Aboriginal Perspectives in Early Childhood Education (AAPEC) reformed a subcommittee comprising Sue Atkinson, Annette Sax, Denise Rundle, Mindy Blaise, Brinda Mootosamy, Brian Newman, Melodie Davies, Catherine Hamm and David Ellis. In partnership with our auspicing body *fka* Children's Services, AAPEC was granted funding from the Association of Graduates in Early Childhood Studies (AGECS). This funding enabled the development and presentation of *The Possum Skin Professional Learning Project* in the form of four professional learning sessions in Semester 2, 2018. The journey and outcomes of the learning project were to be documented in a report *Reflecting on the Possum Skin Learning Project: Journeys and Outcomes*.

These learning sessions were led by Annette Sax, a Taungurung woman who has worked in Aboriginal early childhood and care with a passion and unwavering commitment for over 25 years. Denise Rundle, an experienced non-Indigenous early childhood practitioner of over 35 years who had embedded strong relationships with her local Indigenous community within her program, acted as co-presenter. Dr Sue Atkinson, a Yorta Yorta woman, also shared some of her knowledge and experience accumulated over her forty plus years in the early childhood profession.

Thirty-two early childhood practitioners were selected to participate in the learning sessions. These participants had a variety of qualifications and experiences but shared a commitment to enhancing their 'understanding, respect, knowledge, meaningful connections, authenticity and awareness' around embedding local Aboriginal culture into their programming as demonstrated in the selection process.

The first of the four sessions commenced on July 27, 2018. Annette, Denise, Sue and the participants were warmly Welcomed onto Country by Wurundjeri Elder Uncle Bill Nicholson Jnr.

Elders and senior members of the Aboriginal community whose knowledge was the basis of the *Possum Skin Pedagogy: A Guide for Early Childhood Practitioners* were invited as honoured guest speakers. In session two we were delighted to be joined by Aunty Fay Stewart Muir, a Boonwurrung Elder and language specialist from the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages. Aunty Fay shared her experience and knowledge of teaching young children about Aboriginal language.

Throughout the professional development, Annette, Denise and Sue structured the sessions around the *Possum Skin Pedagogy: A Guide for Early Childhood Practitioners* through seven interconnected narratives. These are:

1. The narrative of journey and healing (e.g. tradition, loss, survival and regeneration)
2. The narrative of ceremony/spirituality (with emphasis on the ceremonial place of skins in Aboriginal Communities, e.g. The place of skins in Welcome to Country, in births and deaths)
3. The narrative of Aboriginal literacy (e.g. how children learnt the meaning of symbols through story telling)
4. The narrative of Nature (e.g. connections to Country, how our people got everything they needed from the land)
5. The narrative of the family (e.g. in the catching and uses of the possum skins the roles of men, women and children)

6. The narrative of science and technology, continuity and change (e.g. the use of tools in the construction of possum skins cloaks past and present)
7. The narrative of recreation (e.g. how Aboriginal children and adults constructed games for sport and education)

In *Possum Skin Pedagogy: A Guide for Early Childhood Practitioners*, these narratives were expanded for the early childhood practitioner with suggested experiences, recommended resources and references. These recommended resources and references were expanded during the course of the professional development as they emerged, but the Possum Skin Pedagogy is much more than a list of experiences, resources and references.

The seven narratives raised questions of protocols around embedding Aboriginal perspectives into the program. For example, the protocol of Aboriginal community consultation is especially important in relation to the first three narratives. As they are based on spiritual or sensitive material they must be presented with the direct involvement of an Elder or another Aboriginal community member.

Underpinning the learning sessions was the exploration of such protocols with the identification of complexities, gaps and barriers around enacting them in early childhood spaces.

Protocols were introduced to the participants as being embedded in Aboriginal culture. As Annette described:

People often feel uneasy when they hear the term protocol. As a Taungurung person I feel that protocols are about respectful ways. As Aboriginal people we have been guided by protocols for thousands and thousands of years. In a contemporary way I continue to be guided by protocols about respecting the ways of the traditional custodians such as Acknowledgement of Country and consultation with Elders and other community members. (2018)

Sue positioned herself as the custodian of the Possum Skin Pedagogy, 'as it is based on the knowledge of a group of Elders and other senior members of the local Victorian Aboriginal Community'. (2018)

Access to the full pedagogy document would be deferred until the training had been completed and the additional document *Reflecting on the Possum Skin Learning Project: Journeys and Outcomes* was constructed and then approved by the Elders and senior members of the community. Both documents would then be posted on the AGES website.

Aboriginal pedagogy guided us as presenters in these sessions. We actively engaged with the importance of:

- listening to the local Aboriginal Elders
- sitting with, observing and listening to Country
- storytelling and yarning circles
- connecting with the local Aboriginal community
- using natural materials in the program

The descriptor 'slow professional development' arose from these sessions, with Denise speaking to the participants about the importance of reflection and deep listening. Denise described how in the earlier years of her practice she was an 'unguided missile of good intentions'.

Slowly acquiring the skill of deep listening to and reflecting on Aboriginal voices had lead her to:

- Listening without resisting
- Listening without trying to think up a solution or justification
- Listening and thinking before responding
- Listening without trying to place the information within her own context
- Sitting with the questions raised, even if uncomfortable

In between sessions participants were given 'homework' to enhance their skills of reflection and deep listening. For example, participants were asked to sit with nature at dusk. They were asked to bring their reflections to a Yarning Circle at the following session, along with an item of significance such as a leaf, flower or stone.

Participants were also asked to reflect on how the content of the themes explored impacted their philosophy and practice. They were asked to develop a question for themselves to answer over the coming months and develop 3 actions that reflected how the Possum Skin pedagogy influenced their learning programs. The following example illustrates the active and informed intent of one of the participants:

I will investigate opportunities to be involved in community activities and opportunities to connect with and listen to my local Aboriginal community in order to deepen my knowledge and to begin to forge relationships. I will be open to any chances to listen or observe, and to be guided by the community's needs rather than those I perceive for myself or my kindergarten community.

Participants input and feedback received informally and formally by the training team was vital in strengthening the *Reflecting on the Possum Skin Pedagogy* document.

From the beginning, participants were positioned as part of a learning community lead by Annette Sax in partnership with Denise Rundle. In this community the participants were not only learners but teachers.

Outcomes: A Reflection

At the conclusion of the four sessions the participants were given time to reflect on their experiences and fill in a feedback form around how the possum skin professional training sessions informed their:

- Understandings of Victorian Aboriginal communities
- Forming and maintaining respectful relationships
- Understanding Aboriginal pedagogy
- Embedding Aboriginal perspectives
- Sharing knowledge with colleagues

All the participant's responses were positive. Participants demonstrated that their understandings and attitudes around embedding Aboriginal perspectives such as *Possum Skin Pedagogy: A Guide for Early Childhood Practitioners* had deepened. Some examples under each principle are quoted anonymously.

Understandings of Victorian Aboriginal Communities

"Possum Skin Pedagogy has piqued my interest to learn more about the Aboriginal culture and to then impart this knowledge to the staff, children and families at the service. I am on my own journey to connect with my Aboriginal ancestry (4 Greats generations ago) and their part in the history of Australia as we know it today. The more I learn about the treatment of Aboriginal people, the more distressed I become; but I am also so very impressed by the Aboriginal people's natural skills of conservation and their great care of the land which has such a strong connection to them."

"Before this project I was only really aware of the Queensland Aboriginal community. Now I have more understanding of the complexity of the Victorian Aboriginal community, the tribes, language bases and community members."

"Possum Skin Pedagogy has also underlined the importance of language we use. I appreciate the reminder that Aboriginal culture should always be talked about in the present, as living and evolving. I think I feel more confident to advise others of this if I hear/read language that suggests otherwise."

Embedding Aboriginal Perspectives

"It enabled me to implement what I learnt, allowed it to be considered, reflected upon, tweaked, discussed, adjusted to fit in with input from authentic sources."

"Information about reading and resources has supported our reflection, discussion and ongoing self-education and will colour all future planning and management. I am fearful of making a "wrong step" or being tokenistic, and this has affected my confidence in including language, stories and materials in the past. Dr Sue Lopez Atkinson and Aunty Fay Scott Muir in particular have given me more confidence in using publicly available material from acknowledged sources in my program and planning and made me acutely aware of the need to seek permission and form better connections to my local Aboriginal community. The openness and generosity shown by presenters has enabled me to acknowledge my fears causing offence, of making missteps, or of being seen to be asking for something from a local community who has had so much taken from them or undervalued. The sessions have helped me to reflect on my cultural assumptions, my weaknesses, and my anxieties about my own lack of knowledge, of connection, and of appropriation or causing offence."

Sharing Knowledge with Colleagues

“I need to embed my knowledge and confidence through connections and relationships further to ensure respectful sharing.”

“I have already agreed for the next years we are going to include all possum skin narratives into our program.”

“The other really important learning has been how with every piece of knowledge shared, be it a story, quote, phrase in language, song, the source needs to be acknowledged, and not just once but many times. I think saying the source, such as an author or speaker, as well as how that was shared and entrusted with you, is a good practice. This is the kind of learning I want to share with other educators.”

Understanding Aboriginal Pedagogy

“It has allowed me to think more deeply, to see beyond the surface of e.g. a story like Bartja and Mayila and reflect within a larger picture. It has moved me away even more from a specific activity focus and confirmed the importance of learning about and understanding Aboriginal pedagogy and perspectives.”

“The Possum Skin Pedagogy project has, very slowly, added new perspectives and ways of thinking into my personal thinking about our journey towards Reconciliation. Learning to understand that this Pedagogy comes from what the Aboriginal people want for their children and what is influencing their journey to be able to share their thoughts and ideas with us, before we can use their guidelines in our work.”

“Understanding we need to honor their journey towards wanting to share with us, taking what we are given with Respect and listening to their wishes in how they would like us to join this path...”

“The unchartered missile with good intentions was me... This year I have learned a lot and I have gone from “ticking of boxes” and being impatient, to creating better relationships and letting experiences flow from that, instead of guiding things along my own idea lines...”.

“Following the flow of nature also has provided to be valuable and I am connecting more to Country... taking more time to be and reflect and notice... “.

Forming and Maintaining Respectful Relationships

“I have had a lovely conversation with the Koorie Engagement officer around protocols and permissions. She was very happy that I had an awareness of these. She said she generally likes to act as a go between for requests (she is a traditional owner) but she thought I was capable of going straight to the owner group which I definitely wouldn’t have been before.”

“Learning about respectful language I was always afraid that I would say the ‘wrong thing’ I now know where to go to gain information that is correct, respectful and able to be shared.”

“Visiting the local Aboriginal Cooperative, spending time yarning, sharing ideas but not asking for anything as yet but letting them know what is happening at the service.”

Case Studies

The following case studies demonstrate in greater depth how the Possum Skin Pedagogy professional learning sessions have informed the philosophy and practice of eight participants who so generously volunteered to share their experiences. It is hoped that these case studies act as an inspiration for other practitioners when embedding Aboriginal perspectives into their programs.

The Voices of the Elders

Emma Kefford, Collingwood College

I loved from the beginning that we had time and being slow Professional Development was very helpful, it gave us the space to unlearn and learn. I had lived in Alice Springs and had worked alongside those communities. The training gave me more understanding of Aboriginal culture in Victoria and lead me to think in my role as a teacher how I could include Aboriginal content in my curriculum.

Learning what the Elders would like Aboriginal children to learn was a useful way to ground the training. Elders voices grounded learning in working with all children around these knowledges. For example, Aunty Fay Muir from the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages advised us on the Aboriginal language resources that were available and the protocols for including language in our teaching.

During the course I was teaching year one and two. We have weekly swimming excursions where we walk past a scar tree near the MCG. During the walk I thought about Uncle Bill Nicholson Jnr who welcomed us onto Wurundjeri land at the beginning of the training and talked about Wurundjeri identity, land, language and history. We looked at the scar tree on our walk and brought in the voice of the Wurundjeri people with the kids thinking more about this scar tree. We are also close to the Wurundjeri land council and we could strengthen our connections with them we hope to have a visit from a staff member in the future.

I did make up the following powerpoint presentation – a brief summary of what we were doing in the sessions – and presented this at a staff meeting. Exploring the protocols and principles around acting ethically was important when putting this together.

This was emphasised during the training. Staff were receptive and interested and I felt that we could have talked longer. I also feel that there is more to do around co-coordinating Aboriginal perspectives across grade levels in the future.



Yarra River Pond Bend

Learning's from Possum Skin Pedagogy Training

Series of 4 PDs from July - November 2018

Presented at the Collingwood College Primary Staff Meeting, December 2018.

Acknowledgement of Country

At Collingwood College we meet on Wurundjeri land and pay our respects to Wurundjeri Elders of the past, present and future. We meet near an important site, the confluence of the Yarra River and Merri Creek.

Presenters of Possum Skin Pedagogy

- Annette Sax, Taungurung woman
Founded Yarn Strong Sista Performs Possum Hunt Show, Aunty Iris Lovett's story
- Dr Sue Atkinson, Yorta Yorta woman
Author of PHD about early Childhood Aboriginal education.
 - Her research question asked Elders, "what do you want Aboriginal children to learn about Culture?"
 - The answers informed the Possum Skin Pedagogy
- Aunty Fay Muir, Boonwurrung Elder
Spoke on behalf of VACL (Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages)
- Denise Rundle, Early Childhood educator

Why the training for Educators?

- A 'curriculum' is being developed, the Possum Skin Pedagogy, intended to be released in Feb/ March 2019.
- Aunty Doris Paton suggested that educators needed to be trained on how to respectfully deliver a curriculum.
- There was an overriding feeling that Aboriginal content in Education had gone from no inclusion in the curriculum, to 'stereotypical' and generalized content (for example dreamtime stories or dot paintings without context).
- Instead Aboriginal education needs to recognize living cultures, local knowledge, involve or consult Aboriginal people, and properly acknowledge sources.
- The Possum Skin Pedagogies and PDs were hoped to be a starting point for this, with much more to come.
- They were planned as 'slow PDs' but I will try to give a glimpse here.

Where are we? What country/ies do we live on?

Begin by considering where you are, where you live, work and travel every day.

- The Wurundjeri-Willam and Wurundjeri-Balluk are clans of the Woi Wurrung language groups
- Wurrung means language or lip movement
- The Woi Wurrung is a shared language with different pronunciations
- Great resources at Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages

Protocols for including language

“We are just starting to reclaim and revive our languages. We need time to do this ourselves before sharing with the wider community.”

Aunty Fay Muir, Boon Wurrung, speaking to the Possum Skin Pedagogy Training, September 2018.

Aunty Fay Muir, Boon Wurrung

- Be aware and educate yourself of history – Indigenous languages were banned at missions and in schools.
- Words of common use, for example Wominjeka in Woi Wurrung, are able to be used. Still best to connect to the person or source. There is an app available from VACL.
- For other words: Contact a local Aboriginal group or VACL.
- Wait until they get back to you.
- If given permission, ideally get someone from that community to teach it or acknowledge sources.
- Connect to context and country – Yarn Strong Sista have native animal soft toys for kids to play with, or bring in part of country- gum leaves, flowers.

Possum Skin Cloaks

- The Pedagogy that is being produced will relate to learning about Possum Skin Cloaks among other aspects of South-East Aboriginal cultures.
- It is a story that is being reclaimed by Victorian Aboriginal people.
- Possum Skin cloaks are and were significant both practically and spiritually.
- There are only 5 cloaks remaining from pre-colonial times. Two of these are in the Melbourne Museum.
- The practice of making cloaks is being revived. Aboriginal people are re-learning the craft and there are a number of skilled cloak-makers.

Stay tuned for the Possum Skin Pedagogy and resources in 2019.

In the meantime we can consider what Collingwood College is currently doing, and could be doing, to include Aboriginal culture and content in respectful ways.

Resources - Websites

- VAEAI – Victorian Aboriginal Education Association <http://www.vaeai.org.au/>
- VACL – Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages <http://www.vaclang.org.au/>
- Yarn Strong Sista Catalogue (storybooks, soft toys and craft):
<https://yarnstrongsista.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/YSSCatalogue.pdf>
- Wurundjeri Tribal Land Council (located at Abbotsford Convent)
<https://www.wurundjeri.com.au/>
- Koorie Youth Council (on Youth Justice/Aboriginal Incarceration issues there is an instructive 2018 report), Ngaga-dji
<https://www.ngaga-djiproject.org.au/>
- Cultural Victoria <https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/>
- Melbourne Museum <https://museumsvictoria.com.au/bunjilaka/whats-on/first-peoples/>

Resources – Early Years Texts

- *Welcome to Country* by Aunty Joy Murphy
- *Bartja and Mayila* by Sue Atkinson; illustrated by Annette Sax
- *Yurri's Manung* by Sue Atkinson; illustrated by Annette Sax
- *The Southern Cross and Nerran the Moon* by Lynnette Solomon; illustrated by Rachel Mullet
- *Marngrook - The Long-ago Story of Aussie Rules* by Titta Secombe
- *Me and my Mum* by Anita Heiss and Jay Davis
- *People and Places* by Aunty Debbie Austin

Exploring and Learning Together; Signs, Symbols and Sharing

Robyn Brown, Kindergarten Teacher at Arnold's Creek Kindergarten

Forming and maintaining respectful relationships

I have strengthened my relationships with Kirrip, an Aboriginal organisation in Melton. After a few visits to this organisation and establishing relationships with the Elders I have now listened to their stories and have shared mine.

One of the staff from Kirrip will be coming up to visit my service. Normally I would have gone there and just expected them to come to the kinder but now I'm more aware of the importance of establishing relationships.

Embedding Aboriginal perspectives

We had been embedding Aboriginal perspectives prior to attending the Possum Skin Pedagogy sessions. For example, before the sessions began, I had introduced the children to the Aboriginal flag and talked about the meaning of the 3 colours.

We had been conducting an Acknowledgement of Country with the children:

Here is the land (touch the floor)
Here is the sky (arms up high)
Here are my friends (open arms)
And here am I (hug yourself)
We say thank you (hand to chin and move outwards)
To the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation
On whose land we play (palms up circular motion)
And learn (pointer finger to side of the brain)

Adapted from Staines, J and Ruby Scarlet, R (Edits) *The Aboriginal Early Childhood Practice Guide*, pg. 40, Multiverse Publishing, www.multiverse.com.au, 2018.

The actions listed above are Auslan signs that one of our educators brought back from an in-service she attended.



At the end of May for Reconciliation week the children made the flag with tissue paper or coloured it in.

We added in the signing for Wurundjeri people, as shown to our colleague at the in-service, by an Aboriginal woman who was one of the facilitators at this in-service. On both hands the thumb and smallest finger are tucked in. The left hand is held in a vertical position, while the right hand, in a horizontal position, touches fingertips with the left hand and then moves along in an up and down motion, depicting hills. This was to illustrate that the Wurundjeri people were from hill country.

After the sessions began, we changed our Acknowledgement of Country from just being on our blue carpet, to sitting in a circle around a mat of Aboriginal symbols provided to the service by the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated.

The children learnt about the symbols on the mat. We also brought in Australian native plants, some bark, the Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islands and Australian flags and sat everything on a piece of hessian on the mat to symbolise bringing Country inside.

We have been sharing Aboriginal language we were taught at the sessions. We taught the children the Aboriginal Hokey Pokey. They remembered all the Aboriginal words for the body parts.

Sharing knowledge with colleagues

During the Melton Learning Festival, I attended a session on “Wurundjeri’s Cultural Heritage of the Melton Area”, based on a book written by Uncle Bill Nicholson and Mandy Nicholson and facilitated by Annette Vickery, Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer with the Melton City Council. I also attended a “Storytelling and Yarning” session with Annette. I was then able to share this book and my learning with my colleagues, who then shared this learning with their kindergarten children and families. Annette also gave me additional copies of the book so that each of our Aboriginal families at the service could have their own personal book.

We are engaging in slow learning, really slowing down and learning about Aboriginal culture. I have learnt that it’s not about ‘ticking the boxes’ it’s how we can be respectful and build relationships and having people come in and share their knowledge with us.

Embedding Aboriginal Perspectives

Susan McNally, The Joey Club

In my centre there seemed to be some reluctance towards embedding Aboriginal perspectives in the program. We decided we wanted to go to the professional development to gain more knowledge of Aboriginal culture. We wished to share this with the staff and make them more culturally aware and make our centre a culturally safe place.

Celebrating Marngrook

During the training Annette asked us to research the story of Marngrook or Game Ball. The children and families at our centre love football. We looked at what Marngrook means and found that AFL was definitely influenced by Marngrook. We shared a big display in the foyer and emphasised pictures and information around Marngrook. We used images from the Marngrook Footy Show and Aboriginal football players, along with football overall.

These people are Aboriginal role models and there are many Aboriginal football players. One staff member brought her family in to show them the display, her children wanted to see the Possum skin football. A couple of the parents commented on how wonderful it was. The display was shared on 'Storypark', a digital portfolio for parents.



Making our own Marngrook

The Aboriginal family who attends our centre loaned us their 2 little boys' possum skins and kangaroo skin and we learnt how the possum skins were stuffed with charcoal then sewn together with kangaroo tail sinew to make a Marngrook football. We rolled up the possum skin and stuffed it with tiny pinecones in the middle to give it filling, then tied it together with tussock grass.

Marking National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day

I did another display for August the 4th 2018, when we celebrated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day in my room. I began by setting up a display to inform educators, families and children about the important background behind the Stolen Children being given the same day for their birthday.

I set up a timeline with photos and posters of a number of Children's Day themes, along the top there was printed information from the fact sheets. 2018 is the 30th anniversary for the day and the theme was Spread the Word.



Part of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day display.

I added a pad of sticky notes and a pen for everyone to write a message to the children to celebrate their birthday. A number of staff and one family contributed. The children listened to a very brief explanation of the day while I drew pictures of two children representing both groups who were taken from their families and placed with other families but no one knew their birthdays so they were all given the same day, the 4th of August, for their new birthdays.

The children were between 2 and 3 years of age so we kept it brief and simple. They then helped ice the patty cakes in the colours of the flags and later they blew out the candle on their cake after singing happy birthday to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The children were able to identify the colour of the flag they chose and the meaning of the colour on the flag while we ate. Later two of those children scribbled their message on a sticky note and their mum scribed their message, 'a cake'.



The staff and children responded positively to this display and the activity in my room. I feel the cultural awareness is building and at the same time the walls that were up around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives are little by little coming down. The staff in my room said the activity was simple and enjoyable.

I am currently finding out more about the Stolen Generations in doing an assignment on the topic for my Bachelor of Education.

Sitting with Country, Connecting with Nature

Denise Rundle, Boroondara Kindergarten

For Denise the major impact of the training was learning to sit with Country. As one of the presenters who spoke with participants about slowing down and sitting with Country she found it ironic as she came to the realisation that she needed to do this too. She now feels more aware of her connection to the Country on which her centre sits and consequently the deeper level in which she embeds Aboriginal perspectives in her program.

In one of the sessions the story of Bartja and Mayila was shared by Annette. For Denise the image of Uncle Ambrose talking with Bartja by Dungala (the Murray River) as he advised Bartja ‘to sit quietly by Dungala and the answer will come to you’ made a big impact.

While listening to this story she was reminded of the moments when she and the children had connected with Country. Some of the examples she shared were:

- Arriving at kindergarten and going outside. We started to look for signs that other creatures had been in the garden – on Wurundjeri Country – when we were at home. This meant that children were noticing and thinking about Country.
- Laying down and looking at Sky Country – listening, breathing, being still – a new understanding for me that Country is not only land and waters.
- Exploring the links of the Wurundjeri people to the Manna gum tree.
- Observing the Manna gum tree in our Kindergarten, leaves, colours, movement in the wind looking for marks in the trunk left by possums.
- Walking to find other Manna gum trees in the area.

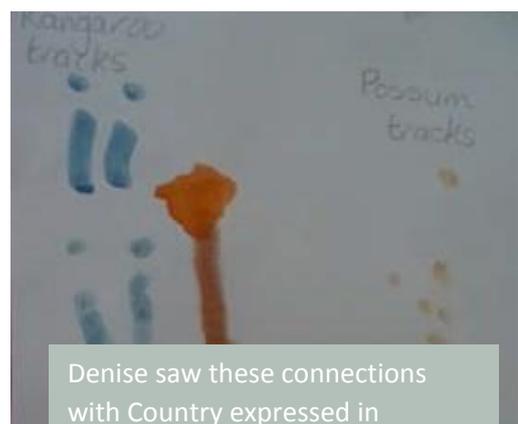
Denise was led to think more deeply about sitting with Country and not just being in Country especially when exploring the narrative of connecting with nature as presented in the training.



A mural by Annette Sax at Boroondara Kindergarten, inspired by the story of Bartja and Mayila.



Denise looking at Sky Country.



Denise saw these connections with Country expressed in children's art, conversations and stories.

Denise shared the following story with me ‘that would not have happened had I not being involved in Possum Skin Pedagogy.’

A dead pigeon

One day we found a dead pigeon before the children arrived. Previously, I would have buried it before the children arrived (even though I knew that it could be a learning experience for children, but I didn’t want to go there). This time, I waited for some of the children to arrive, we talked about what could have happened and then we buried it and said goodbye to the pigeon.

At the same time, we had been reading “Little Black Trackas” and 2 children decided to make a similar book using the Australian animals as models for their drawings. One child’s book diverged into a story of a dead Waa (in hindsight, I think this child thinks that Waa is the Woi-wurrung word for all birds). He retold the story of burying the dead pigeon and it included how it happened on Wurundjeri land.

One week later... a dead Waa the crow

Yes, in exactly the same place, we found a dead crow. This time I covered it over and waited until all the children have arrived - about one and a half hours. All the children knew about the dead

crow and when it was time, we set about paying our respects. Co-incidentally, one of the Aboriginal families arrived and I asked the mother (who is from Western Australia) about her relationships with crows. She said, “One is OK but more than one means death.” I told her what had happened and what we were going to do - she came out and joined in by observing. Later she said, “I liked how you did that - you got the children to say thanks and show respect.” (This was an unexpected validation from this parent).

What we did...

The children talked about the dead pigeon and now the dead crow; we all speculated as to what had happened. The children wanted to have a closer look so I held the bird and children looked at it closely - many were a bit afraid, especially when they saw the claws and beak. It was decided that it looked like an old Waa the crow, that there had been a big storm last night (true) and maybe it hadn’t been able to hold on to the branch anymore.

We dug a hole near the pigeon and buried the crow. I told them when my dad died, we all put some dirt in his grave to say thanks and goodbye. All the children did this, with many saying thanks to Waa for looking after us as the Protector. One child made a sign so that all the children would know that Waa the crow was there. Another child was very worried that there would be no more Waa the crows to look after us and Country. He then noticed some other crows around and decided that this was a good thing. It was a big talking point for the next few days and many parents asked me about what had happened.

So... from that starting point, a big change has happened for me, my colleague (who had been very uncomfortable with talking about this with children) and the children.

Bartja and Mayila, Atkinson, S. and Sax, A., Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages. 2013. Little Black Trackas, Hall, M. and Saunders, G., Neenann. 2015.

Our Path to Reconciliation

Marieke Lutterberg, Tyabb Village Children's Centre

In 2018 we officially commenced our Reconciliation Action Plan when we signed up for Narragunnawali, the tool for Reconciliation in schools and early childhood education.

The Village feels it has a role to play in building a pathway for Reconciliation from the start of children's education. Therefore, we must have a good understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, history and contemporary issues.

As part of building this understanding I took part in the in the Possum Skin Pedagogy Professional Learning Project. This project is a collaboration project designed by Sue Lopez Atkinson, Annette Sax and Denise Rundle and this project aims to create connections between Aboriginal Elders, their communities and Early Childhood Educators and will become a guide for Early Childhood services in Victoria.

The pedagogy addresses seven narratives:

- Journey and Healing
- Ceremony and Spirituality
- Aboriginal Language and Literacy
- Nature
- Family
- Science and Technology
- Recreation

At this stage my response to the training has been very much personal and reflective. I haven't embedded that much in practice. I'm still trying to make sense of the training. I have changed the way of thinking about embedding Aboriginal perspectives: it's not just ticking the boxes; I need to step back and reflect. I need to think deeply about what the Possum Skin Pedagogy means for the values, vision, philosophy and practices in my Early Childhood service. I need to identify a pathway which represents who we are, who we want to become, where we are going on this journey and who might guide us along the way.

As Denise Rundle, Kindergarten teacher and one of the presenters stated "it's sometimes easy to act like an unguided missile of good intentions. As Aboriginal communities work to revive culture and language it is their choice to decide what aspects of this they wish to share."

I am learning to let go of preconceived ideas that I have around Aboriginal communities. I have a deeper knowledge now and have broadened my understanding of the Aboriginal way of living and identity, respect for the land, and family. The more information I have the more that I can share. I hope that the children I teach will take this knowledge into the primary years and beyond. I hope

I can inspire the children to stand up and have a voice, which can lead to acceptance, inclusion and reconciliation. I have learnt that Aboriginal people come from many mobs, all which may have differing opinions and ideas about what Aboriginal perspectives look like.

My question is how do you work out a position between different opinions?

I am still learning how to put this knowledge into practice and convey this to my team. Relationships with the Aboriginal community and Elders will be the guide for this part of the journey.

Connecting with Boonwurrung Elder Aunty Fay Stewart Muir

One of the actions of the RAP is making connections with the local Elders. The Boonwurrung and Bunurong people, who are the traditional custodians of the land Tyabb Village Children's Centre is on, have two prominent female Elders: Aunty Fay Stewart Muir (Boonwurrung) and Aunty Caroline Briggs (Boonwurrung).

Aunty Fay Stewart Muir was one of the speakers at the training. We connected with Aunty Fay and she kindly accepted our invitation to come and visit Tyabb Village all the way from Geelong!

She joined the children's Monday group at their Bush Kinder session in our little forest and showed us a boomerang, clap sticks, a coolamon and a musical instrument made from a baobab tree. She then shared with us the story of the possum skins. Aboriginal children are wrapped in possum skin cloaks, made of 6 skins sewn together, with special markings burnt into the leather back. Over the course of a life time, the cloak will be made to fit by adding additional skins and more markings to document a life's story. At the end of life, the owner is buried wrapped in this cloak.

There are only five traditional historical cloaks remaining: two are in the care of the Museum Victoria Collection and the other three are held overseas are in international collections. The art of making possum skin cloaks is now being revived and many Aboriginal children will now participate in a Welcome Bubup to Country ceremony, where they will receive their own!

We thanked Aunty Fay for sharing her time, patience and knowledge with us. The children gifted her with a beautiful bush bouquet, made from flowers and greenery the children and educators brought in from their home gardens.

As a children's centre, we are looking forward to strengthening our relationship with Aunty Fay, building mutual trust and respect to continue our journey together towards reconciliation.



Aunty Fay Stewart Muir

Storytelling and the Seasons

Jane Evans, Ballarat Steiner School and Kindergarten

The training has given me greater confidence and determination in following the direction I had begun to follow when I arrived in Ballarat in 2013. The Steiner curriculum for early childhood is intimately linked to nature, the seasons, and meaningful adult work. When I moved here from Melbourne I decided to use the local Indigenous weather and seasonal knowledge as the basis for my term's planning, with the European seasonal picture as a secondary influence in the form of domestic work, gardening, and cooking. I experienced a lot of difficulty making formal connections with the local Aboriginal organisations, but the training reinforced the importance of establishing these. It connected me to Aunty Fay, who encouraged me to include language and storytelling using publicly available resources when local connections were not forthcoming.

Oral storytelling and the rich use of language linked to movement in song, gesture games and rhymes, are central parts of any Steiner program. We write our own stories, songs, and rhymes, and choose traditional folktales and children's stories, games, rhymes and songs from the country in which our program is based, and reflecting the cultural backgrounds of the children who attend.

Steiner saw the process of human development mirrored in different stages of world history, or epochs, and the school curriculum takes children through the mythologies and imaginative pictures of many different times and cultures.

In Australia most of our resources for the early childhood curriculum have come from Steiner kindergarten teachers in Europe and England, where the education has been established longer than here in Australia, but many of us have felt the importance of introducing Aboriginal culture to children in their first seven years of life.

Of course for Aboriginal children themselves this is vital, but for all young children here there seems to be a "rightness" of fit between the Aboriginal understanding of the world and traditional tasks of daily life, and the deeper needs of young children.

The training has given me more courage to pursue this, and to deepen my existing knowledge and connections. I can now call Aunty Fay with questions and speak with her about Aboriginal languages, and I use the Aboriginal language apps available through Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL).

The app I use is Wadawurrung, which gives an introduction to the languages of the region that encompasses the Geelong and Ballarat areas of Victoria: Uncle Bert Fagan, Sean Fagan and Tammy Gilson speak the Wadawurrung words and phrases on the app, giving the user a guide to the correct pronunciation. Words are arranged alphabetically, both in English and in Wadawurrung, or can be found using a pictorial link, or from categories in English, such as 'actions', 'body', 'ceremonial', and so on. The content was produced in partnership between the Wathaurong Aboriginal Corporation and VACL. The not for profit Miromaa Aboriginal Language and Technology Centre developed the technology behind this and other Aboriginal language apps as part of its work to document, conserve and disseminate traditional Aboriginal languages.

Our local language is Wadawurrung. We honour the Wadawurrung people by using their language in conversation with the children about the things we see in our garden and natural surrounds, in rhymes and songs in our morning circle, and in our stories. I have been

reluctant to use Aboriginal stories in the kindergarten without express permission from those whose stories they are, so instead I have composed my own nature stories using Wadawurrung language wherever I can, with a focus on Aboriginal seasonal knowledge, animals, plants and traditional activities. The training has altered the way I look at the natural world around me and given me a new foundation to consider around oral storytelling. I have a much deeper connection to the subtle seasonal changes, and to the local plants and what they would have been used for. The children have always collected and chewed the sap from our wattle trees, for example, and now I can tell them what other things this would have been used for, and is still being used for by local Aboriginal artists and dancers. This added richness has been a gift for me, and I hope, for the children. Once your consciousness has been opened, you can never see things in the same way again: Indigenous perspectives have become a fundamental starting point in my intentional teaching.

We look first to the children in front of us, and their particular needs as a group, but then go immediately to the changes that are appearing in the environment for inspiration and research stories, rhymes, and work tasks for the term to fit with seasonal pictures and the traditional human activities within the environment.

So many things that would have occupied the traditional owners of the land are deeply meaningful to young children, in work or in play; the need for shelter, safety and protection; to gather and hunt food; to gather materials and make tools (or weapons!); to decorate and celebrate community, seasons, games, beliefs... the children dig clay to make vessels; pull bark from logs to hold the plant materials and gather play "food", or real fruit, berries and herbs for our meals.



Playing with clay.

They make shelters from bush materials, and draw on the rocks using the coloured clay, charcoal from the fire, and wattle sap. And the adult work of gardening, harvesting, and so on has been enriched by drawing on knowledge of tasks that others have done on this land for thousands of years before us: for example, we pull reeds from the side of the dam and collect the grasses to make twine and baskets that the children can use in play. In all our work and stories the adults reflect upon how others have lived on this land before us and performed so many of these tasks before us, and I believe the children learn from, and flourish in, the attitudes of respect and reverence that arise from such reflection.

We use open-ended natural materials wherever possible and have worked outdoors to make a beautiful environment to encourage nature back into what was once farmland. Native bees are feeding and nesting in the log garden borders and insect hotel; lizards and frogs share the same logs and the sandpit; we have wrens and thornbills and honeyeaters in the native shrubs. We watch the pair of wedge-tailed eagles hovering above the kindergarten as they hunt, and we see Waa chase him away, or court his own reflection in our glass doors in spring, and then bring his fledglings to learn to steal our bantam eggs from the chook house.

At the end of each term we celebrate a seasonal festival and for the winter festival, held at night close to the solstice, the children work over several weeks to make paper lanterns and lead their family in an evening walk, ending in our kindergarten with a story by candlelight.

After beginning the training I wrote a story for the festival that set our own time and small place in a larger picture of Aboriginal knowledge of astronomy, talking about the emu visible in the night sky over the school at that time of year, using Wadawurrung language, and telling a nature story about barnong, the ringtail possum we have seen on the nesting in the gums over the kindergarten fence.

My sister made a possum puppet for me and we constructed a possum nest in the kindergarten from gum branches and leaves. At the end of our lantern walk the children and their families sat in the light of the paper lanterns while a colleague moved the puppet through the branches and leaves, out of its family nest and into its own little nest that we wove as I told the story. The dual threads of our kindergarten culture and the Aboriginal culture were worked into the story, and I am now trying to weave these dual threads through the program all the time.

In the warmer months we talk about blackbirds and wrens nesting; we make crab apple jelly and herb tea but the children collect the herbs in the coolamon, and create their own from bark in the garden to use in their play.



At Christmas there are white lilies and red roses alongside the callistemon in Christmas colours, and bunches of native gasses take over late in summer once the flowers are spent.

Before I began the training I felt a need to honour Country and its peoples, but I was reluctant to make a mistake or to risk causing offence. The training gave me the courage to make mistakes and to learn from them, and helped me to connect with people who encouraged that learning. It stoked a deep desire to learn more and to forge meaningful connections with Country and Aboriginal people wherever I might go in the future. I feel convinced of the worth of making mistakes, and that there is greater risk in doing “nothing”.

I have rewritten the philosophy of the centre to reflect cultural safety. It gives me a starting point in conversation with Indigenous parents and I feel more confident in asking them what they want for their children at our centre and in seeking their input and support for the program for all of the children. I am also more conscious of opportunities to take part in artistic events in the local community and in Melbourne. There has been an Indigenous artist working with the children in the primary school and it would be wonderful to invite an indigenous artist, musician or storyteller into the kindergarten to work over time, or to work with those with local knowledge to reintroduce bush food plants to the land around our dam. I will also try to go to any workshops that focus on Aboriginal culture. This is the first time I've had such an opportunity in Victoria. It's been incredibly enriching and strengthening. I am so grateful to those who have worked to bring it together, and for the generosity shown by Aboriginal elders and community in sharing their time and knowledge.

A Journey of Learning

Kathy Skinner, Uniting Pascoe Vale South Kindergarten

While Aboriginal perspectives have always been in the curriculum it's become a lot more embedded and innate. We always have had objects around the kinder but now we are more aware that they are discussed. We are being more consistent and less stereotypical.

I feel more immersed in the culture and more aware. I feel confident that I am on a journey of learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and able to impart my knowledge to the children and their families. We have had some parents come in to find out what their children are talking about and ask many questions.

We use some words that we were taught in the training throughout our programs. We engage in the hokey pokey using Aboriginal words, that was a wonderful learning tool during family occasions; beginning conversations about culture and how/what we are endeavouring to teach the children.

I have been proactive in sharing what I have learnt with my co-educators. As a result, we feel that as a team we have expanded our teaching about culture, our knowledge of where to appropriately purchase resources, engage in respectful conversations and practices.

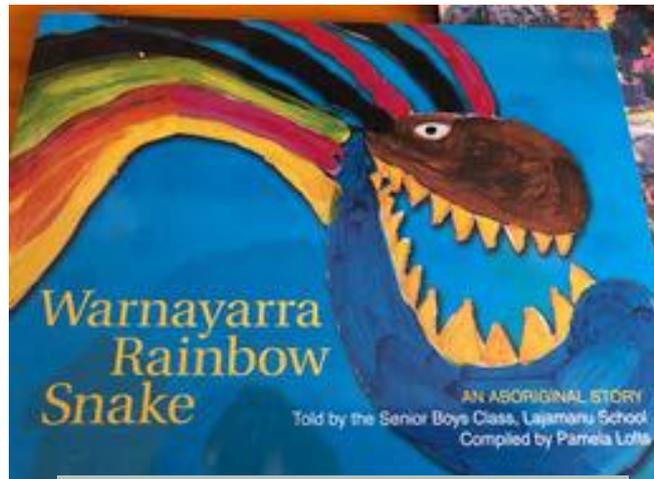
We have been speaking to our Parents Advisory Committee about a Welcome to Country ceremony later this year. We have reached out to a couple of local kindergartens to discuss combining the event to share costs and build relationships between kindergartens, local tribes and the community.

We are hoping to engage in an incursion later this year with the Wurundjeri Tribe Council.

The gift of story

Some of the children have been interested in Australian Aboriginal stories. This year for the first time we gave the children Aboriginal Dreaming Stories as Christmas gifts.

One family from America was particularly excited to receive their book as the mother had the same book as a child growing up in Australia. The family had always embraced Aboriginal culture and had been aware of keeping Aboriginal Australian culture strong. Reading the book was one of the ways that they had done this and kept their links to Australia.



Warnayarra Rainbow Snake, based on a story told by the Senior Boys Class at Lajamanu School.

Final reflections and continuing the journey

Feedback from the participants and these case studies illustrate the strength of their understandings as they journey towards embedding the possum skin pedagogy in early childhood programs.

These journeys have been sign posted by the narratives, Aboriginal pedagogies, knowledges and respectful communications between practitioners and the traditional custodians of the land on which they educate and care for young children.

While the interconnection between knowledges, ethics and protocols was established we could not explore all of the narratives as two of our guest speakers were unfortunately unable to attend.

Therefore, the following narratives – which are based on spiritual or sensitive material and must be presented with the direct involvement of an Elder or another Aboriginal community leader – require further exploration.

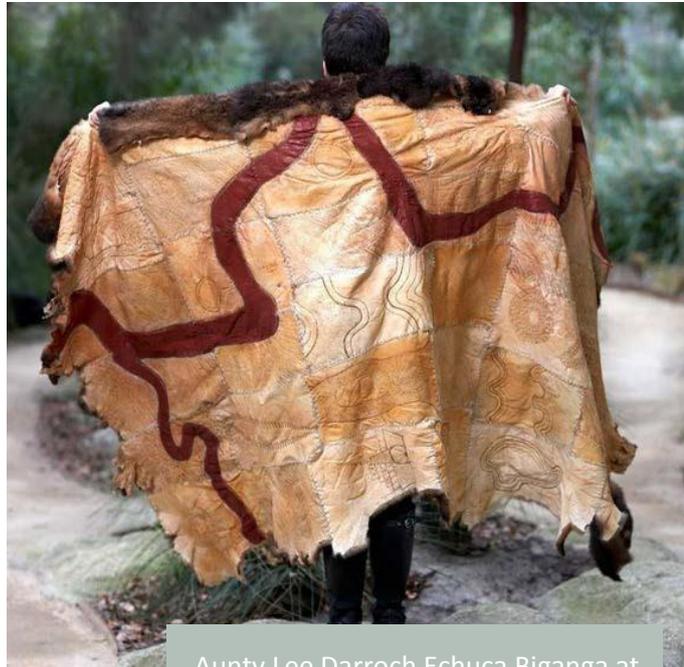
1. The narrative of journey and healing (e.g. tradition, loss, survival and regeneration)
2. The narrative of ceremony/spirituality (with emphasis on the ceremonial place of skins in Aboriginal Communities, e.g. The place of skins in Welcome to Country, in births and deaths)
3. The narrative of Aboriginal literacy (e.g. how children learnt the meaning of symbols through story telling)

Although the participants feel more informed and confident they also acknowledge the complexity of this journey. Marked by pauses for reflection, dealing with feelings of doubt and ongoing questions about the ways forward. It can be a circular journey as one participant noted:

I feel as though I'm back at the start of the journey. I'm questioning and reflecting.

Therefore, feedback from the participants also reflect their aspirations around deepening their understandings, enhancing respectful connections with the local Aboriginal community and authentically implementing Aboriginal pedagogies.

Consequently, AAPEC would like to continue this journey with the original participants by applying for funding to further these aspirations and provide the opportunity to explore the remaining narratives with Elders and senior members of the Victorian Aboriginal community.



Aunty Lee Darroch Echuca Biganga at Melbourne Museum.

Appendix 1:

The Aboriginal Hokey Pokey

Substitute the English words of hand, foot, bottom and body with the following shared Language Words of Woi Wurrung, Boon Wurrung and Daung Wurrung (Kulin Nation).

- Hand: Marnong
- Foot: Djinang (silent d - Geenung)
- Bottom: Mum (Moom)
- Body: Marram (roll the r)

Words shared by Annette Sax, from Yarn Strong Sista (Taungurung), with permission by Aboriginal language specialists from Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL): www.vaclang.org.au.

It is recommended that this song is shared and taught on the lands of the nations above.

Appendix 2:

What does Victoria's Indigenous community expect from early childhood services?

A paper based on a seminar presented by Dr Sue Atkinson Lopez at Melbourne Polytechnic Preston, 2016.

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As we begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we are meeting and learning on today, the Wurundjeri people. I would also like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri Elders past, present and emerging.

My people are Yorta Yorta people whose traditional homelands radiate out from the junction of Goulburn and Murray rivers in Northern Victoria. I was born and raised on Wurundjeri land and I would like to thank the Elders of both the Wurundjeri and Boon Wrung nations for their support and guidance over the last 31 years in which I have worked as an early childhood professional on their lands.

As some of you may know the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community recently celebrated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day on August 4th. The theme for this year, 2016, is "My Country, Our Country, We all Belong."

It's hard to envision that this will ever be a reality for all Indigenous children considering the recent accounts of abuse of Indigenous children in juvenile detention in the Northern Territory. This is just one example of the racism that many of our children face in institutions across Australia.

But the hope and the challenge for us in the early years sector is to double our commitment to the right of Indigenous children to an education that is empowering and based on the principles of Indigenous self-determination and social justice. In Victoria, too many of our children are in juvenile detention and I believe that in giving our children the best early years education possible we are part of addressing some of the root causes of a high representation of our children in the system.

The Australian Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) is based on the themes of Belonging, Being and Becoming. The questions you need to reflect and act on as posed by an Indigenous parent are, in partnership with my family and community, how will you:

- Ensure that my child feels a sense of belonging here as an Indigenous person?
- Support my child in being a proud Indigenous person?
- Support my child in becoming a future Indigenous Elder? (Atkinson, 2012)

In Melbourne, many early years practitioners are slowly moving towards a more socially just society by embedding local Indigenous perspectives in their programs. But it has been a long

road. In reflecting on my own early education in the 1960s it was not about belonging, it was about being marginalised, being subjected to racism and becoming assimilated.

An example of one of the books used in Victorian schools in the 1960s describes Aboriginal people as:

Rather ugly, have dark skins and wear very few clothes. And they are not very clever for they do not know how to grow food or to look after animals or how to build good houses. At certain times of the year they paint themselves with great splashes of red, white and yellow. When painted like this they get very excited and do many strange dances. I should not like to be the child of one of these people would you?

- (Hornblow, 1953)

Imagine being an Aboriginal child hearing this from their teacher. What sort of message do you think is being conveyed here?

To me the message given here is that Aboriginal people are ugly, stupid, primitive and consequently bad parents. It is this type of thinking that informed the removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities.

The other colonial concepts of Aboriginality I recall from my education as a young child were:

- Captain Cook discovered Australia
- Aboriginal people did not resist invasion
- Aboriginal people were nomadic
- There are no Aboriginal people in Tasmania

I recall being told that Aboriginal people got depressed during 'settlement' and sat under trees and died. Although I knew intuitively that these things were untrue, I had no counter reference as my mother had been raised largely outside of the Aboriginal community after the death of her own mother. It was many years later when I gained an education from Aboriginal Elders such as the late Aunty Iris Lovett Gardiner that I had an informed framework from which to challenge these and other concepts.

Some of the concepts that have been particularly persistent in early childhood, which are a reflection of society in general are:

- The absence of or total assimilation of Aboriginal Victorians
- Real Aboriginal people as black and living in remote communities not cities like Melbourne.

Therefore, teaching about Aboriginality has frequently been informed by "looking north" in constructing the curriculum or programming. Ignoring the local Indigenous community and thereby reinforcing stereotypes.

Constructing an Indigenous inclusive program essentially means building respectful relationships with your local Indigenous community and actively engaging with their diverse voices.

Today I would like to share with you some of the results of my PhD research 'Indigenous self determination and early childhood education and care in Victoria' (2008). This research is based on the voices of 33 members of the Victorian Indigenous early childhood community; Elders, parents, early childhood professionals and children from Melbourne and three regional centres of Victoria.

One of chapters in my research 'Decolonising the mainstream' specifically explores the experiences and aspirations of Indigenous families and Koorie Early Childhood Field Officers (KECFOs) whose role now comes under the role of KESOs (Koorie Engagement Support Officers) participating in non- Indigenous early childhood services, predominantly kindergartens.

Most Indigenous people send their children to preschool for similar reasons as other Australians, such as school readiness, building social skills and knowledge, but would like to see this occur in an Indigenous inclusive environment. An environment built in partnership with Indigenous families, the KECFOs/KESOs and the broader Indigenous community.

Molly, a KECFO, expressed the Indigenous communities' expectations around preschool as:

Giving Indigenous children the same start as mainstream preschoolers offering them the same chance to develop in all areas of early childhood development but in a setting where being Indigenous is something to be proud of and they are learning about their culture.

- (Interview with Molly 2003, p.16)

Up until quite recently many Indigenous families only felt comfortable sending their children to Indigenous centres such as the MACS (Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services) confident that their children's identity and culture would be respected there as one parent stated:

As there weren't any Koorie services out there were our children were made to feel good about themselves and their identity and so that was one of the reasons that the MACS were set up.

- (Interview with Anne, 2003, p.15)

But not all Indigenous families had access to services such as a MACS in Victoria, so the majority of our children are enrolled in 'mainstream services'. Looking at my research the Indigenous community had several key expectations in regard to these 'mainstream' early childhood programs.

7 main points stood out from my research, these are:

1. A welcoming environment

Marylyn, a KECFO, who is also a grandmother explained:

I've been into the pre schools that have the ATSIC posters and for Koorie or Indigenous women and mothers I think this is inviting and saying 'come in'...If we had the flag up at all the preschool providers the mothers are going to say 'wow'. For more than two hundred years we have been alienated. It's about the invitation to say 'come in we are Koorie friendly'.

- (Interview with Marylyn, 2003, p.50-51)

Displaying the Aboriginal flag, for example, signals a respect for Indigenous peoples and cultures and invites Indigenous participation in the program. A welcoming environment is foundational in beginning partnerships with Indigenous families as some families may be reluctant to identify themselves as Indigenous. If the centre hasn't signalled openness to inclusion they may feel they are risking exposing themselves and their children to racism.

Molly, a KECFO, explained:

I think some people would be reluctant to identify 'cos it would make them stick out, they would not want to be the only Koorie family there. Past experiences with racism have taught Koorie people to put up and shut up.

- (Interview with Molly, 2003, p.17)

She feels people would identify themselves if the centre first identified itself as a Koorie friendly service.

The foyer of one centre was constructed in consultation with a local Indigenous Elder and Indigenous families at centre. Here, parents were greeted by:

- The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags. Posters of Indigenous people including local Indigenous people. This meant that Indigenous children often saw images of people that they knew, thereby strengthening connections with the centre.
- Books written by Indigenous Elders for parents and staff to read, such as the late Aunty Iris Lovett

Gardiners autobiography *The Lady of the Lake* (1997).

2. Staff that ask about cultural identity with respect

As Primrose, an Indigenous parent of a fair skinned child, remarked with irritation:

When I ticked the Koorie box on the enrollment form they rang up and asked if that was right because they said sometimes parents tick the wrong box.

- (Interview with Primrose, 2004, p.122)

The appropriate response could have been 'I noticed you ticked the box letting us know that you are Indigenous, can we have a conversation about how you would like your culture to be included in our program?'

Asking with respect means not asking how Aboriginal are you or how far back does it go or saying you don't look Aboriginal I thought you were Greek or similar remarks that challenge a person's identity. Many Aboriginal parents talked to me about the stereotypes they and their children often faced when interacting with early childhood professionals who challenged their identity as one parent stated:

I think some people have a limited and very stereotypical understanding of Aboriginal people. I think if you don't have really dark skin, they don't see you as being a real Aboriginal, if you live a contemporary way of life they don't see you as a real Aboriginal.

- (Interview with Anne, 2003, p.15)

CDs such as Aunty Wendy's *Mob* (Notely 1996) are popular at Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS). There are songs about the values many Aboriginal people see as important such as the Aboriginal flag, Aboriginal pride and identity, the extended family and learning about the land. The CD can be used to raise and discuss issues of identity with children. For example, 'There was a man' (Notely) a song which focuses on culture rather than colour when exploring Aboriginality. The song places the socio emotional cultural construction of identity rather than a particular lifestyle or degree of descent at its centre.

3. A program that reflects the lives of their children

Karen, a parent of an Indigenous child, was collecting posters and books to take into her child's centre. When I asked her what sort of things she was focusing on she said:

Contemporary images, we want to move away from the lap lap kind of deal, contemporary images that had a bit of a Victorian focus. He's a Victorian kid so I want him to see his own image around him. His skin is quite light so for him to have lots of photos of Aboriginal people with very dark skin would be hard for him to identify with.

- (Interview with Karen, 2003, p.76)

Donna, a non-Indigenous kindergarten teacher, agreed:

You need to find links with people that are real, like contemporary images of people, not showing someone living in the desert, which is still a valid image but not to represent (Aboriginal) culture in all its forms.

- (Interview with Donna, 2003, p.68)

When I started, teaching 'traditional' images of Aboriginal people in Dreaming stories was all that was available in books for young children. These stories are very important, especially stories from your local area that guide children in learning about culture, spirituality and caring for the land and each other. But I believe they can be problematic as the only introduction to Indigenous culture for young children in 'mainstream' early childhood settings. For non-Indigenous children they may reinforce stereotypes, for Indigenous children they may also be problematic as they don't reflect the way they live in urban centres such as Melbourne.

There are now books available such as the Indij Readers that reflect the lives of Indigenous children as they live today, yet highlight the values that Indigenous people see as important. I describe these books as narratives of the ordinary, as children visit the zoo for example, but demonstrate that colonisation has not erased Aboriginality in urban areas.

For example, in the story of *What I wanna be* by Prior, C., McIntosh, K., Murray, P., Hughes, S., and McKenzie, P. (2007) the focus is on young Indigenous children's ambitions for the future. On a deep reading the relationship between Indigenous culture and these ambitions emerge. These are: respect for the Elders, the place of the extended family, using Koorie English, being part of a collective for the common good, engaging with symbols of Aboriginality such as the flag, the place of women and girls, the role of young Indigenous girls and boys as activists and the rights of the Indigenous child.

4. An Indigenous inclusive program that is ongoing, not just for NAIDOC week but throughout the year

Anne, a parent who travelled out of her area to take her child to kindergarten, explained:

choose this kindergarten because her Koorie programming was something that was part of the everyday program it wasn't something that was just for Aboriginal week, his culture is definitely respected there.

- (Interview with Anne, 2003, p.96)

This programming is reflected in the centre philosophy for example:

At our kindergarten we are working on a daily basis to make reconciliation a part of our kindergarten program... traditional and contemporary Indigenous culture is part of our kindergarten program this is displayed through photos, art, stories, natural materials, activities, songs, games, cooking and dancing.

- (Interview with Maryla, 2006, p.126)

For Indigenous Inclusion to be authentic it needs to move beyond token gestures around themes such as Aboriginal week then be ignored for the rest of the year. Having a special emphasis during NAIDOC week or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Children's day of course is very appropriate.

5. A program that encourages all children to value Indigenous culture and challenges stereotypes

Anita, a KECFO, stressed:

An Indigenous aspect to the program is important for services that have Indigenous children but for services that have non Indigenous children to educate all of Australia that the thing that makes multi culturalism different from any were else in the world is Aboriginal people, and for pre schoolers to start to value this... and at the preschool level will have the chance to change non Indigenous children's views at that early age about Indigenous people.

- (Interview with Anita, 2003, p.12)

Even very young children can hold biased ideas around Aboriginality and exclude Indigenous children from their play. In my own study I found that dark skinned Indigenous children were sometimes rejected by their peers at preschool and wished they had lighter skin.

As Angel, a parent, reports:

I know another non-Aboriginal mother who has an Aboriginal child in preschool and the daughter says to her "I don't want to be black I want to be like you mummy"

- (Interview with Angel, 2003, p.64)

Celine reported a conversation she had had with her 3 year old son whose skin is fairer than hers:

My son says 'you've got to get brown like me; I say I am brown I'm black' No mum you're black, you've got to get brown like me.

- (Interview with Celine, 2003, p.3)

In both of these examples you can see how whiteness is desired and blackness is desired as children judge themselves and their families. I also found that light skinned Indigenous children could be challenged by being denied their identity by non-Indigenous children. As David, a parent, comments:

If one of the kids say they're Aboriginal and they (non-Aboriginal children) say 'You can't be you're not black' and that sort of thing. Or they might go home and say something to their parents and come back and say 'Mum says you're not (Aboriginal)'

- (Interview with David, 2004, p.87)

The early years of education and care are vital in challenging such stereotypes and biased behaviour by building new knowledge with children as Maryla, a kindergarten teacher, states:

Sometimes there has been a remark from the non-Indigenous children that they (Indigenous people) live in the desert where it's really hot and they don't wear clothes and they paint their bodies and those sorts of things or Aboriginal people are black... Hopefully we are able with the resources that we use and the way we discuss things and present things to show that's not the case...

- (Interview with Maryla, 2006, p.126)

6. Early childhood professionals that learn about the history of Indigenous people and its impact on families today

Anne, a parent, explained:

Many non-Indigenous people if they don't know about past policies, the stolen generations and those sorts of things that really affect our community, then they don't have a great understanding of how parenting skills may not be passed on.

- (Interview with Anne, 2003, p.16)

The removal of children from their families and communities also had a devastating effect on the teaching of Indigenous culture as the teaching generation was separated from the learning generation.

When inviting Indigenous parents to contribute to your program don't assume for example that they can share a Dreaming story from their culture with the children. If they would like to contribute to the program, ask them how they would like to do this.

Although the 10 non-Indigenous early childhood professionals interviewed for this study had little or no education around Indigenous inclusion as pre service teachers, they actively sought to educate themselves about Victorian Indigenous culture.

They spoke about:

- Talking to Indigenous families and the local (KESO)
- Attending cross cultural workshops
- Attending NAIDOC week celebrations
- Visiting the Koorie section at the museum where you can talk to Indigenous people and hear the voices of the Elders
- Accessing websites such as Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) who have numerous publications, research and resources around Indigenous early childhood education and care.

Jack, a non-Indigenous person working in an Indigenous children's service, especially highlights the voices of the elders in his education:

I think it's the best way of getting the message across that Aboriginal culture is a living being and its continued to grow and transform and adapt to the context of a colonized country and that it has connections back to pre-colonial times and the best way for people to understand that is to meet and talk to the Elders.

- (Interview with Jack, 2004, p.124)

Although it's not always easy to meet and talk to local Elders, reading the oral histories of our local Elders is a personal and culturally appropriate way of learning about Victorian Indigenous history and culture. For example, the late Aunty Iris Lovett Gardiner's autobiography *The Lady of the Lake* is very accessible.

Although I only interviewed four Indigenous Elders, all the Indigenous participants in the study felt the Elders voices and stories were important in the education of Indigenous children. Celine, an Indigenous early childhood professional, put it this way:

Our Elders need to pass on their stories to encourage children to know who they are, their identity and to make their culture a lot stronger and to believe in themselves.

- (Interview with Celine, 2003, p.1)

More specifically, Indigenous Elders want Indigenous children to learn:

- About their clan group and their totem
- About their traditional language
- About their traditional land
- About their natural world

The Inclusion of the voices of Indigenous Elders in the program is a central pedagogical practice in constructing authentic local Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum.

Although the Elders themselves may be unable to be directly involved in the centre younger Indigenous people can tell their stories or tell their own stories that have been inspired by the Elders knowledge and experience.

An example of such a story which addresses those areas of knowledge that the Elders see as important is *Bartja and Mayila* (Atkinson and Sax, 2013). These are:

- Learning Aboriginal language
- Decision making as a community process
- Consulting with the Elders
- The connection between nature and the spiritual realm
- Using materials from the environment to create arts and crafts
- Learning about animals' food sources
- Indigenous pedagogy being still, observing, listening and waiting

- The intergenerational skill of story telling

As this knowledge is usually learnt within the Indigenous child's family or Indigenous specific early childhood centres such as the MACS, non-Indigenous early childhood professionals should consult with Indigenous families and communities around inclusion.

7. Good communications with Indigenous families and the local Indigenous community were seen as foundational for inclusive practice by the Indigenous early childhood community, as they build knowledge and authentic local Indigenous perspectives through partnerships.

As Anita, a KECFO, described:

Teachers need to talk to families about what culture means to them and keeping that communication open... and purchasing those resources that the family feels are appropriate or getting in community people the family feels are appropriate (in) supporting that child's and family's cultural identity in the service.

- (Interview with Anita, 2003, p.13)

Talking to Indigenous families about 'what culture means to them' acknowledges that Aboriginality is marked not only by commonality but diversity and takes on different expressions from area to area and from family to family. Some families may be articulate and confident in forming partnerships in the early childhood service, others for a variety of reasons may be less so, as Molly explains:

Some parents may not be approaching the preschool teacher to have a program to cater for their child as they may not know themselves. They may be Indigenous people who have not grown up in that community they may be fostered or adopted.

- (Interview with Molly, 2003, p.17)

Some families may be learning about their Aboriginality themselves. Even those people who have grown up in their communities may not have access to resources to share such as traditional stories due to dispossession.

As Maryla, a non-Indigenous preschool teacher, reflects:

I think one of the things I presumed and I don't know why I presumed it was that Aboriginal people would know stories and those sort of things. And often they don't and that just reinforces displacement and you need to think why those stories haven't been handed down.

- (Interview with Maryla, 2003, p.63)

And for others it may be difficult to explain something that is part of your everyday life and taken for granted. As Angel, a parent, explains:

When you are part of a Koorie family you don't explicitly teach Koorie culture, it's just around them and part of them.

- *(Interview with Angel, 2003, p.63)*

As families shouldn't be the only source of information around Indigenous inclusion, early childhood practitioners should draw on their wider Indigenous community for guidance and support.

Valuing Indigenous culture within the early childhood sector and more broadly means recognising the expectations of Indigenous parents intersects with the rights of Indigenous parents, their children and communities to:

- Culturally appropriate and empowering early childhood education and care for their children. In spite of dispossession, we all have a vision for our children built on our cultural strengths.
- Exercise decision making in the planning and implementation of Indigenous perspectives in early childhood services.
- Expect that racism and bias will be challenged in the early childhood curriculum/program.
- Expect that the early childhood education sector will be a partner in dealing with the effects of colonisation and dispossession.

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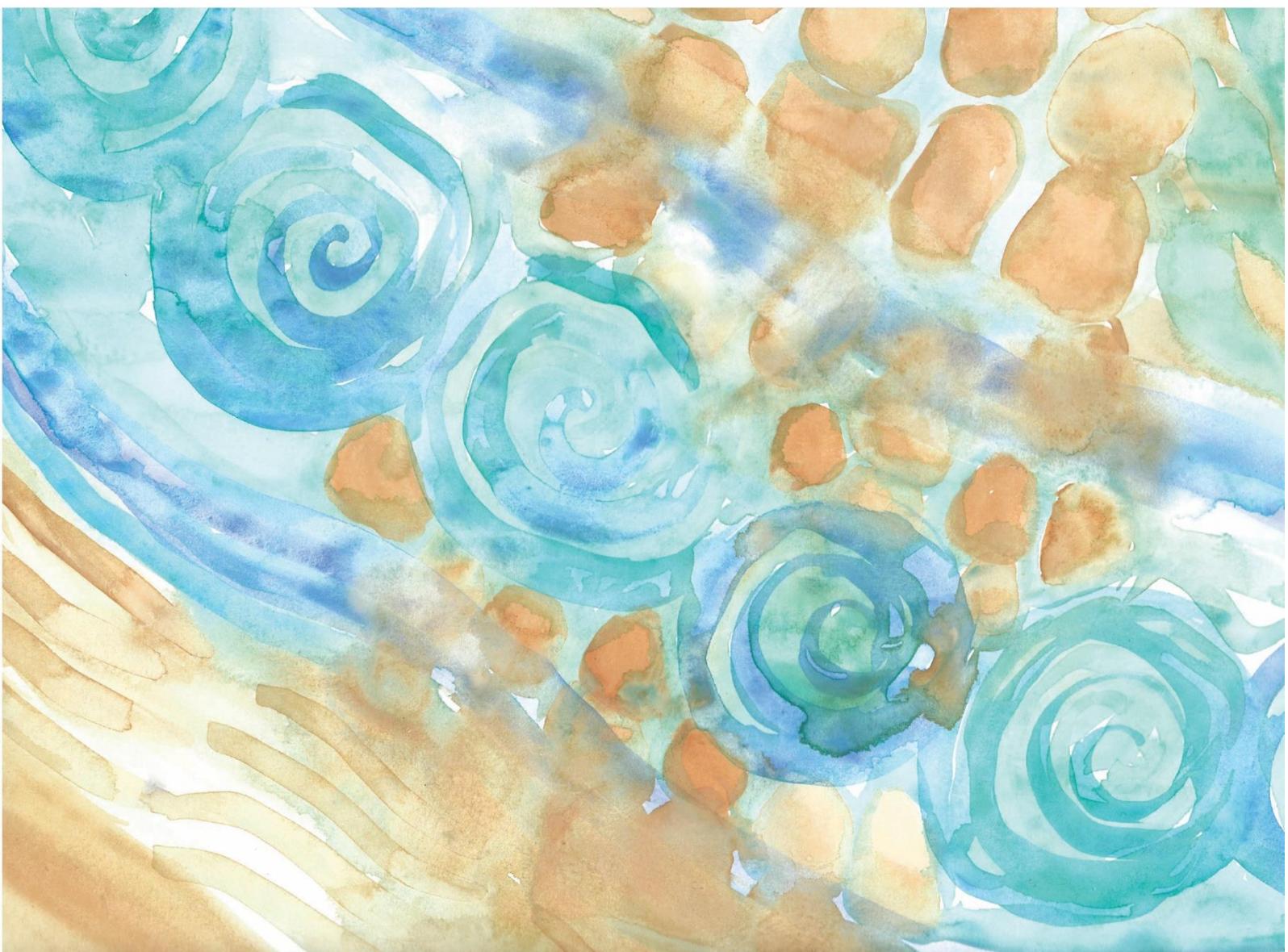
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Possum Skin Pedagogy: A Chain of Allies in the Early Years Landscape



Moonee Moonee by Annette
Sax, Taungurung artist.

Sue Atkinson

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this document contains the names of people who have passed on.

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Epigraph

Walk with Care on Country

Although passed into the Dreaming

They speak

The ancestors buried beneath our feet

They lay under burdens built

Over two centuries tall

Burdens that are eased

When you listen deep

And walk proudly on Country

Where both joy and sorrow

You keep

Sue Atkinson Yorta Yorta 2019

Introduction

In the second half of 2019 thirty-two early childhood practitioners participated in two full day learning sessions based on the Possum Skin Pedagogy: A Guide for Early Childhood Practitioners on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people in Moonee Ponds.

In 2019 Action on Aboriginal Perspectives in Early Childhood (AAPEC) applied to the Association of Graduates in Early Childhood Studies (AGCES) for further funding. This application was a response to the participants call for further training to enhance and deepen their understandings and knowledge of the pedagogy. This funding was subsequently granted, and a further round of training commenced in the second half of 2019 on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people at the Moonee Valley Council.

Walking along the Moonee Ponds Creek was a major part of the learning experience for the participants. The local Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people relied on the Moonee Ponds Creek and its associated rich plant and animal life for fishing, transport, food and clothing.

Prior to the degradation that followed colonisation the creek had shallow ponds of water that formed a chain in the dry season, flowing as one in the wetter months after the heavy rains.

Although the area has been degraded during colonisation there is a strong movement to restore, protect and develop the creek.

For me the creek is a metaphor for the movement around embedding Aboriginal perspectives in early childhood with the participants forming a series of ponds or a chain of allies. It is my hope that these ponds will eventually swell into a creek freely flowing throughout the early childhood field across Victoria.

Once again, the training was led by Annette Sax, Taungurung woman and Denise Rundle, an early childhood professional with strong links to the local Aboriginal community. Sue Atkinson attended and contributed informally during the sessions.

The objective of these two full day sessions was to focus on the narratives of journey and healing and spirituality/ceremony. We also aimed to deepen the understandings of all of narratives using reflective practice.

Reflective Practice and Understanding the Narratives

Participants used the following concepts to describe their learning journey when reflecting on their growing understandings since the 2018 sessions. These concepts were also used throughout subsequent discussions with the trainers and amongst participants.

- Sharing stories
- Listening
- Thinking more deeply, deep learning
- Journey
- Time to consider
- Reflect, reflecting, reflection
- Layers of understanding
- Relationships, values, respect
- Connecting with Country, caring for Country
- Discussing
- Slow learning, unhurried environment
- Deeper understanding, connecting at a deeper level
- “Deep Listening” to Country is called Dadirri by Auntie Miriam Rose Ungunmerr from the Northern Territory and Gulpa Ngwal by Yorta Yorta people.
- Profound
- Question
- Opening my mind

Reflective practice encompasses all of these concepts and according to the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, “reflecting on and critically evaluating practice is a core part of all early professionals work. It is at the heart of maintaining a learning culture in a service, setting or network and is linked with continuous improvement.” (p.8, 2016)¹

The pedagogical practice of reflection, underpinned by exploration, narration and conversation was at the center of these two days of training.

¹ Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, State of Victoria (Department of Education and Training) Published by the Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2016.

Day 1: The Narrative of Ceremony

Acknowledgement of Country

There was a gentle excitement as the participants entered the training space which had been transformed by Annette Sax who had brought 'the outside in'.

Annette had collected plants and items with 'intentional meaning' and set the tables with:

- Flowering gum from a special place where ceremonies were held
- Reeds from the Moonee Ponds creek
- A cockatoo feather: a sign of safe passage as told by Taungurung Elder Uncle Larry Walsh
- A basket made from She -oak
- Possum fur
- Banksia and native hibiscus from her garden
- Objects from op shops such as woven cane baskets holding beads, shells, wattle tree pods and gum nuts

At the beginning of the session Annette opened with an Acknowledgement of the Wurundjeri people on whose Country we were learning. She asked the participants to close their eyes and:

'Imagine what the area would have looked like over 200 years ago, over 2,000 years ago and over 20,000 years ago. Think about the Wurundjeri ancestors, the old people and how they were one with Country. Think about the animals and birds that were in this place and their connections to the land and waterways.'

Some reflections/thoughts on Acknowledgements of Country that emerged:

- Find out the name of the Traditional Custodians of the land on which your centre is located and the way it is pronounced.
- It is best to write your own Acknowledgement, reflecting the Country where your service is placed making it meaningful and local. If possible, consult with Elders. For example, Moonee Valley City Council consultation workshop between Elders and educators to help write a local Acknowledgement.
- Develop this with children and families.
- Ask children 'why do we have an Acknowledgement?', 'To thank Aboriginal people', why do we need to thank them? 'for looking after the land'
- If using an Acknowledgement from elsewhere acknowledge who wrote the words and what Country it was written on.
- The ceremony of Acknowledgement is also a practice of gratitude or mindfulness. Think about your centre's philosophy and its part in being proactive in looking after the land, waterways and animals.
- An Aboriginal practitioner talked about mindfulness being built in her centre and that she could use her own culture as an example of mindfulness in re connecting with nature.

Reflecting on Aunty Joy Murphy's book *Welcome to Country*, illustrated by Lisa Kennedy

This beautiful book in which Aunty Joy Murphy welcomes the reader onto the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people was recommended as a resource for practitioners to use in their centres. The following protocols must be used when sharing Aunt Joy's *Welcome to Country*².

Performing a Welcome to Country is restricted by age and knowledge in the form of Eldership and affiliations to Country. As a senior Elder of the Wurundjeri people Aunty Joy has the right to Welcome visitors onto Wurundjeri land.

In sharing Aunty Joy's books with children these rights must continue to be coupled with the differential rights to perform certain ceremonies.

Therefore, when introducing the book, you need to make it clear that these are the words and language of Aunty Joy who is a Wurundjeri Elder. She has written this book to welcome us onto Wurundjeri land.

² Welcome to Country by Aunty Joy Murphy; illustrated by Lisa Kennedy, Black Dog Books, Newtown, 2016.

The Narrative of Ceremony / Spirituality

'Singing is a wonderful way of teaching language when it is used in such a powerful context as dance and ceremony. It supports the breaking of a transgenerational cycle of language loss as if something is asleep you can always wake it up.' Mandy Nicholson speaking at Possum Skin training session September 2019.

We were honoured to be joined by Dr Mandy Nicholson a Wurundjeri woman to explore the narrative of ceremony.

Mandy is the founder of the Djirri Djirri dance group. Djirri Djirri means Willy wag tail in the Woi Wurrung language of the Wurundjeri people. Mandy generously shared the following information during her session. The Djirri Djirri dance group consists of girls and women. They sing in Woi Wurrung language and the dances have been created to honour the Ancestors, family, Country and animals.

Wurundjeri Elders such as Aunty Dianne Kerr are involved in the group as well as the 'in-between generation' who are emerging as leaders. These younger ones or in-betweeners are pivotal in reviving cultural knowledge. This knowledge hasn't necessarily been handed down from one generation to the other due to dispossession and policies such as the removal of children.

The girls in the dance group wear a feather skirt (Dilbanain) until they go through a coming of age ceremony (Murrum Turrukurruk) at about 12-14yrs of age. At this stage they receive a possum skin belt (Walert) as well as a spiritual protector chosen by their mothers, grandmothers or Elders. These belts are also used as drums. The girls/women are invited to attend every year and receive another skin to eventually make their own possum skin cloak. This way they are immersed in ceremony for years and not only the year they go through it. As part of Murrum Turrukurruk the girls are taught how to make reed necklaces. They are also taught about the roles and responsibilities of being a cultural woman, with their belts being taken from them if they chose the wrong path in life, only returned when they earn it back.

The Djirri Djirri dance group performs on Country embedding culture and ceremony in the life of the community. For example, Mandy and the dancers reclaimed the Abbotsford convent located in Melbourne on Wurundjeri Country on a bend of the Yarra River. Bunjil's star (Altair in the eagle constellation) was placed at the entrance.

A Welcoming song derived from a recording of William Barak, a Wurundjeri leader (Ngurungaeta) from the 1800s, about Bunjil and his two wives the black swans, the duck and the pelican was performed.

Despite urbanisation Mandy told us that the connection to Country is always there. She described in detail the layers of Country that exist.

- Biik-ut (Below Country): This is where we collect ochre to paint our bodies for ceremony and dance. Ochre has also been important in the process of gift exchange and trade between clan groups.
- Biik-dui (On Country): It is the physical ground we walk on, dance and perform ceremony. It is also where the roots of the trees connect.
- Baanj Biik (Water Country): Gives us life and is used in ceremony. Unfortunately, pollution prevents us from drinking from some parts of Country. There is water in many layers of Country, in the form of mist, fog, snow, clouds and water vapour around planets.
- Murnmut Biik (Wind Country): Where we speak and sing in language. The wind spreads smoke from ceremony that reaches Bunjil.
- Wurru Wurru Biik (Sky Country): Where we see the physical forms of our Creation Beings like Bunjil and Waa that watch over us. They are spiritual birds.

- Tharangalk Biik (Bunjil’s Home): Meaning the forest Country above the clouds, a reflection of what is below.
- Baanjmin and Binbeal (Rain and Rainbow): Act as connectors of all layers of Wurundjeri Country.

If you damage one layer of Country, the whole system collapses as they are dependent on one another.

Mandy is happy for workshop participants and readers of this document to share this information within early childhood spaces when she is acknowledged as the source, along with her clan and where and when this knowledge was presented.

Some thoughts for reflection on Mandy’s presentation:

Re-establishing Ceremony is an evolving process occurring within a deep relationship with the land and community across the generations.

The Elders as senior knowledge holders have a special place in this process, but importantly, those community members who are not yet Elders also hold much knowledge.

Send your mind underground to see it from beneath, set your eyes to the sky and see above the clouds and always remember to look up at the stars to remind you of your connection.

Further Resources

Mandy Nicholson, Deadly Story: www.deadlystory.com/page/culture/my-stories/NAIDOC-week/Mandy_Nicholson

Bunjil the Eagle Learning Tool (SNAICC): www.snaicc.org.au/bunjil-eagle-learning-tool/

Bunjil: Creation Story by Carolyn Briggs Parbin-ata Boonwurrung, images created by Balnarring Bubups, Balnarring Pre-school and Boon Wurrung Foundation, Victoria 2018.

My Country by Kwaymullina, E. and Morgan, S., Freemantle Press Western Australia, 2011.

Baby Business by Jasmine Seymour, Magabala Books, 2019.

The Narrative of Journey and Healing

Unfortunately, our guest speaker Dr Vicki Cousens was unable to attend, but please reflect on her words in Kooramook yakeen.

Possum Dreaming by Vicki Cousens: <https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/possum-skin-cloaks/kooramook-yakeen-possum-dreaming-by-vicki-cousens>

Here is part of her narrative from the above site:

“In some communities cloaks are used directly for healing. Cloaks are taken and wrapped around a person who may be experiencing emotional issues. At other times cloaks have been laid across hospital beds for those who are physically ill... When a cloak is put around someone’s shoulders, when they are enfolded within, there is a visible and tangible sense of empowerment expressed in smiles, words and actions. Some will stand taller, beaming, smiles and telling of what they feel. Some will stand quietly reflecting on their feelings, and others will sit and go within to fully experience what they are feeling’ (Cousens, V. p.6, 2011).

Denise Rundle showed the following video of cloak making: Possum Skin Cloak (scroll down to see a video of Lee Darroch creating a cloak) <https://aiatsis.gov.au/exhibitions/possum-skin-cloak>

Further Resources

Possum Skin Cloak provides connections to culture for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients: <https://www.petermac.org/news/possum-skin-cloak-provides-connection-culture-aboriginal-and-torresstrait-islander-patients>

Vicki Cousens and Lee Darroch together with Amanda Reynolds, Treaahna Hamm and Maree Clarke were supported by their Elders to remember, reclaim, revive, and regenerate the practice of cloak making across 75+ communities across South eastern Australia. This is a transformative community healing.

Read about this in Possum skin cloaks as a vehicle for healing in Aboriginal communities in the south east of Australia. In *Urban representations: cultural expression, identity and politics*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012, p.63.

How to read a possum skin: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHuioxOAYPg>

Reflecting on the possum skin as a vehicle for healing:

- Reflect on the significance of the possum skin in the journey and healing of Aboriginal people.
- Reflect on the continuing impact of the dispossession of Aboriginal people through a trauma lens.
- Reflect on the role of the early years in recognising such trauma and supporting the healing that Aboriginal communities are undergoing.
- How does recognising dispossession, trauma and healing strengthen the concept of social justice in the early years program?

Reflecting on Country

With Annette Sax

For participants to make a greater connection with Wurundjeri Country, Annette lead Denise and the participants for a walk around Queens Park in Moonee Ponds.

They looked at three trees that were significant to the area.

A participant noticed a possum nest in an Elm tree made of twigs and more rounded in the top. She described this as 'A possum as a de-coloniser'. At a big gum tree, participants looked for possum scratch marks.

Annette hugged the beautiful gum tree and encouraged the participants to make a connection with this tree. Some people hugged a tree for the first time.

While looking at bracken fern Annette shared how Auntie Glenys Merry a Taungurung Elder had taught her how Aboriginal people would use the fern like a mattress in their shelters. Taungurung people would alternate the bracken fern until it was thick like a mattress. They would lay their Walert Walert on top of the fern. Annette challenged herself to find out how the trunk of the fern was used.

Participants revisited the 'spear and ball' game where we used crumpled newspaper to represent a spear. We pretended to be hunting kangaroo and emu and participants had to aim the paper ball and hit the knitted ball that became the animal of choice.

The next session saw participants walking along the Moonee Ponds Creek. Here they experienced:

- Lichen which is over 2,000 years' old
- Signage of how the local Aboriginal people would have used the area, in relation to the making of artefacts and animals and plants that were significant food sources
- A sparkling water escarpment
- Beautiful gum trees with possum scratch marks
- A She Oak that Annette linked to the story *Yurri's Birthday*³ where it was used for basket weaving. Annette re-told the story of Auntie Iris Lovett Gardiner a Gunditjama Elder and her teachings about possum hunting. How you need to look for Walert Coonie and scratch marks on the trunk of the tree. Annette yarned about how she co-illustrated *Yurri's Birthday* with basket weavers including the late Auntie Glenys Merri a Taungurung Elder.
- Big stones sitting in the creek covered with moving water. Annette encouraged participants to imagine how important this water way was for the Wurundjeri people as they fished in the area. The group looked at the reeds growing near the large rocks and connected this with the story of *Bartja and Mayila*⁴. Annette spoke of how she and her daughter Keilla collected reeds from this Wurundjeri water way and took them home. Kiella threaded the reeds onto a string to make a djagoga - the sort of necklace that Bartja gifted Mayila.
- Rainbow lorikeets squawking as they are having a great feed of nectar from the beautiful flowering gum, connecting participants with sky country.
- Different wattle trees flowering
- Annette sharing how she collected materials there with her daughter Kiella saying to her 'look at these little seeds imagine how Wurundjeri women collected these over the centuries to make damper'

³ *Yurri's Birthday* by Sue Atkinson and Annette Sax, Desktop Publishing, Dixon Patten, Victoria, 2013.

⁴ *Bartja and Mayila* by Sue Atkinson and Annette Sax, Desktop Publishing, Dixon Patten, Victoria, 2013.

- Reminders from Annette to stop and listen quietly

The participants felt these experiences were:

- A good way for people to be in a different sort of space, building the sense of being on Country in the city
- An opportunity to engage with nature as participants were interested in plants, birds and landscape, in an active way
- An opportunity to listen and relax as Annette pointed things out quietly and encouraged people to listen
- A space for reflection

Further Resources

Moreland Pre-Contact Aboriginal Heritage Study 2010: <https://www.moreland.vic.gov.au/globalassets/key-docs/policy-strategy-plan-moreland-pre-contact-aboriginal-heritage-study-pdf>

Reflective Practice and Deep Reading

Participants were asked to reflect on their engagement with the story of *Bartja and Mayila*. As the author of the story I was provoked to reflect on the concept of deep reading.

What is deep reading?

As part of reflective practice deep reading is focused on what the author and illustrator are wanting to tell us. In the case of stories such as *Bartja and Mayila* which was explored in these sessions, it is the intent of the author and illustrator to deepen the readers understanding of Aboriginal culture.

The text can be viewed through the lens of two audiences. The reader as settler to educate non-Aboriginal people about Aboriginal culture and the reader as Aboriginal family and community in strengthening the culture of Aboriginal children.

A personal reflection on the production of *Bartja and Mayila*

Story telling is a powerful teaching tool in our community, it is part of our learning tradition it links us to our history and culture.

Retelling the stories of our Elders or being inspired by them to tell our own stories is also a way of remembering them and paying our respects to their leadership and legacy. This is reflected in how the book was produced. It was not a solitary, individual pursuit, there are layers of permission and consultation with knowledge holders which echo social roles and relationships. Significantly two Yorta Yorta Elders, Aunty Fay Carter and Aunty Lillian Tamura, were consulted during the writing of this book. It was launched at Aboriginal Community Elders Service by Yorta Yorta man Ian Hamm.

Facilitating deep reading

- Take the position of learner, ask what I can learn from the text about Aboriginal culture? This may take several readings.
- Talk with children about the story, pose questions such as:
 - What animal did you like the best?
 - Where did Uncle Ambrose ask Bartja to sit?
 - Why would this be a good place to think?
 - Why did Bartja give Mayila the gift?
 - What was the present Bartja gave to Mayila?⁵
- Extend the book with experiences that can deepen children’s understandings.
- How participants had built on *Bartja and Mayila* after Annette had shared it with children at their centres:
 - They had gone for a walk along the Merri Creek or Moonee Ponds Creek, children would hear the parrots squawking, flowering gums were out, birds were getting nectar. They could see the feathery tops of the reeds blowing around.
 - Children really noticed the trees in the story, this led to research about trees in the yard and the bird life feeding from trees. This was a long project.

⁵ Thank you to Annette Sax for these suggestions.

Talking with other adults about books like *Bartja and Mayila* can reveal layers in what may seem to be a simple picture book.

The following points arose from discussions with student teachers at the University of Melbourne and Melbourne Polytechnic about *Bartja and Mayila*. They had been asked what they had learnt about Aboriginal culture on reading the book and reflecting on this in small groups.

- Respect for the Elders as teachers
- Story telling is an intergenerational skill which passes on knowledge and skills
- The importance of learning on Country
- Watching, waiting and reflecting as a learning practice
- Decision making as a community process
- The connection between nature and the spiritual realm
- Using materials from the environment to create arts and crafts
- Yorta Yorta language is alive and tied to Country
- Learning about the flora and fauna of the forest e.g. what the animals eat
- The Watermark is a symbol for the re-emergence of the Yorta Yorta culture from the shadows

A provocation

- How do these points intersect with the narratives and protocols set out in the Possum Skin Pedagogy?

Further Reading

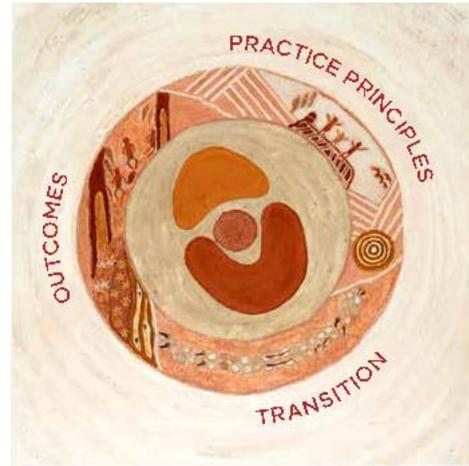
Atkinson, S. and Srinivasan, P. The Possum Hunt: A ghost Story for Pre-schoolers? Death, Continuity and the Revival of Aboriginality in Melbourne in Cologon (Edit) Inclusive Education in The Early Years: Right from the Start. Oxford, 2014.

Reflecting on the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF)

Participants were asked to reflect on and discuss the VEYLDF three elements in relation to embedding Aboriginal perspectives in the program.

The following is based on conversations and reflections around Annette Sax artwork and Sue Atkinson cultural story. The text in **bold** is taken directly from the VEYLDF poster⁶. The text in *italics* is from conversations and reflections from engaging with the poster.

The centre of the image is deeply symbolic, with children at the centre surrounded by kin, family and those professionals supporting learning, development and well-being. Indigenous culture sits at the centre of (the image) but is inclusive.



Artwork by Annette Sax Taungurung

Practice Principles

Bunjil the Eagle and Waa the Crow represent Aboriginal culture and partnerships with families.

- *Centres need to engage with the child's and family's culture rather than expect the child and family to assimilate.*
- *One Aboriginal participant was disappointed with the kindergarten her son attends. Staff had done a mural of the flag and hadn't involved her or any of the centres Indigenous families.*
- *I want to remind colleagues of how we listen to parents and what is going on in their lives at enrolment. Ask 'what do you want your child to learn?' and check in with this later.*

The water hole symbolises reflective practice.

- *Reflective practice has been central to this training and is a central principle of the VEYLDF.*

The gum leaves with their different patterns and colours represents diversity.

- *Learning more about diversity in the Aboriginal community has reminded me that that generalisations about Aboriginal people are unhelpful and inaccurate.*
- *We crush up, smell gum leaves and talk about cold relief-heating up, covering head with a possum skin cloak as taught to us by Aunty Fay Muir, a Boonwurrung Elder.*

The stones underneath the leaves represent equity. They reflect the additional support put in place for all children to achieve.

- *This support must be centred on a strengths-based approach, in recognising the value, resilience and survival of Aboriginal culture and identity.*

⁶ Early Years Learning and Development Framework - Three Elements Poster, Atkinson, S. and Sax, A., Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), Victorian State Government, (ND).

The child and adults standing on 'Ochre Mountain' symbolise the high/equitable expectations we hold for children and adults.

- *Be mindful that there has been a long history of low expectations of Aboriginal children and parents when engaging with the education system, including the early years. Continue to challenge these stereotypes in partnerships with families.*

The family standing on and looking out from 'Ochre Mountain' reflects assessment for learning and development.

- *Be mindful that historically Aboriginal parents have been marginalised in early childhood centres. They have been positioned as lacking interest in their child's learning and development. Continue to challenge these stereotypes in partnership with families.*

The child and adult figures also represent partnerships with professionals.

- *Establish and maintain contacts with local Aboriginal early childhood professionals.*

The land symbol as mother earth represents the basis for respectful relationships and responsive engagement.

- *Aboriginal people as the original owners of the land are to be afforded the right to self-determination, including the right to determine the direction of the early years' education of their children.*

The symbols for land, water and people signify holistic and integrated approaches based on connections to Clan and Country.

- *Involve the local Aboriginal community including Elders, extended family, local Indigenous artists as well as the immediate family.*

Outcomes

Gum leaves as bush medicine symbolise connection to wellbeing.

- *Extend to interest in gum trees for example uses for bark such as canoes*

The yam daisy represents the survival of a strong Aboriginal identity. The yam daisy was central to the diet of Aboriginal Victorians. It was almost wiped out by colonisation but has survived.

- *Recognise the yam daisy in representing the local Victorian culture as alive and vibrant.*

The family sitting under the scar trees with message stick and coolamon symbolises communication.

- *Children learn to read signs and symbols on manufactured materials. This is part of Aboriginal literacy.*

The family seated on the land also symbolises the child learning through their connection to and involvement with community.

- *Such as learning to read the environment, such changes in plants/leaves/pods with the support of the Elders and other older community members. This is another form of Aboriginal literacy.*

Transition and Continuity of Learning

The river stepping stones represent children and families in transition.

- *You can use Bartja and Mayila as a transition story about leaving and going somewhere new but taking your knowledge with you.*

The footprints and wheelchair marks symbolise all abilities.

- *The incidence of disability and chronic ill health is higher in Aboriginal communities. This may affect the child's or family's ability to participate program. Also consider how this affects families home life.*

Animal footprints show children and families walking proudly with culture in transition.

- *Transition to school statements should have space that says 'this is important to my culture' as an option.*

Further Reading

The Journey to Big School: Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Transition to Primary School. Researched and written by Holly Mason-White (Policy Officer, SNAICC), SNAICC, Victoria, 2014.

Being an Ally

On the final day participants were asked to reflect on their position as an ally by engaging with the following statement by Sue Atkinson:

“Being an ally means acting in partnership or alliance with the local Aboriginal community to embed Aboriginal perspectives in the program. Such alliances are based on a framework of social justice as well as critical reflection and self-education on part of the ally. The long-term objective of these alliances is to create change in early childhood spaces on an individual, institutional and societal level.”

How do we enact this?

Have a vision

- Incorporate statements around being allies in your centre philosophy.

Build your program around the narratives in this document

- These narratives will build authentic knowledge and help dislodge those colonial narratives which persist in our society.

Effective communication

- Using your philosophy can support you in having uncomfortable conversations with others with courage and insight.
- Teach what you have learnt via Possum Skin Pedagogy in the context of who taught you this knowledge. In the case of individuals, their names and their position in Aboriginal society must be acknowledged, for example, Mandy Nicholson is a Wurundjeri woman.
- Make others aware of the processes, the protocols and the relationships that have been developed in the construction of this document.
- Be guided by these protocols and processes in your interactions with others in sharing the document.

Practice reflection and self-awareness

- Examine your own understanding of colonisation. For example, examine the often-cited position of ‘it’s not my fault I’m a migrant’. Instead focus on how even recent settlers have benefited from the dispossession of Aboriginal people and have a responsibility to build a better future together with Aboriginal people.
- Take on the challenge of learner, read widely especially local Aboriginal authors.
- Do your research read the references recommended throughout all sections of this document.

Build relationships

- Invite people into the centre who compliment your philosophy such as members of the local Aboriginal community.
- Build networks with like-minded practitioners.

Be courageous

- Be prepared to deal with self-doubt, and discomfort. Don't let doubt freeze you.
- Recognise this is a process that is complex and often confronting.

Make a lifelong commitment to learning by reflecting on the possum skin as a metaphor. Recognise that:

- The possum skin is symbolic of a birth to death commitment to learning.
- At every stage in its evolution from the first baby blanket to being wrapped in your blanket on burial is the process of education.
- Such learning is not an isolated event but flows throughout the community and is lifelong.
- Exploring the 7 narratives via the cloak will demonstrate how learnings overlap and are intertwined.
- This learning takes place within a complex network of a learning community. This is at the centre of Aboriginal pedagogy.

Remember

- Children are the allies of tomorrow.

A final reflection on being part of a chain of allies in the early years landscape

For there to be social justice there must be us as early childhood practitioners on a journey led by Aboriginal people. This can mean challenging racism, ignorance and apathy. But do not lose hope.

Aboriginal people know how such challenges can undermine creativity, strength and the voices of Aboriginal people and our allies.

But we must be courageous and confident that we are building a better future for all Australian children.

- Sue Atkinson

Reflections on Philosophy and Practice

At the conclusion of the two full day sessions participants were given time to reflect on their experiences and fill in a feedback form around how the training sessions further informed the following concepts.

Embedding Aboriginal perspectives

“Recognising that Aboriginal perspectives can be and must be layered within all dimensions of the program brings awareness to remind colleagues, children and families that we all contribute to learning, understanding and respecting Australia first people.”

“I think that it is a journey that I am still on. I feel like the cultural knowledge story (in the VEYLDF) is more important to my practice.”

“I feel more knowledgeable in providing a meaningful perspective within experiences. Such as ‘bringing some Country in’ for our acknowledgment of Country and’ sustainability in sharing fruit platter ‘only take what you need’.”

Understanding of the Victorian Aboriginal Community

“I have a greater awareness of the language groups; I have read and heard a variety of lived experiences to reflect upon. I have research material I can call upon.”

“Hearing other cultural practices/stories and knowledge inspires me to seek more about my own mobs’ stories and how I can share with children and make connections with something similar in their lives.”

“I have felt a shift in my thinking from a sense of shame that came from growing up in country Victoria to a sense of hope for the future, and admiration and appreciation for Elders, community leaders and emerging leaders and their work.”

Forming and maintain respectful relationships with your local Aboriginal community

“Even though I have tried along the years, I will try harder and push for funds to be allocated as this is important.”

“We have introduced ourselves to the Wurundjeri Tribe Council, SNAICC and have met local Indigenous Elders though being part of community events.”

“Especially the need for patience and waiting for the right time. At the same time the need to be persistent in our attempts to make connections respectfully.”

“Although I still have concerns about doing things ‘correctly’ I certainly feel that I have much more confidence than before I started this learning.”

Understanding Aboriginal pedagogy

“The use of teaching narratives, imitation, cultural sharing through dance, singing, art, food, gathering materials.”

“Mandy Nicholson helped me develop a greater understanding of the layers (of Country).”

“Guiding the children to ‘slow learning’- connect with nature and appreciate our trees/birds in the outdoor space through role modelling and conversations.”

Sharing knowledge with colleagues

“More confident to ask/challenge about behaviour, things I see at kindergartens and what staff do with children and embedding Aboriginal perspectives.”

“Rereading and reflecting on resources as a starting point to continue/extend the shared learning.”

“Definitely have been able to share new learnings with work colleagues where we have been able to have discussions around philosophy, values and how we can meaningfully and respectfully implement indigenous perspectives into our community.”

Case Studies

The following case studies demonstrate in greater depth how the learning sessions have informed the philosophy and practice of three of the participants and two of the presenters.

Deborah Muir, Educational Leader, Bridge Road Kindergarten

Indigenous Perspectives in the Curriculum

The possum skin learning profoundly influenced both my professional and personal philosophy and has influenced most things that we do now at Bridge Road Kindergarten.

It encouraged me to further extend my knowledge. I attended my first reconciliation symposium this year and was blown away by the strength and wisdom that is out there. I am now on a personal journey to learn as much as I can. I have attended Tanderrum twice and have been moved each time.

As Educational Leader, I permanently dedicate one section of our team meetings to include an Indigenous perspective. During these meetings I include such things as relevant research, and any learning that I can share with my team that can influence or encourage them to further explore learning Aboriginal culture. We reflect on what each team have been doing in their own practice in this space.

Each room at our kinder now has a table that changes weekly, using natural resources, artwork, books or artifacts. It pays respect and demonstrates the respect and commitment to our first people.

As a team we reflected and introduced an acknowledgement that we do in each group every day.

At one team meeting I taught my colleagues the traditional hunting game that Annette taught us.

Using School Readiness Funding I organised an Indigenous artist to engage and teach our team through art.

Nathan Patterson painted a canvas with our team and as he painted, he told his story of growing up in a white western world in a western family. The canvas now hangs proudly at our service.



The table in our kinder that features natural resources, artwork, books or artifacts.



Our Acknowledgement of Country



Artwork by Nathan Patterson

We have a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) at our service and have strong links with the local Aboriginal co-op; in fact, we gifted them a copy of *Possum Skin Pedagogy*.

I am an active member of outer west RAP meetings where I hold the position of being able to share my learning more broadly with other educational leaders, and advocate at a wider level.

I also attended the first Early Childhood Australia RAP meeting that was held in the western suburbs. Here I was able to share once again with educators that work across the sector the deep learning that I was privy to accessing.

As a teacher we also include Indigenous perspective and learning throughout our program, using natural materials and language with permission.



All images were supplied by Deborah Muir of Bridge Rd Kindergarten.

Reflecting on the Possum Skin Pedagogy Professional Development

Annette Sax Taungurung, Aboriginal Early Childhood Professional, presenter at the Possum Skin Pedagogy Professional Development

I feel that Possum Skin Pedagogy (PSP) Training gave participants the time to critically reflect on the ways they had been foregrounding Aboriginal perspectives within their Early Childhood Education (ECE) Services. During the different Workshops ECE Professionals had the opportunity to ask questions of Aboriginal presenters and guest speakers who were very honest and open and spoke their truth around how educators can be active allies for Aboriginal children, families, and communities.

I was really encouraged to see a massive change in the yarns I was having with particular participants. I listened to one story where an educator was given Ochre by a non-Indigenous person to use in her program and I shared that for me as an Aboriginal person, today I don't collect Ochre from other Aboriginal peoples Countries. I explained that through critical reflection of my own Aboriginal practice I had realised that my Old People would not have taken Ochre from Wurundjeri Country rather this precious gift from Country would have been traded. So, through storytelling I was able to share the protocols and the respectful ways. The Educator listened to my feedback and she said she now understood the importance of respectful ways. I also gifted the Early Childhood Professional Ochre so she could share this with the children. She understood that the Ochre was for children to make their own paint to use on paper, bark and leaves and that the Ochre was not to be painted on the children's bodies. This needs to be facilitated by an Aboriginal person.

At the launch of Possum Skin Pedagogy, I had an amazing conversation with a participant, and I was so encouraged to hear of the ongoing learning she was engaging with as a way of broadening her own understanding of Victorian Aboriginal Culture. She used social media to connect with Aboriginal events which she attended. By attending local festivals, she was able to connect with Aboriginal people.

The PSP training strengthened my own commitment to educating and forming partnerships with non-Indigenous early childhood practitioners. I really value the partnership that Sue Atkinson and I developed with Denise Rundle. Denise is a strong ally for Aboriginal early childhood professionals. It was great to work with her over the time as we prepared each PSP workshop and also yarning together as part of our reflective practice.

I enjoyed getting to know the participants and wanted to acknowledge their commitment, especially when we walked along Moonee Ponds Creek. I shared Cultural Knowledges with Participants as I know they were committed to being active allies. During the training I challenged myself to give really honest answers and feedback when participants asked questions. Sometimes it can be really uncomfortable when we are asked culturally insensitive questions about our Aboriginality or Culture. This is part of the Cultural load we carry so it's important to have our Sista's we can debrief with.

In reflecting on lifelong learning as an Aboriginal woman I feel that it is important to always challenge myself in relation to learning more about my cultural Practices. I travel home to Taungurung Country regularly and am learning more about our Taungurung language and seasons. We have started to revive our Ceremonies with one of our Taungurung female Elders in a small group of our Aboriginal women. We are connecting spiritually with our Ancestors who let us know they are with us through the elements of the air.

We have already had enquires from Darebin Council who are really excited to engage with us to conduct Possum Skin Pedagogy. This is exciting as they see the importance of Dr Sue Atkinson's PhD research and know this is woven through PSP Training. They are also allies of the Aboriginal Community and express how vital it is for their Early Childhood Staff to have access to authentic ongoing Aboriginal Early Childhood Professional Learning, delivered in innovative ways.

Reflecting on the Possum Skin Pedagogy Professional Development

Denise Rundle, Kindergarten Teacher, presenter at the Possum Skin Pedagogy Professional Development

Working alongside Sue Atkinson and Annette Sax in the development and delivery of training in Possum Skin Pedagogy, has been an enormous privilege and a wonderful opportunity for personal learning. The layers of knowledge that were slowly exposed or shared as we worked together is reminiscent of how Mandy Nicholson described the layers of Country within her presentation. There is complexity, depth and knowledge and gaining understanding of this, as a non-Indigenous educator, cannot be hurried. I thank them for their time, generosity and humour.

The PSP training underscores for me the importance to keep connected with like-minded colleagues. For non-Indigenous educators to truly be allies in this work, we need to support each other – in a separate but connected spaces and always strongly connected with Indigenous educators.

I believe there is increased awareness amongst participants that to be an ally extends beyond our actual workplaces. People may have an interest in and be motivated to attend a rally/gathering, join e.g. ANTaR, Koori Heritage Trust, attend celebrations, visit different parts of Australia, talk to family and friends, be aware of whose Country they are on when traveling in Australia....

Our inability to keep in touch with individuals and/or the group reflects the challenge of the day – busyness and busy work. Which returns me to my first point – the importance of somehow keeping in touch and supporting each other in an ongoing, self-sustaining way. One of the highlights of the training was the creation of a space where people could stop, think, slow down and reflect – I see Uncle Ambrose sitting by Dungala, but how do we keep breathing, notice Country, develop and or keep awareness of Place within our normal work lives?

As we work in our different services, we encounter frustrations – colleagues lack of interest and/or knowledge, lack of time or energy for discussions, lack of support from management to find time to implement change. There are so many ‘things’ to get organised and discuss such as implementing frameworks, policies and processes.

In recently returning to teaching in a new workplace, I have noticed that I have slowed down a bit, simplified what I am offering to children and finding myself at odds with the prevailing “wisdom” of early years implementation: not allowing children be “bored”, always following their interests (which are often fleeting or driven by a couple of dominant voices amongst the children), implementing routines or activities because ‘they are going to school next year’ or ‘this is what parents like/want to see’ and regularly changing experiences. I want to provide the chance for children to go back and revisit learning experiences.

EYLF: Where is the Being or Belonging? It seems to be all about Becoming.

VEYLDF: Where is the Equity and Diversity? Variety of Teaching and Learning Approaches? It seems to be all about Transition to School.

The opportunity to enact Uncle Ambrose’s advice to Bartja could be the greatest gift that PSP brings to early years. By implementing the process of Aboriginal Pedagogy, rather than

only focusing on content, educators could slow down the early year's treadmill and create an antidote to the busyness and to the fear of being compliant (or not compliant) that often overrides critical and creative reflection.

Conversations in workplaces

How do we make the starting point for implementing Aboriginal perspectives more visible for the majority of educators? What are the entry points for these educators?

In these conversations in our workplaces, we often need to start at the beginning. We need to be able to articulate the importance of this work, the essential truth of Australia and why we need (and will benefit) from including Aboriginal Pedagogy/PSP in our work. Rather than seeing this as a lack of consolidated understanding within our profession, I now see the personal benefit in revisiting these starting points. Once you have gained knowledge or raised your awareness, it is impossible to return to the state of 'not knowing'. Needing to have these conversations can remind us that we all started somewhere and the most important thing is... to start.

However, sometimes it is hard to know where to start. We now have the PSP pedagogy to guide us in these discussions and support our knowledge and commitments. What are the specific resources that support people to have these initial discussions within their workplace? Could this be an opportunity for the PSP allies - selecting appropriate available resources, creating "scripts" (in consultation with local Aboriginal community members and educators) in starting discussions with non-Indigenous educators?

Perhaps these "scripts" could also highlight how implementing Aboriginal pedagogy leads to change in educational practice and support educators to recognise their current assumptions that influence their everyday practice. Even if that is uncomfortable or challenging. Believe me, the rewards of doing so are ongoing.

Possum Skin Pedagogy Reflection

Catherine Hamm, School of Education, La Trobe University

As a pre-service teacher educator, I find the Possum Skin Pedagogy (PSP) document an invaluable resource. Since its publication, I have used it extensively with preservice teachers in a variety of subjects I have taught. For example, I recently taught a subject about learning and development with children aged birth-2 years. The subject was designed around the concepts of relationships, place, and image of the child. The PSP document was an invaluable resource to engage students with all three of the concepts.

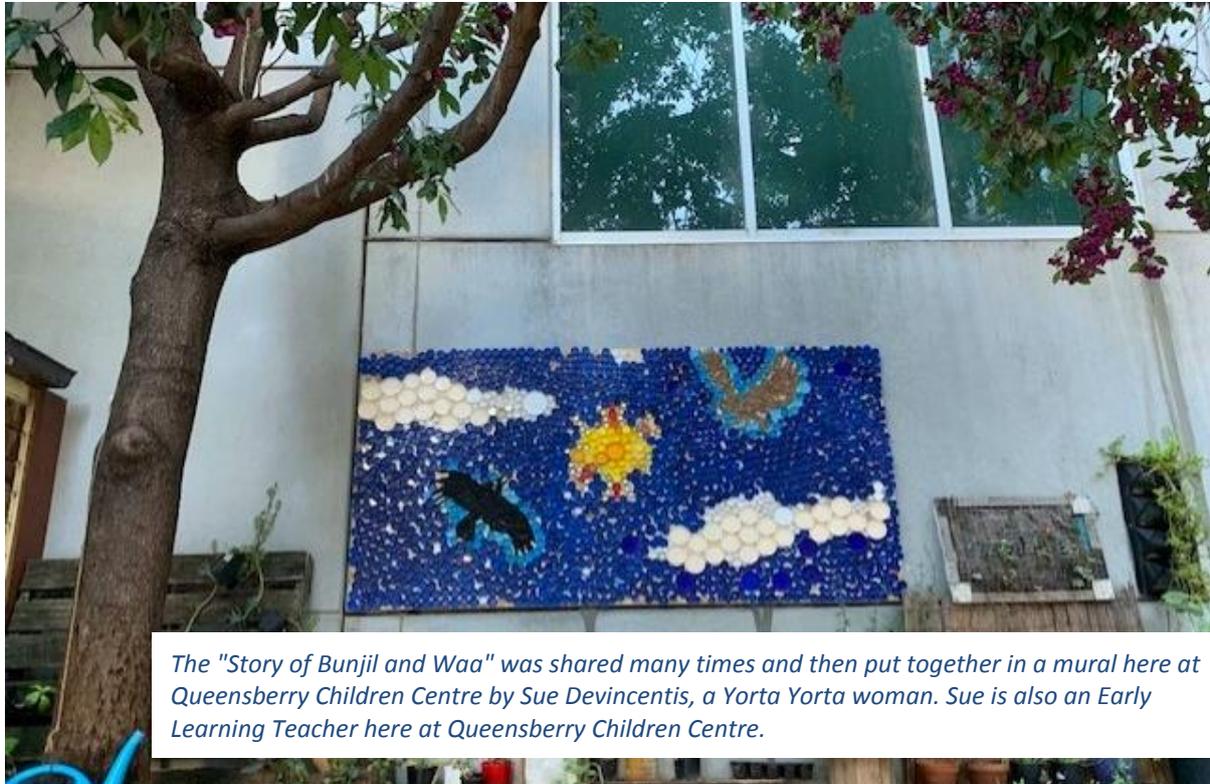
The PSP document is structured through seven narratives that connect traditional and contemporary Aboriginal knowledges and practices. This framework is important so that early childhood practitioners are able to engage with contemporary Aboriginal perspectives in their current practice. PSP also has many practical ideas that students activated in their professional experience placement settings. As students engaged with the document in their placement settings, they also engaged the educators across the services.

PSP is written in a way that makes it very accessible for pre-service teachers to engage with, giving them confidence to authentically embed Aboriginal perspectives in their everyday programs. As I am of settler heritage, I am very mindful of the way that I engage and teach with Aboriginal perspectives. I need to be very aware about doing this work in relation to cultural protocols or 'respectful ways'⁷ as the majority of preservice teachers, educators and children that I work with are not Aboriginal. PSP enables settler educators to have somewhere to 'start' with the important and necessary work of ensuring that Aboriginal perspectives, history and culture is a part of every child's education.

⁷ Atkinson, S. (2017). Possum Skin Pedagogy: A Guide for Early Childhood Practitioners.

A Personal Development Day

Dafina Bytyqi, Early Childhood Educator, Melbourne University Children Services



The "Story of Bunjil and Waa" was shared many times and then put together in a mural here at Queensberry Children Centre by Sue Devincintis, a Yorta Yorta woman. Sue is also an Early Learning Teacher here at Queensberry Children Centre.

We, the children services staff gathered on the 10th of July for a Personal Development day here at Melbourne University.

Brian Newman and I were invited to present the Possum Skin Pedagogy. The document had just been published and I was unsure, unprepared and anxious to present in front of such a big audience.

After a process of consultations between Sue Atkinson and Brian, we were given a green light to present the Possum Skin Pedagogy. We really hoped for Sue, Annette Sax or an Aboriginal Elder to be there, but it was on a short notice, everyone was busy with other projects, so we decided to do it without them.

Brian opened the first session with the Acknowledgment to the Country and shared a brief history of the land we were gathered and where we work every day.

Brian then shared about AAPEC Possum Skin Pedagogy Learning Project and its aim for the early childhood professionals. He also pointed out the need for professional development to be focus of the Pedagogy as some of the narratives must be implemented alongside an Aboriginal Elder or community member. He also spoke about the protocols and their importance during the implementation of the pedagogy, embedding indigenous perspectives, understanding Victorian Aboriginal Communities, sharing Knowledge with colleagues' and in forming and maintaining relationships with the Aboriginal community and Elders. The authenticity of the resources we use at our services was another topic Brian spoke about.

A lot of questions were raised from the participants about the protocols. Some of the questions we answered by sharing our learning from the Possum skin pedagogy training days and some of the answers were left to be found on other occasions and where Aboriginal Community Members or Elders will be present.

My Possum Skin journey was one of the most significant learning experiences in my life. I now see and feel the story of creation of the Aboriginal People of Victoria and their connection to their country with different eyes. But I don't have many words to describe it yet! So, I invite all the educators to take their own learning journeys, like me.

Prior to the PD day I have collected natural materials and elements from the country I live in such as - gumnuts, gum leaves, bark, banksia, rocks, clay, sticks and sand, aiming to "bringing the country in" (Aunty Fay Muir, Boon Wurrung). I have added Australian native animal toys and puppets, yarn, paper, paint and Aboriginal story books and have arranged them across all the tables.

Although it was a very short time for the participants to integrate all that information in half a day, I was ambitious and gave participants a task for the afternoon. They had to work in small groups - a group per table. Using all the provided materials they had to create a learning space which has at least an element of embedding Aboriginal perspective in it. Participants then had to share their creation in form of a story and share with us for which age group or room the story was to be shared, learned or taught.

Some of the learning spaces were:

- **Malu Kangaroo⁸**: Learning about the first children and the sea country - using toy native animals, leaves and bark.
- **How the Birds Got their Colours⁹**: Story shared, and learning space created using materials and puppets.
- **The Wombat Season** (one of the six Melbourne seasons) The cold and wet time of year – Waring or wombat season – lasts from April until July when days are short and nights long and wombats emerge to bask and graze when it is sunny.
- **The Rainbow Serpent¹⁰**: Story and learning space created by another group using yarn, puppets and other props.
- **Torres Strait Islands and its people**: A creation made using colours that represent the colours of Torres Strait Islanders.
- **The possum in the tree**: One of the participants created a scarf for the possum and wrapped it around him to keep warm. She used pens and yarn to create the piece during the afternoon session and the learning story for the children is that Aboriginal people looked after and cared for the possums and their habitat (this one was very moving for me).

⁸ *Malu Kangaroo* by Judith Morecroft and Bronwyn Bancroft, Little Hare Books, Australia, 2008.

⁹ *How the Birds Got their Colours* by Mary Albert, Pamela Lofts and Children in Broome WA, Scholastic, 2004.

¹⁰ *The Rainbow Serpent* by Roughsey, D. and Treize, P., Harper Collins, Australia, 1992.



We also discussed how we could start implementing the pedagogy perhaps starting with games. The narrative of recreation seemed a good place to start for the participants. We then watched the story of Marngrook and educators shared their personal experiences about the history of the game and the Aboriginal players.

I was so impressed and moved by the curiosity, interest and passion they showed during the very first introduction day of the Possum Skin Pedagogy. They, my colleagues' have welcomed and supported me on my learning journey and will be with me as we continue to do more on embedding Indigenous perspectives in our work with children. This is a beginning of a new journey for all of us.

All images supplied by Dafina Bytyqi.

Additional Resources

Books

Respect by Aunty Fay Muir and Sue Lawson, Illustrated by Lisa Kennedy, Magabala Books, 2020.

Silly Birds (2014) / *Mad Magpie* (2016) / *Kookoo Kookaburra* (2015) by Gregg Dresise, Magabala Books.

Going to the Footy by Debbie Coombes, Magabala Books, 2019.

Websites

Indigenous Art I NGV: <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/exhibition-of-indigenous-art/>

Yokayi Footy Program on NITV: <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/yokay-footy>

Books for Older Children

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The Lost Girl by Anbelin Kwaymullina and Leanne Tobi, Walker Books, Newton Australia, 2017.

Young Dark Emu, A Truer History by Bruce Pascoe, Magabala Books Aboriginal Corporation, Western Australia, 2019.

Ant Day by Matear, R., Press Print, Australia 2018.