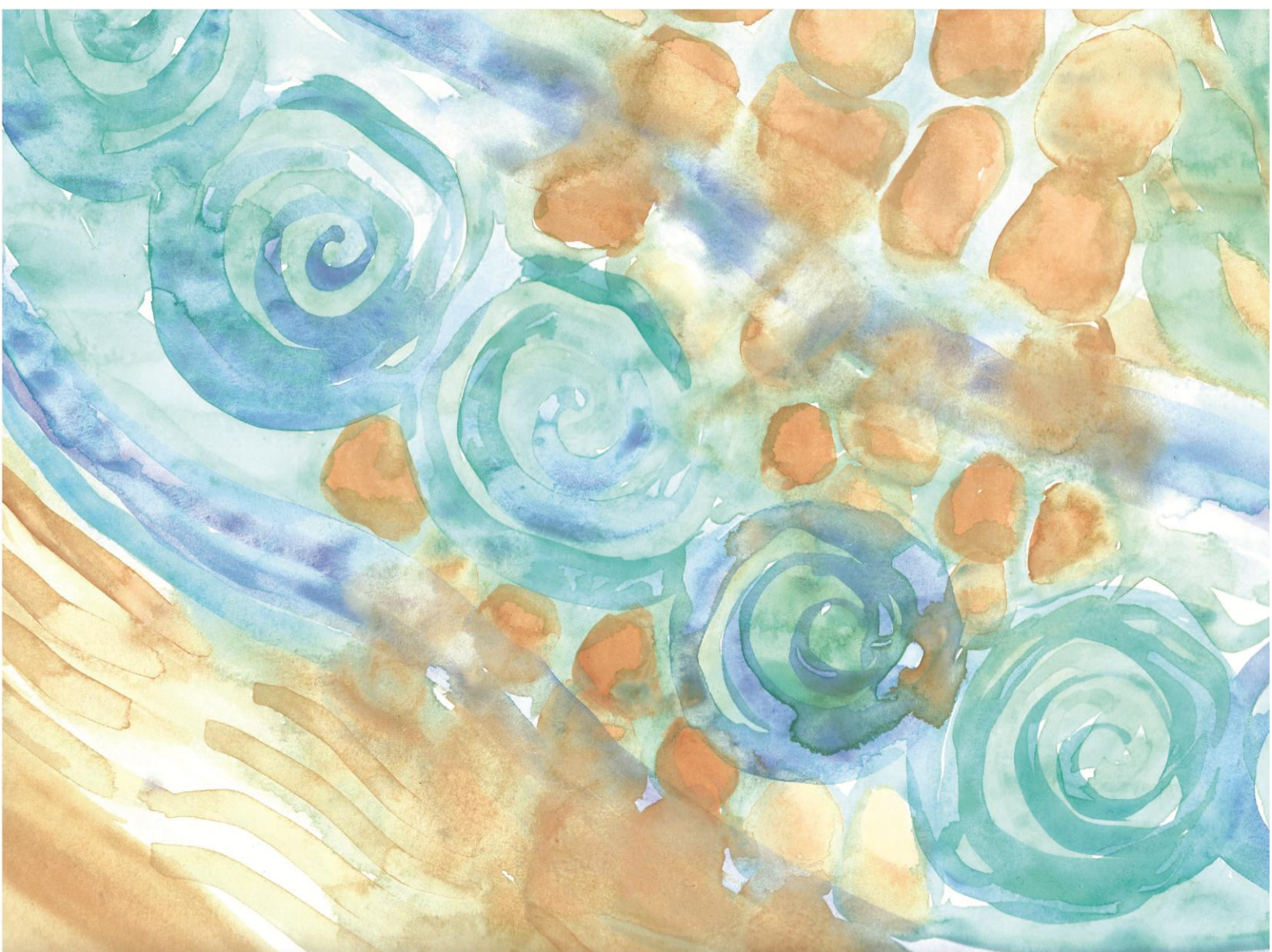


Possum Skin Pedagogy: A Chain of Allies in the Early Years Landscape



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.

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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Contents

Acknowledgements	02
Epigraph	04
Introduction	05
The Narrative of Ceremony/Spirituality	10
The Narrative of Journey and Healing	13
Reflecting on Country	16
Reflective Practice and Deep Reading	19
Reflecting on the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework	22
Being an Ally	27
Reflections on Philosophy and Practice	31
Case Studies	34
Additional Resources	46

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, Treahna 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 Gunditjamarra 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

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.

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 image how Wurundjeri women collected these over the centuries to make damper'
- 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.

⁵ Thank you to Annette Sax for these suggestions.

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.

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

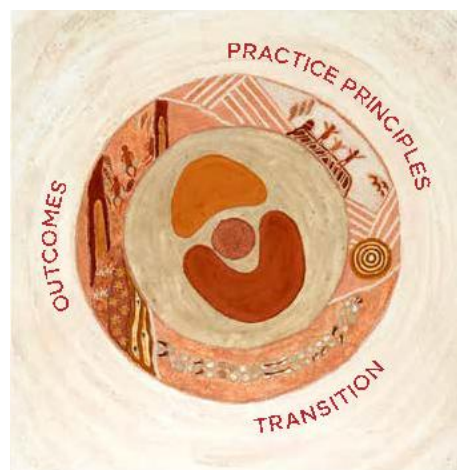
Atkinson, S. and Srinivasan, P. The Possum Hunt: A ghost Story for Pre-schoolers? Death, Continuity and the Revival of Aboriginality in Melbourne in Cologon (Edit) Inclusive Education in The Early Years: Right from the Start. Oxford, 2014.

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 Auntie Fay Muir, a Boonwurrung Elder.*

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 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.*

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

“Recognizing 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

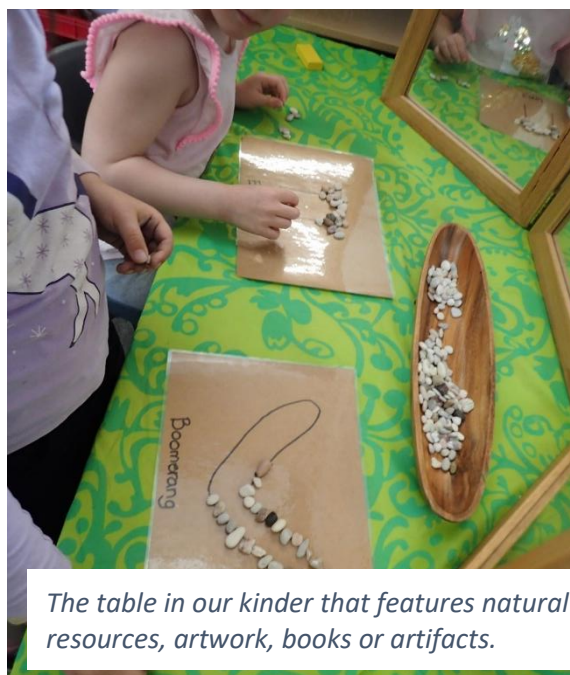
Indigenous Perspectives in the Curriculum

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.



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

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.



Our Acknowledgement of Country

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.



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 Devincentis, 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" (Auntie 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.

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.

- **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 Serpent**¹⁰: 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).



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.

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

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

Caterpillar and Butterfly by Anbelin Kwaymullina, Freemantle Press, Western Australia, 2011.

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.