

reflections

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CONNECTIONS TO CULTURE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: THE POWER OF STORY AND EMBODYING RECONCILIATION

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“Keeping our children and youth connected to their communities and strong in their identity and culture is essential to their wellbeing and the cornerstone of resilience” Andrew Jackomos, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People

The 2017 SNAICC National Conference was an important chance for those who work in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and family services to gather together around inspiring learning experiences. This year's conference was held in Canberra in September and coincided with the 20-year anniversary of the Bringing Them Home report of the National Inquiry into the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander children from their families. Speakers from all over the country, as well as some international speakers, focused on strategies and best practice to support Aboriginal children to be safe and strong within family and culture and reduce interaction with the child protection system.

The conference opened a space for reflection on where we are at as a nation, 20 years on from the Bringing Them Home report. Today there continues to be a disproportionate number of Aboriginal children placed in out of home care, ten times the rate of non-indigenous children (Children in Care Resource Sheet, 2017). The conference asked how we can redress the recommendations from this report, share best practice and develop collective strategies to ensure the rights of Aboriginal children and families are upheld. The final panel of the SNAICC Conference reflected on how so often in Aboriginal communities, 'investigation becomes a substitution for action'. This must change.

Some ongoing questions for all educators are:

- How do we create a culturally inclusive environment for Aboriginal children and families?
- How do we actively value the cultural identity of Aboriginal children and family within our care settings?
- How do we create a space that encourages and facilitates reconciliation for all children within Australia?

In Port Augusta, South Australia, The Dusty Feet Mob, pictured above, are a dance group who continue to share stories and culture across generations in a way that promotes healing and reconciliation. The Dusty Feet Mob are more than just an Aboriginal dance group, they are a community that builds connection to culture, community and country.

Dusty Feet Mob often get the chance to perform in early childhood centres, schools and community groups across South Australia and beyond. One of their most powerful performances is to Uncle Archie Roach's *Took the Children Away*, a song-biography of his own experience as a member of the Stolen Generation. Dusty Feet Mob know that storytelling through dance and song is a powerful way of entering into past hurts and injustices experienced by Aboriginal families in a way that allows both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to grow in acceptance, understanding and empathy together. In the enacting and retelling of sacred and important stories, through dance, they have witnessed the power to change both the lives of those who are involved in the dancing (and their families) as well as those who have the opportunity to witness it.

The saying is often used that "You can't be a strong tree if you don't know your roots". Connection to country, community and culture is essential for Aboriginal children. Identity formation happens from the youngest age and educators can play a significant role in this. How do we understand, collectively, what it means to be Australian if we do not understand our shared history as First Peoples and those who have come after?

The Dusty Feet Mob often end their performances with Indigenous Australian rock group, Yabu Band's *Wongutha* Version of the song *I Am Australian*. In this shared, safe space audience members are invited to join in and participate alongside the dancers. They are invited to literally embody reconciliation in that moment. It is almost

always the young children who race to be involved, so open to these opportunities to learn about culture, story and participate in this shared experience of what it means to be Australian. We must continue to learn from the children and strive to be organisations that actively values and respects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

Questions for reflection:

- How do educators and leaders in early childhood settings recognise the impact of the Stolen Generation and its continual effects of Aboriginal children and families?
- How do services celebrate and acknowledge cultural days of significance?
- Are our services culturally inclusive and safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families?
- Have we, as educators, consulted with local Aboriginal people and found out who the Traditional Owner groups are for your area?

A recommended starting point for services is to undertake research. There is a wealth of information available online to get started in working towards a stronger future:

Cultural Safety for Aboriginal Children Tip Sheet, Commission for Children and Young People

<https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/assets/resources/tipsheet-cultural-safety-aboriginal-c>

Reconciliation Australia

<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/>

SNAICC

<http://www.snaicc.org.au/>

SNAICC 2017 conference papers and presentations

<http://www.snaicc.org.au/conference/program/>

References:

Children in care CFCA Resource Sheet (2017).
www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/children-care

In this article where the author refers to "Aboriginal children" she is including both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

For your professional learning and support contact your state based Gowrie listed below:

NSW www.gowriensw.com.au

TAS www.gowrie-tas.com.au

QLD www.gowrieqld.com.au

VIC www.gowrievictoria.com.au

SA www.gowriesa.org.au

WA www.gowrie-wa.com.au