

# reflections

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## PUT YOUR HAND UP - FROM CONVERSATION TO CONNECTION: A REFLECTION ON BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS AND ENRICHING OUR PROGRAMS

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Throughout the education and care sector, as with other sectors and segments of Australian society, we have been experiencing a welcome shift towards reconciliation and inclusion along with a deeper cultural understanding and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

*“Educators who are culturally competent respect multiple cultural ways of knowing, seeing and living, celebrate the benefits of diversity and have an ability to understand and honour differences”*

(Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 16).

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These efforts have led to a greater emphasis on truly embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture into early and middle childhood education programs.

At Gowrie NSW we believe this emphasis is of fundamental importance to ensure:

- we learn about the traditional owners of the land on which we all now live
- we build our knowledge and awareness
- we break down existing barriers for Indigenous individuals and communities
- we provide equal access and opportunities for all children across the sector
- we provide the highest standards of quality care that we possibly can
- we work towards furthering reconciliation
- we meet the National Quality Standard for the inclusion of all children.

For our efforts to be successful, we must ask ourselves how we as education and care professionals provide opportunities for these conversations to take place. Far from being restricted to officially mandated discussions, these are discussions that can emerge in any environment, from the staff room to the play room and with both children in our care as well as with families and colleagues.

In addition to creating an everyday space for this dialogue to flourish, the Gowrie NSW Indigenous Cultural Hub works within the framework of our Inclusion Support

Program to provide educators from across all of NSW and the ACT an opportunity to reflect and discuss inclusive practice without the fear of “getting it wrong”. The establishment of 20 ‘Yarnin Circles’ have provided educators with a ‘safe space’ in which they can conduct open and honest conversations (yarns), discuss their fears or misgivings and engage in those sometimes difficult conversations regarding sensitive topics. This in turn lays the groundwork for the discussion of strategies for overcoming those obstacles.

In addition to our Yarnin Circles, The Gowrie NSW Education Hub delivers workshops on request based around the concept of ‘Mana Baya’ (meaning ‘Gather and Speak’). These workshops focus on including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.

When we gather, speak, and share these yarns about inclusion, we are addressing fears, building cultural awareness and working together to shape strong foundations for deeper understanding. Together we are embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, cultures, protocols, pedagogy and connection to family and country.

By building this knowledge amongst our educators, they become more confident and comfortable addressing issues and building relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members whilst implementing their cultures in practice.

By providing the opportunities for children to learn and enquire we are gifting them with an important chance to develop their basic knowledge of Australia’s first people



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and cultural practices. This not only builds their awareness but inspires in them the confidence to talk about Aboriginal Australia and what a rich and diverse culture it embodies.

When moving forward with your ongoing inclusion and reconciliation efforts, it always pays to take your time and ensure that things are done in a meaningful way. This process is not just about getting things done, but is about getting things right and setting things right. If we ensure we approach the process with thoughtful planning, engagement, research and consultation then we can be satisfied that it will be meaningfully and respectfully implemented into our everyday practice.

Practical steps towards embedding these principles in your practice can include:

- providing opportunities to have discussions with your teams and making this an agenda item
- building awareness by researching your local community
- finding out what traditional lands you are situated on
- researching an Acknowledgement/Welcome to Country
- researching Nurrangunwali – What is a RAP?
- exposing children to Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander cultures throughout all play environments
- reflecting on your own philosophies and inclusion policies.

As an Aboriginal early childhood professional who has been involved in these discussions for over 27 years, I can safely say that we are making progress via initiatives like these. The fact that the National Quality Standard has catapulted centres and professionals into engaging with this topic reflects a renewed emphasis on its fundamental importance of 'extending and enriching' opportunities for all children and proves that when it comes to inclusion, we are certainly not standing still.

Remember, it is always more important to do something than to do nothing.

Testimonials from our program participants across NSW and the ACT:

*"I feel more confident going back to my centre to share my knowledge and understanding of the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Community"*

*"There are many ways to include cultural activities and perspectives into a child care environment, this should be ongoing and embedded into practice, it is ok to start small."*

*"I have gained insight into a range of diverse ways to embed Indigenous Australian perspectives in my setting. It has also reinforced the idea that embedding culture is not about doing additional work, but rather that perspectives can be embedded in daily tasks that are already present"*

*"Great ideas on how to extend ideas with children and make inclusion practice meaningful"*

*"Discussion is important. That there is always another way to work together for better understandings"*

*"Do not be afraid, we all continue to learn..."*

*"Everyone has their own journey, take it step by step"*

### Reference list

- [Acecqa.gov.au](https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-quality-standard). (2008). The National Quality Standard. Retrieved from <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-quality-standard>
- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. (2009). Belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia. Retrieved from [https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/belonging\\_being\\_and\\_becoming\\_the\\_early\\_years\\_learning\\_framework\\_for\\_australia.pdf](https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/belonging_being_and_becoming_the_early_years_learning_framework_for_australia.pdf)

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