Understanding cultural competence

This issue of Central News highlights examples of different services’ journeys towards cultural competence.

Competency is something education and care services and educators strive for constantly. It is what a service must demonstrate to prove it is meeting or exceeding the National Quality Standard, and what an educator trying to obtain a Certificate III or a Diploma has to prove. But there is a special type of competency that all services must achieve to deliver high quality education and care to all children—cultural competency.

Cultural competence is an essential practice of both the Early Years Learning Framework and the Framework for School Aged Care—My Time, Our Place. It is based on the principle contained in both frameworks—respect for diversity.

Can educators and services ever truly become culturally competent? Many would say that achievement of this competency is always just beyond grasp. That is why the EYLF and My Time, Our Place educators’ guides describe cultural competency as a journey. This journey involves developing skills, gathering knowledge, and exploring and questioning attitudes.

Why is cultural competence so important? For all human beings, culture is the basis of who we are as people. Children absorb their culture as they learn and grow.

For education and care services, understanding and valuing cultural diversity is key to countering racism in our services and in the wider community. Children need to be supported to explore the uniqueness of their culture and identity, while also understanding the cultural diversity that exists in their service and in the world around them.

Educators and services need to be able to recognise, value and draw on children's cultural backgrounds as well as helping children maintain their own languages while learning English. Above all, a service needs to support children to understand that being different does not make us better or worse than other people, but that all of our differences can be appreciated.

Cultural competence is especially important in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

Education and care services can help to recognise the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s home cultures as crucial to their identity and developing a sense of self-worth.

We must also work to ensure we recognise the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures as part of the cultural heritage of all Australians.
A Reconciliation Action Plan?

St Andrew’s Kindergarten is a 35-place preschool in the inner west of Sydney. Director Janette Bickley explains the service’s process toward reconciliation.

Our service has nine staff and one of the nine is Aboriginal. Through her influence, we have always had a strong Aboriginal focus in the program through the use of Aboriginal cultural resources such as books, music, puzzles and visitors (Aboriginal dancers and Auntie Wendy) but we were always concerned about how meaningful this approach was. The idea of developing our own Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) was a response to this concern and a way of meeting Quality Area 6 of the then National Quality Standards.

We were fortunate enough to have strong contacts with a local government Aboriginal Consultative Committee who gave us guidance as to how to begin. We worked within the Reconciliation Australia framework of Relationships, Respect and Opportunities and wrote goals which we thought we could achieve within our environment.

All of our staff were involved at staff meetings in the process and our committee was regularly updated and involved through a special Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) and RAP section added to the monthly director’s report.

The most challenging part was communicating the reasons for wanting to write a RAP plan to stakeholders—some committee members did not initially fully understand the benefits to the children of having a strong Aboriginal perspective in our program. We pushed on, however.

Identifying our goals

In each of the three areas of Relationships, Respect and Opportunities, we have a particular focus on reconciliation and from there we wrote our specific goals. In most instances, these were very simple steps in developing relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in an organisation that had very few existing relationships.

Having a visual presence was one of our first goals with things like:
- purchasing artwork from a local Aboriginal artist (money not from government funds);
- having the Aboriginal word for ‘welcome’ from the Wangel clan (our original local custodians) on our entrance door;
- having an acknowledgment and the Aboriginal flag alongside the Australian flag at the beginning of our Parent Information booklet.

Other goals also included establishing a relationship with Aboriginal Employment Strategies to create opportunities for Aboriginal educators to be employed within our service when opportunities arose.

We sent a draft of our RAP to Reconciliation Australia, seeking endorsement and as a way of ensuring that protocols were being met. Reconciliation Australia was very helpful in giving us advice and, after a few changes to the draft, we had a RAP that was formally endorsed in December 2012. We were able then to use the Reconciliation Australia logo on our RAP as an official endorsement. Their website is also very useful in keeping up to date with current issues and has lots of helpful information.

We all believe now that our RAP has definitely been beneficial to our organisation. It has become part of our overall Quality Improvement Plan and was included in the documents for our first ever assessment and ratings visit in February 2014.

We believe it has given everyone a much deeper understanding of issues surrounding reconciliation but, more importantly, has helped us develop strong, secure and respectful relationships with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and given our children a deeper understanding of Aboriginal people and culture. We are now working to ensure it continues.

Are you financially literate?

Are you comfortable with the part of your role as a service director, co-ordinator or management committee member that involves managing your service’s finances? If you feel like you do not fully understand concepts such as cash and accrual accounting, or do not understand how to read those financial reports the service’s administrator or treasurer hands you, this free video for community-based services may help.

The video was produced by Network SA and funded by the Australian Government. It can be viewed here: http://tinyurl.com/centrefinances

Treasure trove of resources

Have you checked out the new online resource library for education and care services run by the Professional Support Co-ordinator Alliance?

Children’s Services Central is a member of the Alliance, which operates under the Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP).

All resources in the library are free to download and include a wide range of topic areas and formats. Resources include videos, training packages, manuals, sample policies, self-guided learning packages, workbooks, reading materials and much more.

The best part is all resources are free to download.

Go to: www.cscentral.org.au/library

Does your service receive funding from DEC?

If your service receives funding from the NSW Department of Education and Communities and would like funding this year, you will be required to accept the 2014/2015 funding agreement through the Department’s new Early Childhood Contract Management System (ECCMS).

If your service is not registered for the ECCMS, you will not be able to receive your next funding payment.

To discuss anything about the system with DEC, phone 1300 755 426. If you are having trouble obtaining an Askey (which you will need before you can register on the ECCMS), phone 13 28 66.

Wishing a workshop was closer to you?

Ever found a workshop in the Children’s Services Central professional development handbook you would have loved to attend, only to discover it is being held in another location? Do not despair! Contact Children’s Services Central via email at info@cscentral.org.au and if there is enough demand in your area, we will try to run the course again near you. You can also phone us on 1800 157 818.

No jab, no play: is your register up to date?

If you are caring for children below school age, please remember that early childhood education and care services cannot enrol a child unless the parent/guardian has provided documentation that shows the child:
- is fully vaccinated for their age, or
- has a medical reason not to be vaccinated, or
- has a parent/guardian who has a conscientious objection to vaccination, or
- is on a recognised catch-up schedule if their child has fallen behind with their vaccinations.

Your education and care service needs to maintain an immunisation register recording the immunisation status of all enrolled children. The child’s immunisation status must be recorded upon their initial enrolment in the service and at each immunisation milestone (i.e. two, four, six, 12 and 18 months, and three-and-a-half to four years). OSHC Services are exempt from these requirements. For more information, visit: www.health.nsw.gov.au/immunisation/Pages/toolkit-contents.aspx

The best part is all resources are free to download.
Cultural competence: A Bicultural Support perspective

Everyone has his or her own unique interpretation of what cultural competence means, but in a Bicultural Support context, cultural competence is the ability to see life beyond our own existence. By Meni Tsambouniaris, Co-ordinator Bicultural Support.

Bicultural Support workers play a major role in assisting services to be aware of the need for and to become more culturally competent. They are a unique human resource, setting the scene and planting the seeds of cultural competence in education and care settings.

Services invite Bicultural Support workers to share cultures that make up their educational and wider communities. By introducing their culture and language through specific cultural activities and in their day-to-day interactions within services which promote inclusive practices, Bicultural Support workers help to promote and instil the strong sense of positive cultural identity which is essential to children’s sense of who they are and where they belong. Accessing Bicultural Support enables the education and care sector and educators to unpack and embrace cultural competence.

What Bicultural Support workers do:

- Bicultural Support workers challenge educators to become more aware of their own view of culture and what it means to them, as well as helping develop positive attitudes towards cultural differences. Bicultural Support workers also support services to develop and acquire skills for communication and interaction across cultures.
- Bicultural Support workers demonstrate cultural competence at an individual level by introducing and sharing their culture with children, families and educators. Their presence at services and the underpinning philosophy behind Bicultural Support, has the flow-on effect of getting educators to think about their own values, beliefs and attitudes related to culture, diversity, similarities and differences. This enables educators to face any bias they may hold.
- Bicultural Support can also support services to undertake cultural audits, ensure policies and procedures reflect culturally competent and inclusive practices, and embrace cultural competency at all levels through professional development and access to resources.
- Bicultural Support workers also help services become more culturally competent at the systems level—there have been many good news stories, for example, of Aboriginal Bicultural Support workers supporting services to better relate and connect with their local community and agencies. Services have, for example, united local Aboriginal Elders to the centre on an ongoing basis to authentically share their culture, stories, language and foods.
- Bicultural Support also promotes cultural competence through introducing and promoting diversity, regardless of whether there are culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) or Aboriginal children and families accessing a service. Having a Bicultural Support worker at a service is a cultural awareness and cultural competence exercise in itself.

I recently asked a handful of Bicultural Support workers: “How do you, as a Bicultural Support worker, work with education and care services to enhance cultural competence?” These are some of the responses:

- Many years of working in children’s services as a Bicultural Support worker/consultant has enabled me to acquire the knowledge, skills and the insight to understand culture and diversity. I believe we are culturally diverse. I fully appreciate the influence and impact by which cultures shape our daily lives and I reinforce this with the services I work with. I also encourage them to reflect on the importance of differentiating between culture and aspiring to be culturally competent. By implementing culturally appropriate activities such as music, songs, stories, utilising and promoting home language, respecting diverse child-rearing practices and expanding this awareness/knowledge to the children, educators, and the families we may come into contact with, I believe I have enhanced service’s awareness and cultural competence.”
- Many years of working in children’s services as a Bicultural Support worker/consultant has enabled me to acquire the knowledge, skills and the insight to understand culture and diversity. I believe we are culturally diverse. I fully appreciate the influence and impact by which cultures shape our daily lives and I reinforce this with the services I work with. I also encourage them to reflect on the importance of differentiating between culture and aspiring to be culturally competent. By implementing culturally appropriate activities such as music, songs, stories, utilising and promoting home language, respecting diverse child-rearing practices and expanding this awareness/knowledge to the children, educators, and the families we may come into contact with, I believe I have enhanced service’s awareness and cultural competence.”
- Bicultural Support is a great resource when it comes to supporting education and care services to become culturally competent places for children. Bicultural Support workers and consultants provide services with invaluable information about language and culture as they have the understanding, cultural knowledge, skills, resources and professional practice needed to work effectively with children and families from diverse backgrounds.

Lastly, recent feedback received through the eyes of a child on the impact that Bicultural Support had on them really summed up cultural competence for me.

The child said: “It is good that you can understand me, because it is very funny that the other staff can’t understand, and I have to talk very simply and explain to them…”

Hoa Thi Tran from Bicultural Support (reading) with staff and children from Bankstown Multicultural Children’s Centre.

Celebrating Sinhala New Year at family day care

Cultural competency isn’t always just about being alert to the varying cultures of the children in your service. Sometimes, it is about ensuring that children are introduced to the cultural background of their educators.

Although important in all service types, this is especially important in family day care settings where children are in educators’ own homes. Domanee’s families are invited to participate in the traditional Sinhala New Year celebrations with her. She provides the children with traditional clothing to dress for the occasion. Kiribath is cooked and served as the first meal of the new year and each child greets their family in the traditional way with a bettul leaf. Domanee has also organised this breakfast at the family day care play session where other educators’ children participated.

Domanee believes that awareness of differing cultures helps children to appreciate the differences in people and their traditions. She also thinks such awareness helps children respect and be tolerant of those from cultures differing from their own.

Domanee actively shares her Sinhala culture with the children she cares for as an integral part of daily routines and activities. Many Sinhalese artefacts are on display in her home and she often plays Sinhala music during the day. This enables Domanee to teach the children Sinhala dances. The children she cares for have access to picture books from Sri Lanka and Domanee teaches the children to count from one to 10 in Sinhala. Cooking activities sometimes involve cooking kiribath, which is a traditional Sri Lankan dish made from rice and milk, similar to a rice pudding.

Domanee ensures all the children in her care can participate in Sinhalese New Year celebrations, known as Aluth Avurudda, which is an important national holiday for the cultures of the Sinhalese people of Sri Lanka. Domanee’s families are invited to participate in the traditional Sinhala New Year celebrations with her. She provides the children with traditional clothing to dress for the occasion. Kiribath is cooked and served as the first meal of the new year and each child greets their family in the traditional way with a bettul leaf. Domanee has also organised this breakfast at the family day care play session where other educators’ children participated.

Domanee believes that involving children and their families in celebrations such as these enables the families to form a community of friends that support each other and their children.

Domanee also celebrates special days and holidays from a range of cultures, as well as her own, to ensure the children she cares for know there are many cultural traditions that people celebrate in Australia and across the world.
Community in Practice (Sister Service) Project lives on

Children’s Services Central takes a look back at the origins and success of the Community in Practice (Sister Service) Project. While it has evolved into a new program with a new name, the spirit of the project, to connect education and care services with Aboriginal communities, lives on in the program’s new Yarnin Circle format. By Judy McKay-Tempest, from IPSU (NSW/ACT). IPSU (NSW/ACT) is managed by Gowrie NSW.

In 2010, Children’s Services Central funded the Indigenous Professional Support Unit (NSW/ACT) to facilitate a project, the Sister Service Project, to engage Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal early childhood educators in professional learning through a communities in practice model. The project was based on an earlier project run by Gowrie NSW for three Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Services (MACS).

Children’s Services Central and the IPSU (NSW/ACT) worked collaboratively with Inclusion Support Agencies in specific regions to provide a ‘sister service’ opportunity, partnering six NSW Aboriginal community-controlled MACS, long day care and playgroup services with community-based non-Aboriginal early childhood education and care service in the same local area. The Community in Practice Sister Service project aimed to:

- promote a local focus on ‘closing the gap’ in early childhood education and care services
- provide professional development for participants
- develop best practice models for inclusive practice and cultural competence
- improve/develop new strategies for the recruitment and retention of staff in remote, disadvantaged and diverse communities
- establish ongoing communities of practice that would be sustained after completion of the project.

The services that participated were:
- Albury Family Day Care (Albury)
- Amy Hard Child Care Centre (Wagga Wagga)
- Coojiga MACS (La Perouse, Sydney)
- Koori Kindermann Aboriginal Playgroup and Preschool (Albury)
- Mitchell Early Learning Centre (Bathurst)
- North Coora Children’s Centre (Coora)
- Plumperton Long Day Care (Bidwill)
- Tigger’s Honeypot Childcare Centre (Randwick, Sydney)
- Towi MACS (Bathurst)
- Waadjri MACS (Wagga Wagga)
- Yabinga Boost MACS (Coora)
- Yawara Community and Child Care Centre (Bidwill).

So, what happened in the Sister Service project? The services in each community joined together for a range of combined activities such as joint staff meetings, staff exchange opportunities and combined training sessions so participants could be in environments and undertake activities that would enable the mutual exchange of ideas, stories and experiences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators.

Did the project work? All participants found their experiences helped to break down cultural barriers and to give them the confidence to re-examine the cultural safety and competency of their own programs for all children and families. Participants had many practical opportunities to share their ideas and education and care practices and to learn from the successes and challenges experienced by their sister service.

The project provided educators with opportunities to create ongoing networks between sister services to allow for the future exchange of ideas and support. Of course, the project wasn’t without challenges. Logistical difficulties in carrying out planned staff swaps were problematic. Services didn’t always have the same staff qualifications and unanticipated staff changes often occurred. However, these challenges were overcome by adapting this aspect of the project to allow for the sister services to arrange for mutually appropriate opportunities to bring educators and children together in other real and meaningful ways.

Moreover, by working together to create these meeting and sharing opportunities, educators were able to gain a stronger understanding of the specific circumstances and needs of their sister service.

Today, the project is called ‘Making Connections with Aboriginal Communities: Yarnin Circles’. These Yarnin Circles provide an opportunity for educators to ‘talk up’ issues that they may have faced in making connections with their local Aboriginal community and for an opportunity to share how educators have made connections.

Sessions are run by the Indigenous Professional Support Unit (NSW/ACT) for Children’s Services Central. For information, please contact IPSU (NSW/ACT) on their tollfree number: 1800 450 472.

WALKING THE LAND TOGETHER

Ngroo Education was established to improve opportunities for Aboriginal children to participate in early childhood education and care. Ngroo runs workshops to increase the service’s ability to create culturally safe and welcoming places and ultimately increase the number of Aboriginal children at the service.

The workshops Ngroo offers include:

- Walking Together
- Walking the Land Together
- Does the Shoe Fit?

Ngroo also provides services with ongoing mentoring and engagement with local Aboriginal communities. For more information, go to: www.ngroo.org.au

Need to know (more)

Many great publications and resources exist to help education and care services travel along the path of cultural competency.

Resources for cultural competence relating to out-of-school care services

These Inclusion and Professional Support Program sheets (pictured above) provide clear and easy steps for services that are not Aboriginal to follow to engage with their local Aboriginal communities.

Deadly Cards

The Deadly Cards are a vibrant collection of 64 cards designed to assist educators to explore cultural competence through facilitated conversation, or ‘yarning’. The cards produced by the Workforce Council in Queensland encourage personal engagement in understanding the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inclusion.

For links to all these resources, please go to: www.cscentral.org.au/culturalcompetency
Cultural Connections Booklet

This booklet prepared by Child Australia (the Professional Support Co-ordinator for Western Australia and the Northern Territory) contains fantastic practical examples, stories, reflective questions and staff exercises for education and care services looking to become more culturally competent.

Kids Matter Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resource portal

This portal has more resources than anyone could ever use! Check out Working with Aboriginal People and Communities, a practical resource, put out by NSW Department of Community Services, which provides great practice tips for communicating with Aboriginal Communities.

Why culture matters for children’s development and wellbeing

Produced by Kids Matter Early Childhood, this resource outlines how early childhood and education services can play a critical role in supporting and engaging children and families from cultural backgrounds.

Educators’ Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia

Educators’ Guide to the Framework for School Age Care in Australia.

Both of these publications were developed to assist educators to implement the Learning Frameworks in their service. Both the Frameworks and these guides are designed to engage educators in critical thinking, reflection and inquiry.

For links to all these resources, please go to: www.cscentral.org.au/culturalcompetency