'We love sharing your land': What children say about Acknowledgement of Country practices in Early Learning Centres
Thanks and Acknowledgements

This project took place on the lands of the Dharug and Dharawal people, and we acknowledge their ownership and custodianship of the land. The project is a partnership between the Transforming early Education and Child Health (TeEACH) Research Centre at Western Sydney University and the Western Sydney University Early Learning Centres. We would like to thank all children who participated in the interviews and focus groups and generously gave us their time and knowledge, and the educators that supported participation by the children. We hope this report is useful in the ongoing project of embedding Indigenous knowledges and ways of being in early learning environments.

Suggested Citation

Table of Contents

Who we are.................................................3
Executive Summary....................................4
Recommendations......................................5
Background................................................6
Research objectives...................................6
Method......................................................7
Research with children...............................7
Analysis.....................................................8
Findings.....................................................9
  1. Acknowledgement practices......................9
  2. This land on which we play....................12
  3. First Peoples First.................................16
  4. Imagination and Play.............................20
Conclusion...............................................22
References...............................................25
Who we are

Cris Townley
I was raised in England in the Forest of Dean. My father is from Yorkshire in the north of England. My mother's family were Irish convict settlers on Wiradjuri Land. My mother was raised there and on Gamaragal Land, and her love of Country was woven through my childhood. Like my parents and grandmothers, I am an educator, I focus on inclusion in early childhood. I am living and raising my children on Wangal Land.

Rebekah Grace
I was raised in the Blue Mountains on the lands of the Gundungurra people. My father was from London in England, and my mother’s family were Scottish convict settlers on Dharug land. I have raised my own children on those same lands, the lands of the Bidjigal peole of the Dharug nation. My life’s work is committed to ensuring that all children have every opportunity to thrive.

Kerry Staples
My parents’ families came across the oceans, eventually making their home on the lands of the Bediagal clan. This is where my parents were raised, and I was born. I am grateful to now live near the peaceful waters of Guragurang, on the land of the Dharawal language speaking people, the Norongerragal. For me, working with and in communities and families to enhance inclusion and opportunities for all children has been at the forefront of my research and teaching.

Christine Woodrow
I was born and lived my childhood on the lands of the Larrakia people in the Northern Territory. This is beautiful land and sea country, and my childhood memories are replete with rich experiences in this country. I returned to Larrakia country as a teacher of young children after attending university on the lands of the Kaurna people with a passion for equity and education that is as vibrant now as then. I now have the great fortune to live on the lands of the Dharug and Gundungurra peoples.

Elise Baker
I was born on Gunditjmara Land and was raised on Dharug Land. My mother and five generations before her were born and raised on Gunditjmara Land, descended from settlers from County Offaly, Ireland. My father was born and raised on Gadigal land, descended from settlers from Somerset Shire County, England. I am a speech pathologist and researcher driven by a passion for the human right to communicate, and the need for young children with communication difficulties to be helped and heard. I am living and raising my children on Dharug Land.

Catherine Kaplun
As a young child, my family moved several times, living on the lands of the Kamilaroi and later the Wiradjuri peoples, before returning to the lands of Pemulwuy and the Bediagal clans of the Dharug and Eora nations, where I was born and raised. I am fortunate to now live and work on these same lands, ones that I love and care for, and where I have raised my children. I have worked in the health and education sectors in various roles, where my awareness and knowledge of the inequities of children’s experiences and opportunities grew. As a researcher, I strive to make a difference in the lives of young children by making changes that improve children’s health, development, learning and life opportunities.
Executive Summary

This report explores ‘Acknowledgement of Country’ practices in early education. We build on our previous report (Grace et al., 2021) which identified key features of Acknowledgement of Country practices, examined the process that contributes to their implementation, and explored how families and educators perceived the significance, meaning, benefits and impacts of Acknowledgement practices.

This report adds children’s voices to our existing research with educators, parents and carers of children (Grace et al. 2021). The findings from the conversations with children were deferred due to restricted access to early learning centres during the first two years of the COVID pandemic. Therefore, this report is published separately to the initial research report.

As indicated by the report title, ‘We love sharing your land’, this research is conducted with predominantly non-Aboriginal children, by non-Aboriginal researchers. The research was conducted in early childhood settings in which both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal practitioners have developed and embedded Acknowledgement of Country practices and guided children in their understandings over time. Important guidance was provided by a steering committee which included Aboriginal members with practitioner and research expertise in early education.

We conducted focus groups with children in five early learning centres. Consent was obtained for the participation of 69 children, and most of these did participate. It is difficult to establish exactly how many of the 69 children participated, as children were free to leave or join the focus group as it progressed. We recognise that the children know more about Indigenous knowledges than we were able to elicit or hear during the focus groups.

The initial report was structured around five themes that were constructed from the data (Grace et al. 2021). We began our analysis with these themes, which were adapted during the analysis to four themes: Acknowledgement practices; the Land on which we play; First Peoples first; and Imagination and Play. We use these four themes to analyse and report on the conversations with children.

An important aim of this body of work is to provide research data that informs the development of professional training for educators, particularly non-Aboriginal educators, to support them as they embed Acknowledgement of Country in early learning environments. We aim to make children’s understandings visible, for the benefit of other early learning centres. Our recommendations are intended to support and enhance practice. Our recommendations are based on what children told us about the inclusive practice of educators and other staff at all WSUELL centres.
Recommendations

We recommend:

1. Songs, storybooks and art works are impactful mechanisms for introducing Indigenous knowledges to young children. Again, selecting materials that reflect and honour local culture whenever possible demonstrates respect and supports understanding of local context and diversity across Indigenous communities.

2. Our interview data points to the value of developing habitual Acknowledgement of Country protocols that are specific to a service. This facilitates a sense of connection for the staff and children, and reduces the risk of tokenism. Acknowledgement of Country songs might be created or modified with children so they are unique to that group of children.

3. Cultural and creative expressions embedded within a centre reflect local context and customs. Some expressions of culture, such as dot paintings, can be misinterpreted as generic representations of Aboriginal culture, rather than as reflecting the particular traditions of different Aboriginal groups and countries.

4. Start by listening to what children already understand and know.

5. Building an understanding with children that the land on which they live and play is both Aboriginal Land, and can be described by the suburb names they know. It is the same Land. Australia is a First Nations Country.

6. Integrating Aboriginal concepts of Country at a number of levels, from the mat where we sit, the suburb where we live, the Australia where we are citizens, to the sky and what we know about the solar system.

7. Helping the children to understand that the black of the Aboriginal flag is representing Aboriginal people. However, it is important not to explicitly link this with skin colour. Of course, not all Aboriginal people who are alive today have dark skin.

8. Explaining the colours and symbols on the Torres Strait Islander flag, and that this is also Australian.

9. Acknowledging Aboriginal people as Australia’s First Peoples, a continuous ongoing culture in Australia, and the most important to acknowledge, respect and know.

10. Centring Aboriginal culture in celebrations of diversity, because we are on land that belongs to the First Peoples.

11. Work towards Aboriginal people being present in the centre.

12. Continue to develop inclusive practices for all cultures represented at the early childhood centre and within surrounding communities.

13. Talk about Indigenous people as contemporary people rather than ancient people.

14. Allow children to experiment through imagination and play with ideas, stories, identity and language, whilst also modelling and providing scaffolding for appropriate and respectful protocols.

15. Educators to be explicit and consistent in their instruction about why Acknowledgement of Country is done, and aware that children can have varied and emerging perspectives.
**Background**

This research project was developed as a pilot study to explore the practice of ‘Acknowledgement of Country’ in Australian early education contexts. Our aim was to better understand the motivations and the perspectives of key actors around its meaning and significance. Our first report from the project (Grace et al., 2021) documented Acknowledgement practices across the six Western Sydney University Early Learning (WSUELL) sites, explored and analysed the associated processes that support the implementation of ongoing Acknowledgement practices, and considered the contribution to the lives of children and cultural discourse. The original research design included investigating the perspectives of children, families, educators and Elders. However, due to the impact of COVID 19 across Greater Sydney in 2021, where movement was restricted for an extended part of the year, there was no opportunity to hold conversations with children, or with Elders. In late 2022 we were able to visit early learning centres and speak with children. This report adds to the initial body of work by presenting the findings from the focus groups with children.

Whilst Acknowledgement of Country practices have been theorised as integral to bringing about understanding and reconciliation (Blair, 2015; Dempster, 2007; Somerville et al., 2019), or argued to have little practical impact (Ahmed, 2006; Kowal, 2015), there is little empirical research to substantiate either of these positions. This research will add to knowledge on the impact of Acknowledgement practices in early childhood settings.

In the initial report (Grace et al., 2022) we developed seven guiding principles for early learning centres to consider when embedding Acknowledgement practices into the centre. These are the seven guiding principles:

1. Develop relationships with local Aboriginal people.
2. Seek out and honour local Aboriginal knowledge.
3. Centre Aboriginal culture in celebrations of diversity, because we are on land that belongs to the First Peoples.
4. Encourage families to travel this journey with you.
5. Prioritise time for professional reflection and learning.
6. Decide as a centre the extent to which you will share difficult knowledges with the children.
7. Invest in a shared collection of resources.

Building on work that informs educators in schools (Shay & Oliver, 2021), there is a small and growing body of work on Acknowledgement practices in early education and care (Duncan, 2017; Grace et al., 2021; Kitson & Bowes, 2010; Locke, 2022). However, there is little research into the perspectives of children on Indigenous knowledges. Whilst we are encouraged to include children’s voices in reconciliation pedagogies (Duncan, 2017), we could not find any research which listened to children’s voices regarding their perspectives on Acknowledgement practices.
Research objectives

Acknowledgement practices are a prime example of critical pedagogies that sit in the context of the EYLF, yet can open up conversations with children, and ways of being with children, that engage with multiplicity, difference, religion, sexuality, race, skin colour (Giugni, 2011). Despite being considered difficult and challenging topics to discuss with children, children are capable of these conversations (Boutte et al., 2011; Robinson et al., 2019). Our research will enable a better understanding of this process, of children’s perspectives on Indigenous knowledges, and how early childhood educators might be supported to implement Acknowledgement practices in a way that opens up child, educator and community understandings of Indigenous onto-epistemologies.

This report addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the key features evident in Acknowledgement of Country practices, from the perspective of children, in early childhood education and care (ECEC) contexts?
2. How do children perceive the significance, meanings and benefits of the practices?

Method

This is a qualitative study that undertook focus groups with children. This is an appropriate methodology since the study aims to examine the perspectives of children. The study benefitted from the trust and relationships built in the previous stage of the research in the Early Learning Centres with WSUELL services and WSU Aboriginal community members in Western Sydney University. In stage one, a steering committee was established, comprising of two non-Indigenous managers, an Aboriginal educator from WSUELL, and two Aboriginal advisors from the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Indigenous Leadership, Western Sydney University. Some one-on-one or small group face-to-face yarns took place for people to get to know each other. One or two researchers undertook familiarisation visits to each centre, and two researchers attended a Reconciliation Week BBQ at one centre. The same steering committee had oversight of stage 2, with the exception of the Aboriginal educator, who had left the service by late 2022.

We conducted five focus groups with children, one at each of five early learning centres. Consent was obtained for the participation of 69 children. Whilst most of these 69 children participated, it is difficult to establish exactly how many participated and for how long, as children were free to leave or join the focus group as it progressed. Children’s voices were at the centre of the data collection and analysis. At least one educator was present in each focus group, so that children had a familiar adult present. The educators participated in the conversations to varying degrees, to encourage children to speak. We audio recorded the focus groups, and one researcher, who was present at each focus group, transcribed the audio.

Three researchers were involved in the focus groups, with either one or two researchers conducting each focus group. Continuity was provided by having one researcher present for all focus groups. Two of the other researchers participated in one focus group each. We did not enquire as to whether or not children present in the focus groups were Indigenous, as this personal information was not necessary for this research. Ethics approval was obtained from Western Sydney University (Approval Number H14181). When attributing quotes, we have labelled the focus groups Group 1 through to Group 5.
Research with children

Graham and Fitzgerald set out the reasons for including children in research in Australia (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). We included children in this research for a number of these reasons. Firstly, because we recognise that children are both being and becoming. As people who are being, they can actively shape and contribute to their world, and involving them in research recognises this contribution to the research questions. Recognition and respect for children’s views contributes to their wellbeing and identity. Children also benefit from socio-cultural experiences to become citizens, and the topic of Aboriginal knowledges in early learning environments is connected to social justice concerns and how people can live together in a multicultural society (Grace et al. 2021).

Use of task based methods (Punch, 2002) or visual methods (Pimlott-Wilson, 2012) such as drawings, photographs or construction is recommended for research involving children. Whilst we did not set tasks such as drawings, we did talk to children about artefacts they were familiar with. (Note that when we use the term ‘artefact’, we are referring to a learning tool or object that holds Indigenous cultural knowledge from a living culture, rather than an object from the past that can be found in a museum.) We began each group by asking them about the flags that were displayed in the entrance space of each centre: the Aboriginal flag, the Torres Strait Islander flag and the Australian Blue Ensign. We then discussed drawings and craft that they had previously created that were displayed around the centre, and/or artefacts such as Acknowledgement baskets. Using familiar artefacts and art from around their own centres situated their participation in the research context (Punch, 2002), and children could make choices about what to show us in their environment, which is a useful strategy to adopt when listening to children’s voices (Ceballos & Susinos, 2022). We also showed them video of an activity we wanted to discuss with them, of children participating in Acknowledgement of Country (Ethnic Community Services Co-operative, 2018). Showing a video is recommended as a way of helping children recall and speak about their own experiences (Nilsson et al., 2015).

Consent to participate was obtained from the children’s parents or carers. We also ensured children’s assent. Children’s assent was a relational process (Dockett & Perry, 2011), paying attention to their body language, ensuring a familiar educator was present so they felt safe, and providing a choice of other activities if they wished to dissent to participating. Assent was ongoing in that the children could wander in and out of the conversation, because children may need to experience what it is they are being asked to do in order to give consent (Nilsson et al., 2015). To build rapport we sat down at the level of children, in most cases on the floor, together with familiar educators.
Although this research does prioritise and centre Indigenous knowledges, it did not create a space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to have their contributions prioritised and centred in their peer group. This was a deliberate decision in the design of the research. The early learning centres were predominantly made up of children who were not Aboriginal, with very few families identifying themselves as Aboriginal. From the previous stage in the research, we were aware that at least one of the children in the focus groups was Aboriginal, and that it was likely that there would be more. We decided not to identify which children were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and to make them a focal point. Rather we remained open about the possibilities for children’s cultural identities. We also felt it was more important to allow children and families agency and privacy in choices about disclosing their Aboriginality, and to work with the ambiguity of possibility in each focus group, particularly given the purpose of the focus group was to discuss activities that identify and celebrate Indigenous knowledges.

Analysis

The interviews were initially transcribed using software, then checked for accuracy of transcription by the researcher who had been present for all interviews. The transcripts were coded, assisted by NVivo software (QSR International Pty Ltd., March 2020) by this researcher. These codes were then organised according to the five themes constructed from the data in the initial report (Grace et al. 2021). These are: the range of Acknowledgement practices present; the land on which we play; living with many cultures – acknowledging the First Peoples; getting it right / just start; someone to ask; and begin with the children. The researchers then met to discuss the preliminary analysis. The researcher who been present at all focus groups and initially coded the transcripts began a written draft of the findings. The researchers then met to refine and validate the analysis. These findings were written up by the researcher who had conducted all interviews. The themes were refined and validated through review by the other researchers.

Participatory research with children requires a ‘dialogical approach’ and a ‘disposition to accommodate the complexity and ambiguity of children’s accounts’ (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010, p. 138). With this in mind, our analysis is at times speculative and inclusive of multiple meanings, to reduce the likelihood of imposing our definitive understandings on what children had to say. Such imposition can be a methodological issue in research with children (Punch, 2002). Koch (2021) reminds us that playfulness is part of the researcher-child relationship, and in this analysis the playful creative storytelling of children is acknowledged as exploring multiple meanings and possibilities. Punch (2002) identifies as a methodological issue that children, like adults, may exaggerate or lie in research interviews for a number of reasons. We found that children’s playfulness and use of storytelling to explore meanings might also lead to what could be interpreted by others as lies, but we interpret as explorations of meaning and knowledge.
Whilst this project consulted with Aboriginal people through the Steering committee, and at least one Aboriginal child was present in the focus groups, our report and recommendations are developed by non-Aboriginal researchers, largely from conversations with non-Aboriginal children about their experiences and understandings of Aboriginal knowledges and practices within their early learning centres. We particularly thank the Aboriginal members of the steering committee for their close reading of the draft reports, and the feedback they gave us. This report is one perspective of many, that builds on our previous report on educator and parent voices, and we offer it in the hope it will be a catalyst for sharing ideas and discussion, rather than to prescribe practice in early learning centres. We have learnt that we will not get everything ‘right’, but it is important to start and learn.

Findings

Our data has been analysed through the lens of the five themes constructed from the data in the initial report (Grace et al. 2021). These are: Range of Acknowledgement practices present; the Land on which we play; Living with many cultures – acknowledging the First Peoples; Getting it right / just start; Someone to ask; and Begin with the children. We found that the two themes of ‘Begin with the children’ and ‘Getting it right / just start’ were so interconnected that we merged these themes into ‘Imagination and Play’. We also found that ‘Someone to ask’ was rarely present in what the children had to say. As a result, our findings in this report are structured around the four themes: Acknowledgement practices; the Land on which we play; First Peoples first; and Imagination and play.

1. Acknowledgement practices

Strengths

- Indigenous knowledges are embedded across songs, art, story, craft, maths, and Acknowledgement of Country
- Children engage with Indigenous knowledges in a meaningful way
- Children are familiar with an habitual Acknowledgement of Country protocol

Children were willing and often eager to engage in conversation about the artefacts shown to them. Across the five research sites, children spoke about a range of practices and knowledge that they held, and showed us different artefacts and art. These included making suggestions of songs, singing to us, reciting their Acknowledgement to Country, discussing their artworks and Darug numbers, naming books of Indigenous stories, showing us clapsticks, symbol stones, a didgeridoo, and baby dolls. Many items were identified as Aboriginal by the children, including boomerangs, cars, dinosaurs and paper.
Songs

A range of songs were discussed or suggested by the children. Singing Indigenous songs was familiar to the children, one asked ‘are we going to sing the song?’ (site 5). This song was then described as ‘the warami song’ (where warami means hello in Darug). However, it was still unclear which song the child meant, the children and educators were unable to further identify it. Despite this reference to ‘the song’, singular, and the inability to identify it further, these children then suggested or sang more than one Indigenous related song, demonstrating a knowledge of a range of songs. Most notably, they joined in with their educator to sing ‘Red Black and Yellow’, with accompanying actions.

Some children demonstrated an ability to attribute ownership of songs, with one child reporting on the death of the singer of one song they knew, and another identifying Taba Naba with the Torres Strait Islander flag.

Art

A range of artwork was evident in the centres that reflected engagement with Indigenous knowledges, and was associated as such by the children. This included paintings of whales, ‘because they are whales found around Australia’ (site 5). Dot paintings, painting on leaves, painting with sand, footprints, and artwork arranged in the shape and colours of the Aboriginal flag were present in the centres and discussed with the children. ‘Aboriginal spots’ (site 4) were identified on a coolamon, and white ‘dots’ and ‘lines’ (site 3) on the face of a baby doll signified an Aboriginal baby. Although a range of art was evident across the centres, when children spoke about Aboriginal art they usually spoke about dot painting to the exclusion of other styles.

There was a strong association of red and black and yellow with Indigenous art because ‘there’s a lot of Aboriginal people who use those colours for painting’ (site 1). The colours of the Torres Strait Islander flag were not discussed, although one child showed us braided green, blue and white ribbons on a wooden ring. The sun featured as a subject in the children’s Aboriginal paintings ‘because a lot of Aboriginal people make the sun’ (site 1), and the yellow circle in the Aboriginal flag sun was recognised as representing the sun in all centres. Paintings did not always feature a sun. Other subjects included a chicken and an elephant.
Story

Children’s engagement with Aboriginal stories was evident in the centres. There was a wall display of artwork generated from the book *How the birds got their colours* (Albert & Lofts, 2004) which the children had explored for book week. The children at this centre were so engaged in the focus group that they requested the researcher read a story at the end, so they read How the birds got their colours. In another centre *Welcome to Country* (Murphy & Kennedy, 2016) was named as a favourite book.

Children in two centres spoke about the Darug book *Baby Business* (Seymour, 2019). At site 5 the children had crafted a diorama of the story using craft materials such as paper and cardboard, leaves and wood, and dolls. The diorama showed two babies sitting in a bush, beside a campfire, together with a bundle of leaves tied up with a leaf. The children retold the story, with some prompting from their educator. The bundle of leaves was for a smoking ceremony, where ‘they make it into fire and put the baby on it’. When asked why, a child explained ‘because they wanted to name the baby’. Discussion of the baby’s name led to a child explaining how to gather honey in the bush ‘they just take the bees off and then we take honey and then the bees get it.’ The grammar in the last quote perhaps indicates that the child is able to place themselves both within and outside of Aboriginal knowledge, as they work through understanding their own identity and its relationship to the knowledge present in the centre activities.
Acknowledgement of Country

A habitual Acknowledgement of Country protocol was evident in the centres. After watching the video, children in four of the focus groups showed us their Acknowledgement protocol. In one centre, this begins with children taking a natural object such as a seed pod from a basket, and describing the sensory experience of holding their natural objects. They then recited an Acknowledgement, as a group, phrase by phrase following the educator lead. In the other three centres children demonstrated their Acknowledgement protocol of a song, with actions. In one centre this was one child and an educator, in the other two centres a group of children supported by an educator. In the centre where the children did not show us an Acknowledgement, we know from our subsequent visit that there is an Acknowledgement song developed by the service that is familiar to many of the children. Children can expand on the meaning of the Acknowledgement, for example one said: ‘we love sharing your land’ (Site 5)

We the people of Western Sydney Early Learning pay our acknowledgement to the Darug people. Hello sky, hello land, hello friends and hello me.

Recommendations:

- We recommend that the cultural and creative expressions embedded within a centre reflect local context and customs. Some expressions of culture, such as dot paintings, can be misinterpreted as generic representations of Aboriginal culture, rather than as reflecting the particular traditions of different Aboriginal groups and countries.
- Songs, storybooks and art works are impactful mechanisms for introducing Indigenous knowledges to young children. Again, selecting materials that reflect and honour local culture whenever possible demonstrates respect and supports understanding of local context and diversity across Indigenous communities.
- Our interview data points to the value of developing habitual Acknowledgement of Country protocols that are specific to a service. This facilitates a sense of connection for the staff and children, and reduces the risk of tokenism. Acknowledgement of Country songs might be created or modified with children so they are unique to that group of children.
- Start by listening to what children already understand and know.
2. This land on which we play

Strengths
- Children recognise the Aboriginal Flag and can talk about the significance of the three colours
- When prompted, children can acknowledge specific Country
- Aboriginal knowledge is associated with Australian animals and plants, and children’s knowledge of animals and bush tucker is strong
- Art is common as a way of honouring Indigenous knowledges

Flags
We began each focus group by asking the children what they knew about the flags that we showed them, taken from the reception area of their service. In some centres these were the Aboriginal flag and the Torres Strait Islander flag, in others the Australian Blue Ensign was also included.

Children expressed familiarity with the flags, one saying ‘I saw them on telly’ (site 3). Most commonly, the Australian Blue Ensign was the flag identified as being Australian ‘One is from Australia’ (Site 1). Some children understood that all three flags were Australian. We found that the children were most familiar with the Australian Blue Ensign and the Aboriginal flag.

The Torres Strait Islander flag was harder for children to place, one group identified it as the Torres Strait Islander flag, two groups hazarded that it was from America, or California. No groups discussed the meaning of the colours and symbol on the Torres Strait Island flag.

Children knew that the colours of the Aboriginal flag were important, and could explain their symbolism.

The yellow central circle was consistently recognised as representing the sun. Most groups explained that the red was the ‘land’ (site 3, 4), or ‘the ground’ (site 2). The black was explained as symbolising ‘the people’ (site 5) or ‘black humans’ (site 2). At site 3 there was a debate about the meaning of the colour black

**Child A:** No, the black one is the Aboriginal skin

...  

**Child B:** it’s not skin, it’s the darkness when it was night time

Understanding that the colour black on the flag represents Aboriginal people, that many Aboriginal people have dark skin, but that many Aboriginal people do not have dark skin are quite complex concepts, that many adults have not grasped (Carlson, 2016; Heiss, 2022). This debate over the meaning of the black colour in the flag may reflect children attempting to come to grips with this complexity.
Children in two centres showed us the dark skinned baby dolls in their centre that they associated with Aboriginal people, reinforcing the idea that Aboriginal people have darker skin (and that only Aboriginal people have dark skin?).

**Researcher:** Do Aboriginal people have to have black skin?

**Child:** Yes

**Researcher:** Yes?

**Child:** Some people and babies have black skin. (Site 3)

Reinforcing for children that some, but not all, Aboriginal people have dark skin, and there are many people with dark skin who are not Aboriginal, may be required.

**Where I live and play**

In four of the five groups, the mention of Australia quickly prompted a statement like ‘I live in Australia’ (site 3 and 5), followed by a discussion of where the children lived. Many children proffered the suburb names around the centre as where they lived, some giving street names and sometimes their house or apartment number. It was more difficult for the children to identify the Aboriginal name for the Country where they lived, or where their centre was situated, particularly in the context of a discussion about the suburbs where they lived. They had not yet integrated their understandings that the names for the places they know (usually given by colonisers) also had Aboriginal names, despite the fact that children learn the linguistic concept of synonymy during the preschool years (Hadley et al., 2016).

**Researcher:** Do you know which Aboriginal people are in this part of Australia here.

**Child:** No but I only know about Australia land

**Researcher:** Is Aboriginal land different to Australia land?

**Child:** Yeah it is. [names two suburbs and two major roads]

...  

**Researcher:** Does anyone know the name of the place where we are here in the centre?

**Child:** I know

**Child:** I know

**Child:** It is, ah, Kindy (Site 4)

When prompted, they could accurately identify the land of the centre as either Darug or Dharawhal land (as appropriate), but this was quite abstract.

In one centre, after watching the video and then being asked what land their own centre was on, an answer was offered as ‘earth’ (site 1) followed by this exchange

**Researcher:** So here, we are in Darug Land

**Child:** We are not on Darug Land .... We are in Australia.

This illustrates the difficulty of understanding that where we are is simultaneously Australia, Darug Land, and the familiar suburb. This understanding is developing. In one centre, the children had explained that bush tucker was found on Darug Land, but were stumped by the question from the researcher of ‘Where’s Darug Land? ... If I wanted to go there where would I go?’ (Site 2), except for one child who silently pointed their thumb to the ground.

A sense of varying scale about place was evident, where the naming of various suburbs sometimes led to a discussion at a larger scale:

**Child:** Australia is much bigger

...  

**Child:** No, no, Russia is the most bigger

**Child:** Australia is a big island (Site 3)
The scale of places was given as a reason as to why there were no Aboriginal people in one area (Site 3):

**Researcher:** Do you know any Aboriginal people that live around here?
**Child:** No.
**Researcher:** No.
**Child:** They live, they don’t live here,
**Researcher:** Okay.
**Child:** It is a really big world

After watching the video and being asked about singing about Gadigal, Wangal and Darug Land, one child explained that ‘I only learned about the solar system’ (site 1), implying that he knew about the solar system, but recognised that he had a gap in his knowledge about Aboriginal place names. From ages 2 to 5 children are developing their semantic knowledge of place, building semantic webs or hierarchical networks of superordinate categories (e.g. ‘Country’) and subordinate terms within a category (e.g. ‘Darug’) (Hadley et al., 2016; Webb, 2022). Engaging with Aboriginal naming of Country at this age will help children integrate Aboriginal and settler knowledge in their semantic networks about Country and the names given to places.

One centre stood out as a site where the children had made some progress in integrating the complexity of scale, Aboriginal names and settler names. The land was named at a macro level as earth, a micro level as the snake mat where we sat, or the house number where we live, and with an Aboriginal name and a settler name.

**Researcher:** My house is on Wangal land. And where I work that’s on Burramattagal land. Do you know what land we are here?
**Child:** Earth
**Researcher:** Earth. Yes.
**Educator:** Aboriginal land
**Child:** This is a snake.
**Researcher:** Oh, on the mat. Yes, it is.
**Child:** Not a real snake, it’s a pretend snake
**Child:** [prompted by educator] Darug Land
**Researcher:** Darug land! Yes. So what is Darug land?
**Child:** Darug land is where we live
**Child:** I live in a Darug land too
**Child:** I live at number 16 with a one and a six
**Researcher:** very good, that’s very useful. (Site 5)

This knowledge was still tenuous, the exchange finished like this:

**Researcher:** And what about [suburb name where the centre is located], is [suburb name] in Darug land or not?
**Child:** No (Site 5)
Nature

The plants and animals found on the land were a core element of children’s knowledge about Indigenous Country. As we saw above, whales were integral to Indigenous knowledges as they were found around Australia. In one centre, when asked whether they could see anything from Aboriginal culture, children pointed out a fabric wall hanging which was a landscape painting on a black background with a range of animals in dot and Xray style. Once the children had named the animals they could see, the researcher posed a question:

**Researcher:** Is there a lion in the picture?
**Child:** No
**Child:** I can’t see one
**Researcher:** Why not?
**Child:** Because Aboriginals don’t have lions (Site 3)

This makes it clear that the children understand that not all animals are situated within Indigenous knowledges in Australia.

At one site the children talked about which animals were cooked and eaten by Aboriginal people, and identified various kinds of bush tucker in a puzzle. At another site, a toy possum and platypus were shown to the researcher. Demonstrating the practice of paying attention to Country, one focus group was interrupted when children moved to the window to pay attention to the lorikeets nesting in the tree outside, whose progress they had been watching over the previous weeks. At this centre, the Acknowledgement to Country protocol began with paying attention to the sensory experience of examining a basket of natural objects and describing them, and the focus group began in a similar way.

**Recommendations:**

- Build an understanding with children that the land on which they live and play is both Aboriginal Land, and can be described by the suburb names they know. It is the same Land. Australia is a First Nations Country.
- Integrate Aboriginal concepts of Country at a number of levels, from the mat where we sit, the suburb where we live, the Australia where we are citizens, to the sky and what we know about the solar system.
- Help the children to understand that the black of the Aboriginal flag is representing Aboriginal people. However, it is important not to explicitly link this with skin colour. Of course, not all Aboriginal people who are alive today have dark skin.
- Explain the colours and symbols on the Torres Strait Islander flag, and that this is also Australian.
3. First Peoples First

**Strengths**
- The children described the importance of showing respect for Indigenous peoples, and particularly associated this with a need to care for the land, which demonstrates understanding of shared stewardship in the context of Indigenous ownership.
- The children were emerging in their understanding of diverse cultures and the richness of multi-cultural environments

**Respect**

The language of respect arose in two of the conversations with children. Respect for Aboriginal people is embedded in art activities. In one centre, there was a display of painting for NAIDOC week.

**Researcher:** Do you know what NAIDOC week is and why you did [these paintings] for NAIDOC week?

**Child:** Because we need to respect the Aboriginal people

**Researcher:** Mmm. And NAIDOC week is a time for us to do that more?

**Child:** Remember the Aboriginal people

**Researcher:** Yes, why do we do that?

**Child:** Because we can take care of the land and make the land nice and clean for the Aboriginal people

Respect is connected to taking care of the land, and remembering that Aboriginal people always were and always will be the traditional owners of the land.

Tragically, respect for Aboriginal peoples is contested in wider Australian societal discourse, and consequently in education (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016), and there were glimpses of this contestation in the children’s conversations:

**Researcher:** When you had your precious things from the basket and you were saying your Acknowledgement of Country you talked about paying your respects to Aboriginal people. What does that mean?

**Child:** Being kind to them

**Researcher:** Oh, good answer, being kind. What else might it mean as well?

**Second Child:** I don’t like being kind to Aboriginal ...

**Researcher:** Paying respect

**Second Child:** They always, they always, they always fighting (Site 2)

In another group:

**Child:** Do you know, Aboriginal peoples are really nice like that?

**Researcher:** Mm

**Child:** They help each other. And some other people are helping each other like that. [indistinct, then the topic is changed] (Site 4)
An important phrase in many Acknowledgement protocols is ‘past and present’ (site 2 Acknowledgement to Country). Aboriginal peoples and knowledges were most easily situated, for most children, in the past. An invitation to tell us what they knew about the flags generated from one child the comment of ‘that’s in the olden days’ (Site 3), in reference to the Aboriginal flag. One child offered what they knew about the olden days as his contribution to what was happening in the Acknowledgement of Country video. ‘I know in the olden days, some cars and buses and trucks that gets scrapped.’ (Site 3). When prompted to explain what ‘present’ meant, one child offered that ‘Santa could bring your presents’ (Site 2).

Children rarely talked about contemporary Aboriginal people, or Aboriginal people that they themselves had met.

Researcher: So I’ve got another question for you. I’ve heard of some of the things that you’ve talked about about Aboriginal people in the past a long time ago. Can anyone tell me anything about Aboriginal people today?

Researcher: Do you know any? You’ve probably got some in the centre, or that you live with or work with or play with? Or any come and visit?

[pause. No response] (Site 2)

In one focus group a discussion about respect led to a child trying to make sense of what they knew about peoples and history.

Researcher: We’re very new in Australia and Aboriginal people are the First people on this land and that’s why we respect them. They looked after the land for so long.

Child: They are not the longest people

Researcher: Tell me more about that.

Child: Because the cave men... (Site 1)

This child was trying to understand the timeframe of what they knew about ‘cavemen’, probably meaning prehistoric peoples from European history, and the history of Indigenous people in Australia.

Aboriginal people were not entirely absent in the present. In discussion of what it means when they hear the clapping sticks, a child offered: ‘it comes from an Aboriginal who paints them’ (Site 2). Also at site 2 there was discussion of an incursion where an Aboriginal community member visited the centre and children dressed up in animal costumes.

Past and present

An important phrase in many Acknowledgement protocols is ‘past and present’ (site 2 Acknowledgement to Country). Aboriginal peoples and knowledges were most easily situated, for most children, in the past. An invitation to tell us what they knew about the flags generated from one child the comment of ‘that’s in the olden days’ (Site 3), in reference to the Aboriginal flag. One child offered what they knew about the olden days as his contribution to what was happening in the Acknowledgement of Country video. ‘I know in the olden days, some cars and buses and trucks that gets scrapped.’ (Site 3). When prompted to explain what ‘present’ meant, one child offered that ‘Santa could bring your presents’ (Site 2).

Children rarely talked about contemporary Aboriginal people, or Aboriginal people that they themselves had met.

Researcher: So I’ve got another question for you. I’ve heard of some of the things that you’ve talked about about Aboriginal people in the past a long time ago. Can anyone tell me anything about Aboriginal people today?

[pause]

Researcher: Do you know any? You’ve probably got some in the centre, or that you live with or work with or play with? Or any come and visit?

[pause. No response] (Site 2)

In one focus group a discussion about respect led to a child trying to make sense of what they knew about peoples and history.

Researcher: We’re very new in Australia and Aboriginal people are the First people on this land and that’s why we respect them. They looked after the land for so long.

Child: They are not the longest people

Researcher: Tell me more about that.

Child: Because the cave men... (Site 1)

This child was trying to understand the timeframe of what they knew about ‘cavemen’, probably meaning prehistoric peoples from European history, and the history of Indigenous people in Australia.

Aboriginal people were not entirely absent in the present. In discussion of what it means when they hear the clapping sticks, a child offered: ‘it comes from an Aboriginal who paints them’ (Site 2). Also at site 2 there was discussion of an incursion where an Aboriginal community member visited the centre and children dressed up in animal costumes.
Given that most preschool-aged children understand and use present and past tense to describe current and past events (Hoff, 2013), the children’s use of tense provided interesting insight into their understanding of Aboriginal people. Specifically, in the focus groups their use of tense was mixed, suggesting that they are making sense of how Aboriginal people are spoken about as both past and present.

Knowing that Aboriginal people lived in the past, and not knowing that there are probably Indigenous people present in their day to day, is congruent with the explanation in a previous section that Aboriginal people are in some other location, because the world is a big place. However it is expressed, the children rarely expected Indigenous people to be present in their day to day world, as their peers or educators.

**Multicultural Land / Social Justice**

In this section we offer examples to demonstrate how Aboriginal knowledges are positioned within multicultural environments. As discussed above in relation to the connection between animals and Country, in one of the centres there was a picture on the wall of Australian animals in Aboriginal styles of dot painting and X-ray art. The children pointed this out, and were enthusiastic in naming the different animals. This centre has a significant Chinese population in the area, and Chinese families at the centre. The picture was hung with a red Chinese lantern, demonstrating that the two cultures are present in the programming and activities in the centre. The conversation in the focus group conflated Chinese and Aboriginal cultures in a number of points (by children of European heritage). One child was showing the Aboriginal animal puzzle to the researcher, and described the pictures as ‘a Chinese fish ... I’ve got a Chinese lizard’ (site 3) and later, children’s observations on the video went along these lines:

- **Child:** they were playing.
- **Researcher:** Yeah, they were playing.
- **Child:** Yeah. also talking about Aboriginal
- **Researcher:** about Aboriginal people. Yeah. What were they saying about that?
- **Child:** Aboriginal? Was it about Aboriginals?
- **Researcher:** Yeah, good question. What about them?
- **Second Child:** They talk in different languages. They speak Chinese words (site 3).

Some of the children at the centre do speak Chinese rather than English, so this child’s description of language he doesn’t understand is that it is Chinese. This demonstrates that the children are exposed to both of these cultures, and are actively building their understanding of which knowledges might be associated with which people and cultures, and how different languages can be a sign of different cultures and people groups.
There were instances when the children associated learning about Aboriginal culture and knowledges with building common ground in a multicultural society. When asked about their favourite stories from Aboriginal culture, one child proffered ‘different people look like us’ (Site 3). When we were discussing songs associated with Aboriginal knowledges, this suggestion was made:

**Child**: my other song is called ‘we are Australian’
**Researcher**: oh yeah, we can do that one.
**Educator**: Ready? We are one. Ready?
**Children and educator sing**: We are one but we are many, and from all of the lands of the earth we come. We share our dreams, we sing in one voice. I am, you are, we are Australian.
**Researcher**: That is beautiful
**Educator**: I am going to cry (Site 5)

The child had made an association between Aboriginal songs, and the concept that as Australians we can find common ground in a multicultural country, where we all have a voice.

### Recommendations:

- Acknowledge Aboriginal people as Australia First Peoples, a continuous ongoing culture in Australia, and the most important to acknowledge, respect and know.
- Centre Aboriginal culture in celebrations of diversity, because we are on land that belongs to the First Peoples.
- Work towards Aboriginal people being present in the centre.
- Continue to develop inclusive practices for all cultures represented at the early childhood centre and within surrounding communities.
- Talk about Indigenous people as contemporary people rather than ancient people.

### 4. Imagination and play

#### Strengths

- The children were interested in, and experimented with, language and ideas as they actively engaged in sense-making to incorporate their understanding of Indigenous peoples into their world view
- The children understood that Indigenous stories and artefacts held meaning and were a way of sharing knowledge

In this section we present and discuss our finding that children engage imaginatively with Indigenous knowledges in a way that creates ambiguity and possibility.

#### Trying things out / unknown cultural knowledge

After identifying the Torres Strait Islander flag, one child said: ‘That’s the land of our, of my people’. (Site 5). The educators were confused by this statement. Either the child is from the Torres Strait Islands (and the educators are unaware of this), or the child is trying out language and ideas, demonstrating that they know the significance and protocol of identifying and naming the land for Indigenous people. This child went on to say ‘and I’ve got two old grannies’ (site 5), which may have been inspired by the book Baby Business which this group later told me about.
At site 5 children suggested Aboriginal names for where we were, like ‘gomorrah’ and ‘womil’, and named the land of a nearby park ‘garun or garin’ (Site 5). These names were unfamiliar to the educators. Another child asserted ‘I know someone in the wommeroi’ (site 5). At site 4 a child said that ‘knucklewa’ was also an Aboriginal land name. These pronunciations by the children seem to imply that they are either repeating Aboriginal names they had heard others says, or that they have an emerging implicit understanding of the phototactics of other Aboriginal words they have heard and so generating new words in keeping with their basic phonological knowledge of Aboriginal words. At site 4, children sing Taba Naba, then a child sings what sounds like a second made-up verse, in unidentifiable language (to the researchers).

The unidentifiable language sounded similar phonotactically to Aboriginal languages. Our interpretation of this data is that children are playing with languages as they make meaning of Aboriginal knowledges.

At site 4 the children have lots to say about artefacts and symbols, not much of it accurate but they had fun talking about them Site 4. For example, the witchetty grub is described as a ‘snailworm’, and ‘this is a scribbly scrubbly one, this is a crazy eyeball’ (Site 4) in reference to the meeting place symbol, also described a ‘a sun’ and ‘a spider’ (Site 4). The kangaroo tracks are ‘Number one Aboriginal’, and they do look like the number one, upside down.

At site 4, one child told a long involved story, sparked by the Aboriginal flag, about stars:

Child: So the black stars are the bad stars and the red stars are the good stars. Yellow stars are the good stars too. Those bad stars. Good stars. And good stars are hitting the black stars so that's why this is the Aboriginal stars. ... this is the good one this is the good one this is the bad one
Researcher: so can you tell me about this being the bad one?
Child: so that bad one likes to take all the peoples up to the moon
Researcher: okay
Child: like those bad guys, if the bad guys hit you under the moon you will die
Researcher: that is terribly sad
Child: when I was, when I was at my home and I was sleeping and I have a dream of that
Researcher: Did you?
Child: It was a person of the star that was black. It was ... scary. (Site 4)

The educators offered an explanation that the previous week the children had learnt about Aboriginal astronomy and dreamtime stories, and that this story that the child told may have been linked to this work.
And in discussing a wooden coolamon, with carvings, the same child explained:

**Child:** this is a really special board so it can sting you, see that little tiny, you can’t see it but I can see it because it is magic, and it is in a bigger board, and that is a turn around, turn around. And then if you touch this it won’t get hurt. If it is real it will hurt you.

**Researcher:** So you’re telling me about these circles around the edge of this plate? Is that what you’re telling me about?

**Child:** Yeah. Inside here, have stings in here but you can’t touch it if it’s real

**Researcher:** Right. Is that a story that you have heard?

**Child:** Yeah

Here, the child recognises that important Aboriginal knowledge is embedded in markings on artefacts, combined with storytelling (Yunkaporta, 2019).

In other conversations, the way that children expressed concepts and explored language demonstrated that Aboriginal knowledges were incorporated into their play and sense-making, in ways that could be interpreted as nonsensical or disrespectful. In these conversations, the artefacts and symbols are not novel, just part of their play. We know that play cements ideas, so imaginative play with Aboriginal language and practices is important. This playing around with Aboriginal language and identity is not appropriate for adults. However, for the children this imaginative play perhaps opens up an ambiguous space that supports sense-making, and creates the possibility of Aboriginal peers being present in the centre.

Sometimes in the focus groups, the educator led the conversation, and knowledge was prompted in a kind of rote learning by educators. While this is not usually a preferred way of nurturing children’s learning, there may be a need for this where children may not encounter Aboriginal knowledge elsewhere in their lives, and because respect for Aboriginal people is demonstrated by following correct language and protocols.

**Recommendations:**

- Allow children to experiment through imagination and play with ideas, stories, identity and language, whilst also modelling and providing scaffolding for appropriate and respectful protocols.
- Educators to be explicit and consistent in their instruction about why Acknowledgement of Country is done, and aware that children can have varied and emerging perspectives.
Conclusion

Early childhood education settings are known to be critical in laying the foundations for life-long learning (Department of Education, 2022). ECEC settings are also important places of learning and thinking about issues of social justice - there is a literature arguing that they are seats of social change, that it is here in these earliest encounters with formal learning that we can address some of the misunderstandings and prejudices that may permeate other contexts. There is an opportunity to embed Indigenous knowledges and plant the seeds to improve widespread understanding of the role Indigenous people play both in the history of this nation, and in contemporary society. It is also an important opportunity to support children to understand that it is harmful when one group of people think that their ways of doing things are better than the ways of other people. We are all stronger when we all value the ways of others and learn from each other.

The ECEC centres we engaged with are all doing this work, as we know are many other centres across Australia. Acknowledgement of Country is not just a moment in the day, but embedded throughout the day. Centres use play, storytelling, creative activities, and routines to support child learning. The children in this study demonstrated emerging understanding and were active in experimenting with ideas in their own meaning making. The gaps in their understandings largely reflect their developmental stage. What was most encouraging were the ways in which the educators provided exposure to ideas, opportunities to experiment and ask questions, and were helping to instil a sense of respect and valuing of diversity.

There is room and opportunity for educators to be at the forefront in nurturing and extending children’s understanding of indigenous knowledges, which is an important foundation for countering wider misunderstanding, discrimination and racism in society. To be able to do this, they need confidence to draw on community resources and people and enhanced opportunities to develop their own knowledge and skills in localised communities of practice, that might involve together and separately, fellow educators, community members (indigenous and non-indigenous) and children.

There is value in gathering children’s voices – through listening to children we can understand what is being absorbed, how it is being interpreted, and whether our narratives and activities are having a positive impact and conveying the information we intend. This area is under-researched and provides important insights into children’s perceptions, understandings and potential for greater work.
References


 Punch, S. (2002). Research with Children: The Same or Different from Research with Adults? Childhood (Copenhagen, Denmark), 9(3), 321-341. https://doi.org/10.11770907568202009003005