



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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## The Sometimes Forgotten Needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Children.

Tania Smith \*

Recently, I have had the opportunity to visit an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander preschool/kindergarten as part of a course I did called "Children with special needs."

As I entered the preschool kindergarten I instantly observed the many ways the environment catered for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The environment in this room provided a welcoming impression that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were valued in this preschool/kindergarten.

In a discussion with the Teacher in Charge, she explained that, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to survive in white society, they need to feel positive about being black and understand that it is alright to be black. Once children have come to terms about their background, it helps them to build a positive concept about themselves.

I feel the environment plays an important role in helping children accept and build a positive attitude about their heritage, which in turn develops a positive identity.

The environment of this preschool/kindergarten provided an acceptance of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This was achieved through displaying a variety of media and equipment that encourage the idea that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are valued members of our society. Some of the media displayed were Aboriginal paintings (including traditional and contemporary paintings), pictures of Torres Strait dancers, pictures of traditional Aboriginal weapons, photos of an Aboriginal lady preparing bush tucker, pictures of

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\* Tania Smith, is a final year education student at The University of Central Queensland - Rockhamton - Qld - 4702.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, black wooden dolls, white and black dress up dolls in dramatic play, Torres Strait Island gass skirts, and in the book corner a variety of books that displayed the Aboriginal culture, traditions and beliefs, as well as a number of European books including traditional fairy tales.

One setback that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have to deal with, when coming to accept being black, is the many kinds of prejudice they meet up with in our society, because of their heritage. I believe that children's ideas about other cultures and traditions start to develop at an early age. Therefore it is important for early childhood teachers to build an environment that reinforces the acceptance of a number of multicultural races that make up our society and promotes their equity and equality in our society. Often teachers may overlook the hidden messages that children may be perceiving from their environment.

If a teacher has an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child in the classroom and the environment does not make her or him feel part of the class, this may have negative consequences to the child's self esteem, which often affects the child's ability to succeed socially and academically in the classroom.

Some questions that early childhood teachers need to ask themselves when setting up their classroom environment to cater for a variety of races and cultures are:

- *Are the books used highlighting the acceptance of a variety of cultures and races?*
- *Do any of the books have any prejudiced remarks or comments in them?*
- *Are any races being portrayed as having set roles, e.i. a coloured person as maid or cleaner?*
- *Are pictures and posters of people around the room inclusive of a variety of races?*
- *Are there a variety of white and black dolls in the home corner?*
- *Are there a variety of dresses and costumes from different cultures?*
- *Do stimulus pictures used in discussion display a variety of races and cultures?*
- *Do the teachers' attitudes promote acceptance of a variety of races and cultures?*

In looking at the answers to these questions we must strive for an environment that encourages everyone to be seen as an equal.

You may be thinking. "But I do not have any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children in my class, therefore I do not have to provide a multicultural environment." I disagree. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

children may experience prejudiced remarks or actions from children they have never met. Children who display such prejudice, pick it up from a variety of sources including adult attitudes and what the hidden agenda from their environment is reinforcing. If children do not interact with other races and cultures, the attitude that other races and cultures are not equal to themselves may be developed. In fact they may see their race or culture as being superior to any other. This is why the preschool or kindergarten teacher should try to address this injustice as soon as children enter their classroom. Children need to learn and accept that our society is made up of a variety of races and cultures and that we all play an important role in our society as equals.

To conclude, there are aspects of the environment that children quickly pick up, whether they are conscious of them or not. Targeting this hidden agenda will encourage acceptance of multiculturalism and help promote an acceptance of other cultures, as well as help build the self esteem of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Their identity and feeling of belonging in our society will be encouraged. Teachers need to look at what equipment and materials they have in their classroom. They should also make sure they are evenly favouring a variety of cultures, whether there is an Aboriginal child in the class or not.



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