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Chapter Overview

In this chapter we will discuss an outdoor learning project with young Aboriginal children (4-8 years), their teachers and their community in Perth, Western Australia. Due to the location of this project in the Perth region, there are no forests nearby, wild spaces within a short drive from the school are native bush areas and hence we refer to our outdoor learning project as "Bush School" rather than "Forest School".

The reader will learn how a local community worked together to provide experiences for young children in an outdoor setting that enabled them to learn and experience the outdoors in a culturally appropriate way.

This chapter will provide an important voice in the literature regarding outdoor learning since it specifically works within an Aboriginal community context and emphasises traditional cultural knowledge about relationships with nature and a sense of belonging in the natural world. Teachers in a range of settings could adapt the experiences described in this chapter to local situations. More importantly, teachers involved in this

(or other) outdoor learning experiences are provided with the opportunity to learn first-hand about traditional ways of 'knowing, being and doing' (Martin, 2005) and this has enormous potential for programming when back in the mortar and brick classroom.

An important feature of this chapter is the incorporation of traditional cultural knowledge and spiritual connection to place that is highly significant for Aboriginal students and the communities to which they belong. The cultural perspectives discussed in this chapter may also be relevant for educators working with other First Nations communities such as the Pacific Islands, Australia, New Zealand, Scandinavia, Asia, Canada and North and South America.

Setting the Scene

As a matter of respect and following the protocol of '*country*' it is important as the authors that we inform you, the reader, some of the elements of *Noongar boodjar* (country) as a way of connecting. For those of who are unfamiliar *Noongar boodjar* (country) is located in the south-west corridor of Western Australia and extends from south of Geraldton along the coast to Cape Leeuwin, continuing south to Esperance and then in line north-west to re-join the coast at Geraldton. It is an area of almost 3 000 000 hectares with 1600 kilometres of coastline. This region occupies 14 regional language groups (Green, 1984, p1). Our Bush School is operating within the traditional *Whadjuck* area,

The outdoor setting in which the Bush School took place is a wetlands area called *Walliabup* (this is the lakes traditional name according to the *Noongar* people of the region). The *Beelias* wetlands are made up of a chain of lakes and *Walliabup* is an important aspect in this chain. *Walliabup* provides one of the last habitats for the endangered *karrak* (Carnaby Cockatoos) as well as the *Maarli* (Black Swan) and is host to numerous migrating birds. There are also *koya* (frogs) *booyi* (tortoises) and *nornt* (tiger snakes) living in the wetlands. Traditionally, the wetlands have great spiritual significance to the *Noongars* and hosted semi-permanent camp sites for the *Beelias Noongars* of the area and provided an abundantly rich source of food. This area is also where social and cultural obligations were fulfilled through traditional ceremonies, for *marman*, *yok* and *koolungar* (men, women and children). The *moyootj* (swamp area) is the source of an important story about how fire was stolen from the moon and brought to the *Beelias Noongars*.

(<http://www.savenorthlake.com.au/documents/other/Firestick.pdf>). The project was a collaboration between Aboriginal families in the local community, a local primary school, Murdoch University and the local shire, who funded the project.

Twenty *Noongar Koolunger* (children), aged 4-7 took part one day a week in a term-long Bush School. The children were enrolled from Kindergarten to Year 3, some of the children were siblings. The children were transported to the site by bus and were accompanied by a *Noongar* Elder respectfully referred to as *Uncle*, as well as the school's Aboriginal Education Assistant, one classroom teacher, two members of the Murdoch research team and a project officer (who was also a parent).

Background

Aboriginal children's sense of cultural identity is known to have a clear impact on their school-based achievement and is jeopardised by mainstream curriculum and poor integration of Indigenous knowledge in the classroom (Kickett-Tucker, 2008). In addition, psychological wellbeing is promoted when cultural identity is clarified and strengthened (Taylor and Osborne, 2010). Hence, this project sought to strengthen the cultural identity of Aboriginal children in order to improve their well-being and their academic success.

The gap in educational and social outcomes for Aboriginal students in Australia compared to non-Aboriginal students mirrors similar trends in other nations with Indigenous populations (Harrison, 2011, Taylor and Osborne, 2010). Numerous costly government initiatives have been trialled with limited success while other Aboriginal led initiatives have been more successful, these were characterised by school leaders engaging local Elders to be their mentors, this approach has brought enormous benefits to student learning and community participation in education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012).

Traditionally, Elders had the responsibility for passing on important learning to *koolunger* (children) and this learning was almost inevitably in the outdoors and was based around respect for and care for '*country*' and the lessons needed to survive and thrive in a harsh climate. Language, kinship systems and The Law, Dreaming stories,

weaving, tool making, hunting and gathering skills were passed on by Elders to the next generation orally and by modelling and demonstration. These practices were documented thoroughly by Coombs, Brandl and Snowdon (1984) who noted an exemplary instance where mothers taught young children how to find and dig for bush yams “they did not discuss the procedures; they just went and found the yams...the children watched” (p.97). Since the early days of colonisation when Aboriginal people were forbidden by white settlers to speak their language or practice many of their traditional ceremonies, much of the rich culture and language has disappeared. In particular, several hundred Aboriginal languages have been lost (Bonython, 2003). There are some aspects of culture that can only be understood in the mother tongue and hence the practices and beliefs of some language groups have been marred forever by colonisation (Bonython, 2003). Many Aboriginal people now live in large cities and towns, adding to the complexity of maintaining a connection to natural places. What was previously a life completely in tune with nature, the seasons, the animals, the plants and a sustainable human inhabitation of the earth has been replaced by educational, social, emotional and economic disadvantage (Beresford, Partington & Gower, 2012). However, Aboriginal people the authors have *yarned with* (spoken to) do express an innate sense of connection to *country* and it is clear that despite the losses, the importance of place and identity has not been diluted in the hearts and minds of Aboriginal people in twenty-first century Australia. Inevitably when Aboriginal people meet all over Australia the first words spoken are ‘*where you from?*’ The answer creates a discourse of either connecting to each other by way of ‘*country*’ or by an already established relationship with someone from that ‘*country*’ — connection to ‘*country*’

establishes relationships through belonging, identity and wellbeing. This is consistent with Moreton-Robinson's (2003) thoughtful consideration of place and identity in Aboriginal consciousness in the current century.

One major issue contributing to the significantly lower educational outcomes for Aboriginal students is poor school attendance rates. The thinking behind addressing educational disadvantage has tended to be focussed on improving attendance, which presumes that better attendance will improve outcomes and that the school classroom provides the most appropriate curriculum. However, the authors have often pondered the quality of school learning environments and their appropriateness for Aboriginal students. In light of the oral tradition of the Aboriginal cultures and the historic use of natural environments to share knowledge, it seemed a worthwhile endeavour to explore the possibility that an outdoor learning program with a cultural emphasis might well go some way to bridging the gap in Aboriginal learning outcomes.

In order to undertake this work within an Aboriginal community, it was vital to develop a respectful relationship with the Elders and families who are part of the community. In the case of the Bush School described in this chapter, the authors worked closely with local Elders to receive initial support for the idea of Bush School and to refine the detail of its delivery. Approval and support from Elders in the initial stages of approaching the Bush School concept for Aboriginal students was a vital step in its development. This approach may be understood from an ecological perspective using Bronfenbrenner's

Ecological Systems Theory (1992). since it acknowledges and draws on the child's home, community and culture as the basis for developing an appropriate program.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides insights into the significance of culture and community in shaping the child's experiences and hence their learning and growth. Bronfenbrenner saw the child's learning and development as being in relationship with multiple 'systems' such as family, school, culture, socio-economic status and the broader historical context in which the child is growing up. His work has had a lasting impact on education of disadvantaged and marginalised students.

Refer to: Bronfenbrenner, U Ecological systems theory. In Vasta, Ross (ed.), 1992 *Six theories of child development: Revised formulations and current issues* Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, pp 187-249

What is Country?

In a discussion of Aboriginal children's participation in a Bush School, it is very important to understand a significant spiritual concept about connection to the land. As a non-Aboriginal participant in this project, the author has endeavoured to faithfully represent this relationship with the land that is known as 'country'. Rose (1996) provides a very comprehensive account of what 'country' means to Aboriginal people;

Country is a place that gives and receives life. Not just imagined or represented, it is lived in and lived with. Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun but also a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells,

takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy... country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. Because of this richness, country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind, and spirit; heart's ease (1996, p.7).

With this in mind, the Bush School has a unique emphasis on Aboriginal perspectives about 'country' and this is drawn upon throughout the children's experiences in the outdoors. Further, having the focus about 'country' exemplifies Martin's (2005) concept of 'relatedness' as 'country' is an Aboriginal worldview that Aboriginal students can connect and relate to, it is something they know and this in turn give a sense of wellbeing when engaging in the Bush School.

Forest school research and theory

The existing research and theory behind Europe and the UK forest schools informs the Bush School concept. The earlier work of Knight (2009, 2011), Milchem (2011), O'Brien and Murray (2006) and Waller (2007) has provided a theoretical and practical framework for the conduct of a forest/bush school. In addition, the work of Sobel (2008) highlights the importance of children's relationship to place and connection to nature as fundamental. Sobel's seven play motifs for children in nature are based on extensive observations of children spending time in the outdoors. The motifs, or principles, are:

1. Adventure – activities with a physical challenge
2. Fantasy and Imagination – stories, plays, dramatic play

3. Animal Allies – children’s inherent empathy with wild and domestic animals
4. Maps and Paths – exploring local geographies
5. Special Places – forts, cubbies, hiding places
6. Small Worlds – miniature worlds that represent aspects of the ‘big’ world
7. Hunting and Gathering – treasure hunts, collecting things

(Sobel, 2008, pp. 19-57)

Following Waller’s (2007) work in the UK, the Bush School utilised the Leuven Involvement Scale (Laevens, 1994) to measure children’s levels of involvement in experiences in the outdoors. Ratings of children’s involvement levels were taken in both the outdoor setting and the classroom. Children’s scores on involvement were unilaterally higher in the outdoor setting compared to the classroom, the overall rating for the outdoor setting was high with children “continuously engaged in the activity and absorbed in it” (Laevens, 2005) while in the classroom the rating was medium where children were busy the whole time, but showed none of the energy and imagination captured in the outdoor setting. Some indicators in the original scale needed to be modified with regard to non-verbal signals since these have particular cultural interpretations. For example, eye-contact is not necessarily an indication that a child is listening to what is being said. In some communities eye contact with an adult is seen as disrespectful and hence there are *some* Aboriginal children whose eyes will wander when they are listening, as this is a culturally determined expectation. Laevens’ scale describes an indicator of high-level involvement as “without eyes wandering around

space” but in the case of this research, it was deemed not to be an appropriate indicator because of the influence of culture on behavioural ‘norms’.

Laevers on Child Wellbeing and Involvement

“When we want to know how each of the children is doing in a setting, we first have to explore the degree in which children do feel at ease, act spontaneously, show vitality and self confidence. All this indicates that their emotional **wellbeing** is ok and that their physical needs, the need for tenderness and affection, the need for safety and clarity, the need for social recognition, the need to feel competent and the need for meaning in life and moral value are satisfied.”

“**Involvement** goes along with strong motivation, fascination and total implication: there is no distance between person and activity, no calculation of the possible benefits. Because of that, time perception is distorted (time passes by rapidly). Furthermore there is an openness to (relevant) stimuli and the perceptual and cognitive functioning has an intensity, lacking in activities of another kind. The meanings of words and ideas are felt more strongly and deeply.” (Laevers, 2003, p.15)

Bush School Experiences

In this section, we explore the synergies between Aboriginal perspectives of learning and some of the key experiences of the Forest/Bush School and to make connections to children’s learning.

Case Study Bush Medicine

This is a brief case story about one boy who was intently listening to *Uncle's* stories of bush food and bush medicine. *Uncle* was explaining how to extract the nut from a seed to use for making flour. In extracting the seed from the sharp seed pod the boy managed to cut the palm of his hand slightly and it bled. He immediately sought advice from the Elder as to what was a traditional treatment for bleeding, asking: "*what do Noongar's do when they bleed?*" On being asked this question *Uncle* escorted the boy to another nearby tree and showed him a leaf that could be wrapped around the cut to prevent infection. Several weeks after this event the boy was able to recall every detail of what *Uncle* had told him. His first hand experience of bush medicine had a lasting impact on his learning.

Insert figure 1: What to do when you bleed

Hunting and gathering

As Sobel (2008) notes, hunting and gathering are important and timeless themes in children's play. Experiences for young children to hunt and gather in the 21st Century are few and far between. The odd bit of fishing or collecting berries is about the limit of our modern version of this in countries like Australia, particularly in large cities.

However, a tradition of hunting native animals for food has existed in Aboriginal culture for thousands of years and is still practised today. Most often this involved the use of spears, traps and boomerangs. In the Bush School, the Elder, *Uncle* was well prepared to demonstrate to the children how to hunt and gather. Children were given pieces of dowel about 1.5 metres long with blunt edges and taught to hunt and gather. The dowel

was used both as a spear and as a digging stick. The children enjoyed digging for bush onions, turtle eggs (large river stones hidden under the sand) and hunting kangaroos. The case study *Spear Throwing* below explains one of these experiences in detail.

Curriculum Connections

The notion that the outdoors is a curriculum in itself is one that is gaining more and more recognition in Australian early childhood settings. *The Australian Early Years Learning Framework* specifically identifies children's connection with the world as an important outcome of early education, noting that educators promote this learning when they "consider the nature of children's connectedness to the land" (Australian Government, 2009, p. 29). The framework also enshrines the notion that there is a spiritual dimension to this connection and that children should experience a sense of awe and wonder that promotes a sense of being and belonging. In providing experiences that were culturally relevant and engaging for young children, we also made very explicit links to the standard school curriculum areas in order to demonstrate to educators and school leaders that the outdoors is at least as significant for learning as a standard classroom.

Case Study Spear Throwing

One of the memorable tasks undertaken at the Bush School was an experience of hunting. In the context of understanding that the ancestors took only what they needed and ensured the species survived by taking, for example, half the eggs from a nest so

the next generation could survive, the Elder in our Bush School introduced the children to hunting and gathering. Each child was issued with a piece of dowel and shown how to walk with it safely (adjacent to the body). The children were also taught the value of silence for stalking as well as walking softly so as not to create vibrations that animals might feel. The children proceeded into the bush in single file, the last child in the line had responsibility for covering tracks. This created an atmosphere of excitement and intrigue as the children proceeded into the bush. *Uncle* had prepared and spread a kangaroo skin over a shrub and this was the 'prey'. The children were shown how to hold their spear on their shoulders and use a rocking motion to prepare their throw. They had turns at spearing the kangaroo and received immediate feedback about their throwing techniques.

After this experience the children walked to a large clearing and lined up side by side and threw their spears as far as they could. We used this experience as an opportunity to make important connections to the school curriculum. We decided to measure the distances the spears were thrown and make comparisons. We used the spears themselves to measure the distance, so, for example, Layla threw her spear ten lengths, compared to Graham who threw his 14 spear lengths, we were able to consider the difference and decided to try again and compare the first throw to the second, and so on. Opportunities like this to link hands-on, real life experiences to mathematical concepts are vital for children's concept development.

Other curriculum links included history (the original use of spears), culture (the stories *Uncle* told of the 'old people' and how they hunted), geography (which parts of the landscape were likely hiding spots for different types of animals), physical education

(walking softly, throwing technique) and science (physics of throwing the spears, lifecycles of animals). In addition, Sobel's (2008) principles of *adventure* and *hunting and gathering* are both evident in this experience.

Insert Figure Two: Young hunters

Case Study Fishing Traps

In this experience children were invited to learn how to make a traditional fishing trap. *Uncle* showed them how to tie the lashings on the joins to make a frame and provided wooden fish with single holes drilled in them. The fish were trapped at the end of the wading pool and spears were used to catch the fish. There were different roles for boys and girls in this game as per the traditional practices. The boys built the traps and waded through the water to trap the fish while the girls learned and danced the 'fishing dance' and were responsible for spearing and collecting the fish. Similar to the kangaroo hunting, this experience provided many curriculum links and provided additional opportunities for children to practice their fine and gross motor skills (tying the trap, wading through the water, guiding the trap, spearing the fish, dancing) and the inclusion of dance in this experience provided seamless integration of the performing arts. When the children revisited this game the next week they introduced 'clapping sticks' and kept the rhythm while the dance took place.

Insert Figure Three: Creating traps and playing the fishing game

Case Study: Cultural Identity

Specific activities in this project were provided to strengthen and support Aboriginal children's cultural identity. *Uncle* used various resources to enable this. One experience was particular highlight for the children and I use it to illustrate the significance of involving knowledgeable Elders in Bush Schools for Aboriginal children. *Uncle* used paint to mark the children's faces with the *mopoke* (owl) totem he had been given permission to use from his Elders. The children waited silently as he carefully painted each one, boys were painted in one way, the girls in another. Sharing the experience of the *mopoke* totem story creates the space where messages and meanings about the diversity of identity can be explored. The sharing of stories has been a way of communication across cultures for generations, and as such it creates a scaffold for understanding and sharing knowledge. It is through the experience of listening to stories that children are encouraged and involved in a naturalistic way that builds confidence for children to explore diversity and difference, which, in turn lights the spirit of identity.

Martin on Identity

To know who you are in relatedness is the ultimate premise of Aboriginal worldview because of this is the formation of identity. This is acquired through being immersed in situations, contexts, and elements through change and past, present and future. A child is guided through lifehood stages [...] from womb to tomb. Based on the theory, relatedness is to give function and service to the spirit of the child so that it emerges as the child grows and fulfils tasks of lifehood [...] it is not only physical, biological, emotional or cognitive but also spiritual and psychological.

(Martin, 2005)

Insert Picture: Totem

On interviewing the Aboriginal Education Officer at the conclusion of the project it was clear that these *Noongar koolungar* had not always experienced their cultural identity positively in the wider community. She was very encouraged by the fact that, as a result of this project, the children grew to appreciate the beauty and wisdom of their culture and to see their cultural identity as something to treasure and be proud of.

Risk Management

In the Australian bush, there are numerous animals whose bites are potentially fatal. Deadly snakes and spiders inhabit the general area where we conduct the Bush School. Children are taught about habitats for these creatures and encouraged to show great respect for the animals in the wild. They are taught to identify and avoid likely homes for snakes and spiders (in thick scrub, under rocks and logs and near water). In addition, children are taught how to respond if they do stumble on such a creature. When walking in grassy areas they are encouraged to clap their hands and stamp their feet to ward off any snakes and teachers are equipped with mobile phones and first aid kits in case of an emergency.

A final word

The encouragement of the chapter is to work collaboratively with local communities embracing all stakeholders and inviting them to a shared experience that sustains practitioners, communities and children. We see possibilities for student teachers, who will work in contexts with Indigenous students to enrich the teaching and learning of all

curriculum areas and to invite a further dimension of children's experiences to bring life to what it means to live sustainability, to appreciate and value cultural knowledges and experiences with a profound spiritual connection to place. Experiences such as Bush School provide rich opportunities for all *koolungar* (children) to engage and connect culturally with environments that are in their community's 'back yard'. It is these healthy environments which connect children to the strong spirit of wellbeing and light the spirit of identity.

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