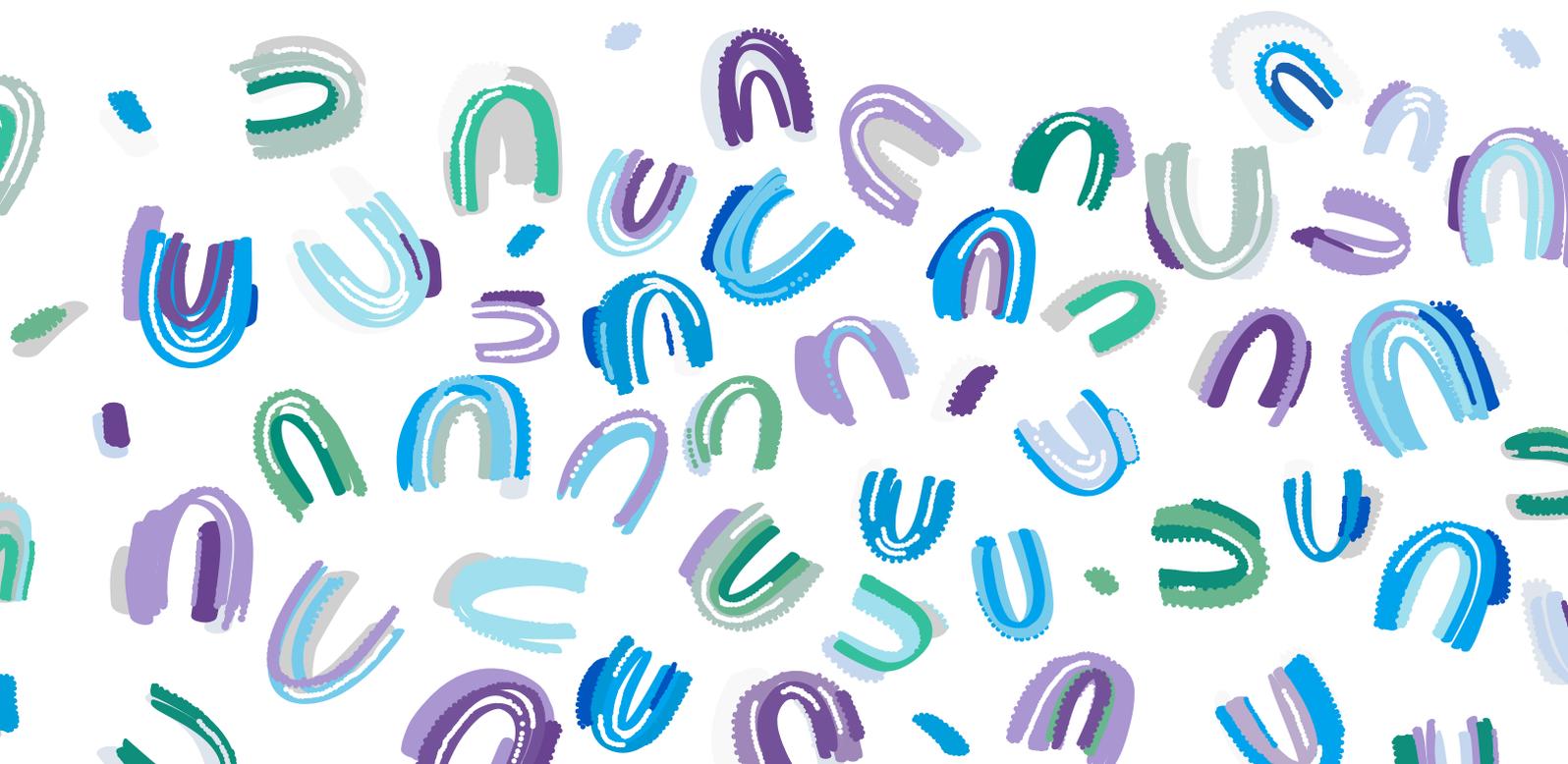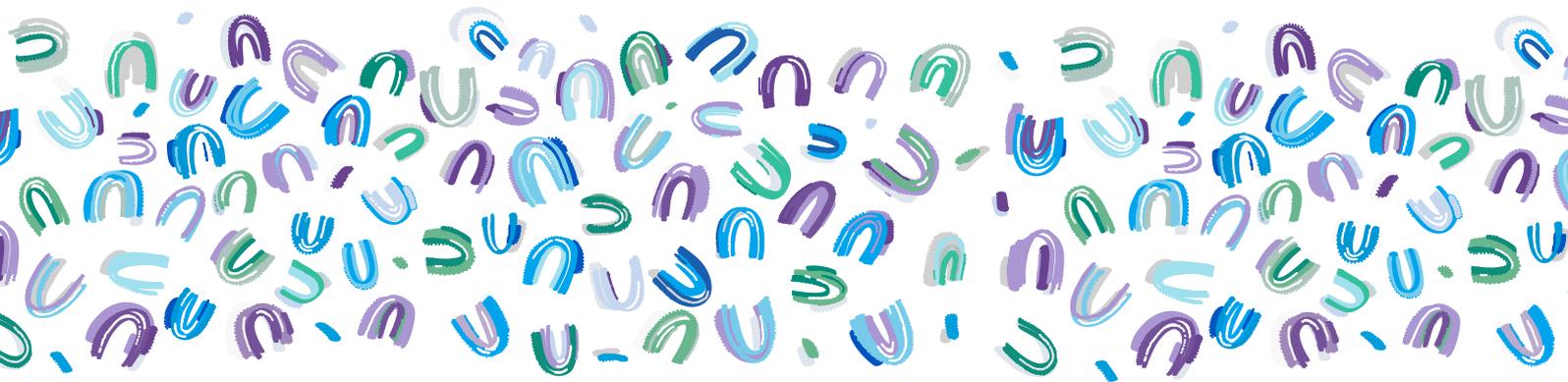# Cultural responsiveness in learning communities: A focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

This resource for learning communities highlights common strategies for understanding and respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing.

The strategies are derived from a literature review by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), which evaluated the relevant literature in culturally responsive pedagogy in schools.

Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights, cultures and history plays an important role in enabling social and emotional wellbeing, according to the literature.

The review suggests ways for educators to embed culturally responsive practices in education contexts. These range from educators learning about local knowledge, language and cultures to holding children and young people to high expectations, and building trust and partnerships with families.

While the literature review focuses mainly on schools, both early learning services and schools can use the insights in this resource to share knowledge, plan actions and reflect on practice.

Acknowledgement of Country

Be You Acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the Land, sea, Country, and waterways across Australia. We honour and pay our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging.

Thank you to AIATSIS

AIATSIS is Australia's only national institution focused exclusively on the diverse history, cultures and heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia. We acknowledge the experienced staff at AIATSIS, in particular its Education team, and thank AIATSIS for being a part of this important work.

Six common strategies

These are the common strategies highlighted in the literature on culturally responsive pedagogy.

Developing cultural competency

Perso and Hayward (2015, 1) define 'cultural responsiveness' as 'enacted cultural competence', meaning applying one's 'capacity or ability to understand, interact and communicate effectively, and with sensitivity, with people from different cultural backgrounds'.

Cultural competency requires, but should not be confused with, cultural knowledge. Approaches to cultural difference in education can rely on teaching the 'four Fs' – food, folk-dancing, festivals and fashion. However, what's required is an engagement with the 'deeper dimensions of students' cultural lives' and 'the complex issues of power, discrimination or colonialism' which inevitably structure teacher-student relations (Morrison et al. 2019, 47–48).

Developing cultural competency requires critical self-awareness of non-Indigenous people's cultural positioning, as well as an understanding of the history and socio-political factors that structure Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations, including its impacts on the classroom (Bishop and Durksen 2020).

For more on developing cultural competency see also Buckskin 2019.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding involves educators providing structured support to help children and young people develop new skills or understanding. It can help make learning culturally relevant to children and young people (Perso 2012, 50–51) and has had success when used with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Halse and Robinson 2011, 263).

For more on scaffolding, see also Perso and Hayward 2015, 128–30.

Respecting and using Aboriginal English and Indigenous languages

One classroom strategy to improve learning outcomes for students is to recognise that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students speak something other than standard Australian English at home. For teachers to effectively scaffold, it is important to recognise that the words and phrases educators use are not necessarily ones that are recognisable or known by students (as it may not be something they are exposed to at home). Aboriginal English is not 'bad English' – it is a different variety of English (in the same way Australian English is different to American English) with its own patterns of pronunciation and unique vocabulary (Perso and Hayward 2015, 38–39).

Recognising that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students come from home environments with a different linguistic context, can help teachers adjust their pedagogy to ensure better comprehension and communication (Perso 2012, 56–58).

For more on respecting and using Aboriginal English and Indigenous languages, see also Halse and Robinson 2011, 264–265.

High expectations

Teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students should be careful not to lower learning expectations of their students, which can result in poorer educational opportunities for them. Having high expectations can counter these harmful assumptions and practices.

For more on high expectations see Morrison et al. 2019, 20–21; Perso and Hayward 2015, 71–74; Perso 2012, 55–56.

Building strong relationships with children and young people

Significant scholarship demonstrates the importance of strong relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and their educators. Perso (2012, 49) highlights that there's less likely to be a cultural expectation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to simply defer to adult educators, often because children tend to be more independent and take on large responsibilities, such as taking care of younger siblings.

For educators, build strong, authentic relationships with children and young people to earn their respect and trust.

For more on building strong relationships with children and young people, see also Bishop and Durksen 2020, 188.

Building strong relationships with parents, carers and the wider community

To better understand children and young people's environments, learning communities must develop strong relationships with parents, carers and the local community. Some ways to do this might include finding opportunities to participate in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community events or by hosting special functions for Elders and the community.

For more on building strong relationships with parents, carers and the wider community, see Harrison and Shellwood 2016, 73; Smith 2011.

Linking to national frameworks and the curriculum

National frameworks and curriculums provide clear direction for each of the six strategies and ask learning communities to build their understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy.

The National Quality Standard (NQS)

All the quality areas of the NQS provide a foundation for culturally competent practice in early childhood education and care. Quality Area 6 – Collaborative partnerships with families and communities outlines standards for building strong relationships with parents and carers, based on respect for 'the expertise, culture, values and beliefs of families'.

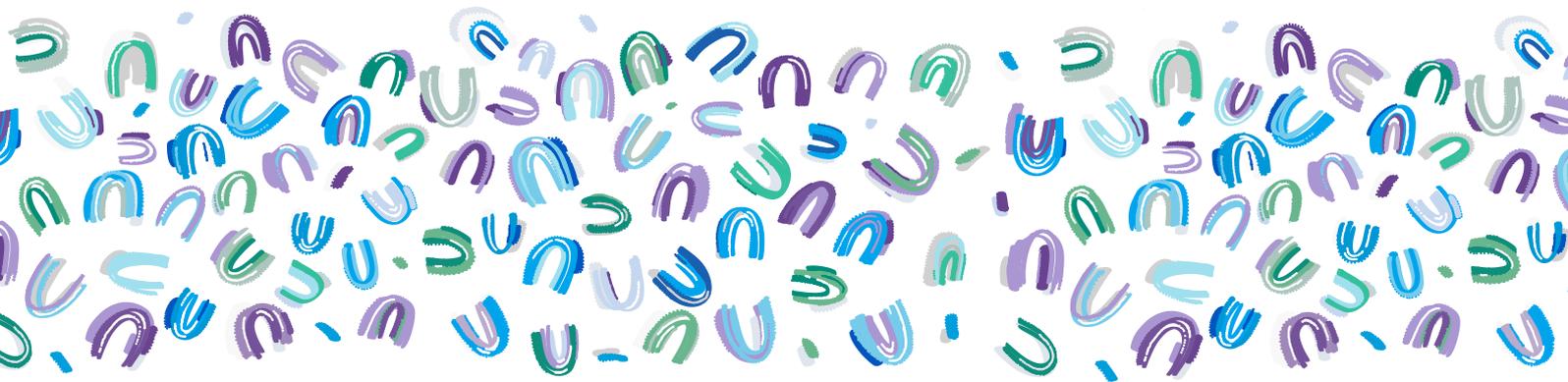## Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) V2.0

The EYLF V2.0 has 8 principles that support and underpin cultural responsiveness, particularly the following principles: Equity, inclusion and high expectations, partnerships, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. The EYLF V2.0 states, 'Educators who are culturally responsive respect multiple cultural ways of knowing, doing and being, and celebrate the benefits of diversity'.

My Time Our Place (MTOP) V2.0

MTOP V2.0 has 8 principles that support and guide educators' response to cultural diversity, particularly Equity, inclusion and high expectations, Partnerships and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. MTOP V2.0 states, 'Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives encourages openness to diverse perspectives, enhances all children's experiences and assists in the authentic advancement of Reconciliation'.

Australian Curriculum

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority supports teachers to embed the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Cultures in all the learning areas of the Australian Curriculum. For example, the Science elaborations for this cross-curriculum priority acknowledge that Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have worked scientifically for millennia and show how Indigenous history, cultures, knowledge and understanding can be incorporated into teaching core scientific concepts.
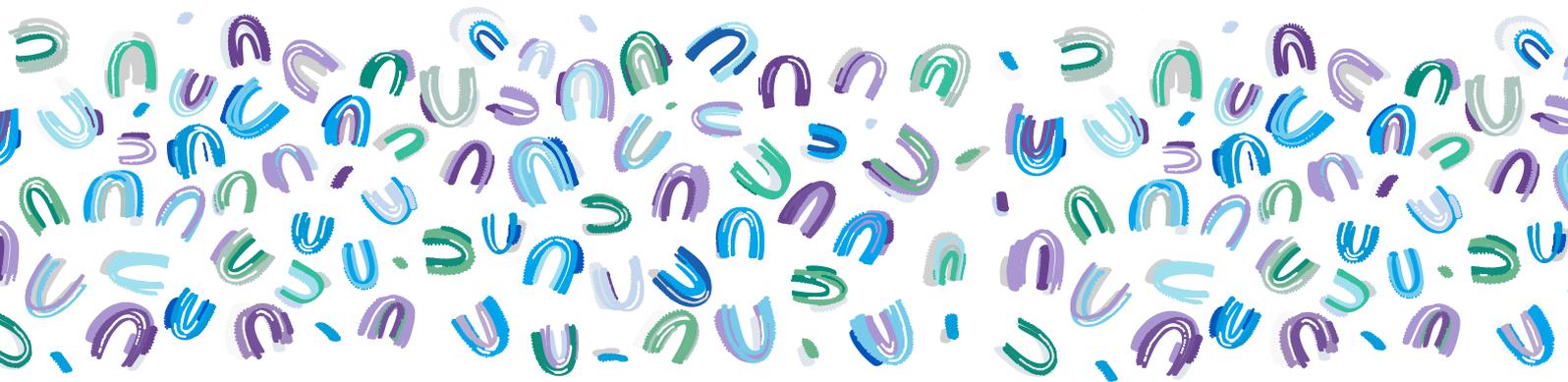
Challenges

Despite the growing number of studies, there remain significant challenges in implementing culturally responsive pedagogy.

Lewthwaite et al. (2017) argue that many of the supporting resources relating to Aboriginal students are 'conspicuously nebulous', and research relating to culturally responsive pedagogy is often 'high-inference' (that is, subject to wide varieties of personal interpretation) (Morrison et al. 2019, 43–51).

According to the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), challenges for adopting culturally responsive pedagogy (AITSL 2020, 25–26) can also include the following:

- Teachers feel guilty or paralysed by a fear of offending (see also Morrison et al. 2019, 51).

- Teachers unable to discern the quality of the resources available for teaching about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and perspectives.

- Teachers find it difficult or uncomfortable to connect with the local Indigenous community.

- School leadership shows resistance or apathy.

- Teachers express unwillingness to develop cultural competency, which might involve embracing vulnerability and feeling uncomfortable.

- Teachers are not educated on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies in their initial teacher education.

Racism and racialised perspectives are key concepts to explore in developing support for educators to strengthen their cultural competence, and these challenges present learning communities with opportunities to partner with educational experts and organisations.

Resources for educators

Here are some resources to support your understanding of identity, racism, resilience and reconciliation.

- [All Together Now](#) is a not-for-profit offering resources and tools to educate Australians about racism, including [racism in schools](#).

- [Racism. It Stops With Me](#) is a national campaign that provides resources for early childhood educators and school learning resources, including lesson plans, to learn more about racism and contribute to an inclusive society.

- [The Australian Dream education resources](#) by ABC Education teach students about Adam Goodes's story. Based on five videos that discuss the themes of Indigenous Australian identity; history and truths; racism; and resilience and reconciliation, the resources aim to promote an inclusive nation and include [key considerations for educators](#).

- [The Final Quarter Curriculum Resources](#) by education not-for-profit Cool Australia address racism, rights and reconciliation. There are 52 lessons designed for Years 5 to 12 that investigate racism, privilege, truth-telling, cultural pride, resilience, values and dignity.

For a longer list of useful websites and organisations to support culturally responsive pedagogy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, see [Useful websites for engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and cultures.](#)

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