

Finding the Thread to Begin Including Indigenous Perspectives in Our Teaching

Philippa Morgan

Recently Evie in Year One greeted me "Womin Jeka Ms. Morgan". I was thrilled - the use of the greeting used by the peoples of the Kulin Nation represented the establishment of a cultural link between Evie, 7, from Mornington and the Boon Wurrung People who have lived on the Peninsula for maybe 40 thousand years.

As a classroom teacher on the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria, in 2012, like many teachers, I am working to include Indigenous Perspectives more consistently, more purposefully and more authentically in the thinking and learning that happens in my classroom. I want to develop enduring awareness of our First People's thinking and learning in my Year One students. The intention is to do so because it is the right thing to do but also to engage with the Educational goals as defined in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, 2008, ⁱ which shapes the priorities of The Australian Curriculum. The most relevant is Goal 2, which states that all Australian students should:

"understand and acknowledge the value of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Cultures and possess knowledge to contribute to and benefit from Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians." (Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, 2008) ⁱⁱ

Why does it matter?

This matters because students have a potential role to help safeguard Indigenous cultures not only by understanding the history but by learning languages, knowing the beliefs, celebrations and events significant to Indigenous people and respecting their traditional protocols and practices. I expect that the learning will be rich with narratives and that this story will tell of students who are beginning to develop a conceptual and emotional connection to Indigenous Australians. Maybe the children in Year One will even be ready to pose questions about the past and present lives of Aboriginal Australians. It is this questioning that will not only "drive learning but also be an outcome of the learning". (Ritchhart, 2011) ⁱⁱⁱ I also hope the students will to begin to have a stance.

Sustaining my practice is an expectation that each child's thinking and learning will uncover both the simplicity and complexity of teaching Indigenous history and cultures. On a simple level I want children to understand some local aboriginal language such as "Womin Jeka", as exclaimed earlier by Evie. I want my students to begin to understand words such as Reconciliation and "closing the gap" and recognise that they make a contribution when they are aware of the life in today's aboriginal cultures and, like Evie, they can connect directly with their beauty and strength.

Within this thread there will be stories of learning which tell of children who now have an outlook that includes an awareness of Indigenous ways of knowing. On concepts such as pattern, identity, belonging, family, and community I aim to move students' knowledge beyond their existing culture and the culture of our school to that of local and national Indigenous peoples. To this end I use thinking routines to model thinking dispositions which are inquiring, communicative and reflective and are therefore based on a desire to become more knowledgeable.

The thread begins with a whole school project

As a school we have begun the thread of learning in visible and active ways and our aim is for children to feel personally involved. We approach with three key words "Respect, Relationships and Opportunities". These words underpin the actions proposed and supported by Reconciliation Australia. The First was the Artist in Residence Mural Project where children in the Junior School worked closely over six months with local Indigenous artists Nola Lauch and Bob Kelly to create a mural for the playground. This mural, beautiful both in its simplicity and its complexity, symbolises our commitment to consistently including Indigenous perspectives in our curriculum. It is an ongoing representation both of the challenge we set ourselves but also the beauty and the power of the learning ahead.

The first time Nola and Bob met with our students to develop a concept for the mural they said that this project would be as much about listening and making connections as it was about creating a mural. Throughout the project Nola and Bob, paint brushes in hand, developed this connection with our students by sharing deep cultural knowledge and exposing a common love for the coastal environment we live in.

On Harmony Day this year we revealed the mural in a ceremony. The cross cultural connection had indeed been built through respect, relationships and opportunity. This connection was epitomised as Jenny, our school Chaplain,

and Nola came together in front of the school community and blessed the mural with gum leaves and water.



Figure 1. Nola and Jenny at Mural Ceremony

Subsequently, the school has dedicated assembly time to learning about aspects of local Indigenous culture, such as the Kulin Nation, its languages, moieties and beliefs. We read together stories told by local indigenous people, adults and children. We observe significant events on the Indigenous calendar like Sorry Day, Reconciliation Week, The AFL Dreamtime Round and Naidoc Week. Observing these significant days becomes part of our school calendar.

The thread continues in the classroom

Back in the Year One classroom with Evie and her peers, the intention now is to continue to explore Indigenous ways of knowing through inquiry. Opportunities for students to share emerging learning and make thinking visible are provided through thinking routines. To begin exploring the concept of Belonging through Indigenous art the children pose questions such as:

Where do Indigenous People belong now?

How does painting give Indigenous people a sense of belonging?

How have the Indigenous people survived when they are not where they used to belong?

With questions such as these I look for evidence of children who are developing curiosity about Indigenous Australians and who ask compelling questions that direct our learning short and long term. I say long term because many of these questions will not be fully answered in my classroom but I hope the children will keep asking them.

A See- Think -Wonder. (Ritchhart, Church and Morrison, 2011) iv

We began inquiring into painting as a medium for sharing and preserving the stories and knowledge. Below is a painting by Pilbara Artist Matthew Minton. Matthew paints stories of his childhood in the desert. The painting was displayed prominently in the classroom. As my students stopped to take in the painting I told them only that the painting was mine and that it was extremely precious to me. The students identified quickly that the artist was Indigenous. They have experience in considering the forms in Indigenous painting, particularly through the mural project. The painting remained without discussion for a few more days after which we embarked on a See Think Wonder, a routine which has been well used by these children. In small groups we began the "See" phase.



Figure 2. Painting by Matthew Minton

See (some responses)

Rectangles	dots	background
form	colours	repeats blue lines black
patterns stripes	boxes	brown 18 boxes a rule

Following time to share our “Sees” and before embarking on our “Think” I told the children that this painting was by Matthew Minton and he lives in the desert. We identified the Pilbara on a map of Australia. I told them the painting did tell a story and that all the patterns, colours and shapes they had seen were chosen to tell this story.

This was a most rewarding and enlightening part of the thinking process. The children’s responses show a preparedness to look closely, deeply and thoughtfully at the painting to find its story. I was particularly pleased to see evidence in the children’s thinking that they were applying some understanding of our first people’s role in, and dependence on, the natural world. Furthermore, during this sharing the children were able to listen to the thinking of others and think deeply about the meanings in the painting. There is evidence of a process of active listening as the children consider and synthesise the responses. Suddenly Leo says “I think it is a map.” The students were greatly encouraged when I was able to tell them that if we were to combine their interpretations of the painting they had indeed together found the story within the painting.

Think (some responses)

The painter chose the form of the pattern to express a story when he was a little baby.

He grew up in a desert.

The painting is about the painter.

It's about where he lived.

Life

Desert

Suns

I think it is about lots of footprints in the desert.

It's about finding water in the desert.

I think it is about his life.

I then told them the story as told by the artist. The square sections represent the four directions from which members of Mathew's family journey to converge at a sacred rock hole at Cotton Creek in the Pilbara. The following are a selection of responses representing the children's wonders.

Wonder (some responses)

I wonder if he made many copies of it.

I wonder if his family like visiting the rock hole.

I wonder if he loves his family

I wonder if they live in different deserts

I wonder if they have paint.

I wonder how much they travel.

I wonder if people get to the rock hole by making a map.

I wonder who is in his family.

I wonder if they have any money.

I wonder what his family's homes are.

I wonder where you live.

I wonder what you eat.

In my students' thinking I find a developing awareness that the symbols in the painting are intended to portray a view of concepts such as Indigenous family and community life as well as sacred beliefs. Particularly informative are responses where the child appears to speak directly to the painter. They write "I wonder where you live and I wonder what you eat" as if a connection has been established through the art and the child understands that the painting represents an expression of a man's cultural and social identity. The painting and its symbols are helping to construct an understanding of another cultural group. This construction of a view on Indigenous thinking and beliefs represents more of the evidence I am looking for in this story of learning. I also find interesting the responses which indicate the children are thinking in a way where they can compare their own family life to that of the painter. Such as when they ask "I wonder if he had a map or money" "I wonder if he loves his family"

The thread leads to a student's voice and the beginning of a stance.

During Reconciliation Week^v the class participated in a series of engagements intended to challenge us to look through the identity, belonging and community lenses we were using to sharpen our focus on Indigenous perspectives.

Sorry Day^{vi} began with the students watching footage of community groups, Indigenous and non Indigenous, gathering to listen to Kevin Rudd deliver the apology speech to the Stolen Generations in 2008.

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKWfiFp24rA>) The footage includes moving images of Indigenous Australians listening and reacting. The children were moved and asked many questions about the older indigenous people they saw crying. We talked also about the ways in which an apology can be an act of compassion and reparation.

Next the class read together a picture story book called *Stolen Girl* (Saffioti, 2011)^{vii} The book is a fictional account of an Aboriginal girl being taken from her family to live in a mission. In the story she dreams of her country and a reunion with her family. She plans an escape by swimming under the waters of the billabong which neighbour the mission. The book ends with her opening the mission door the night she attempts to leave. The reader is left to wonder if she is successful in returning to her family.

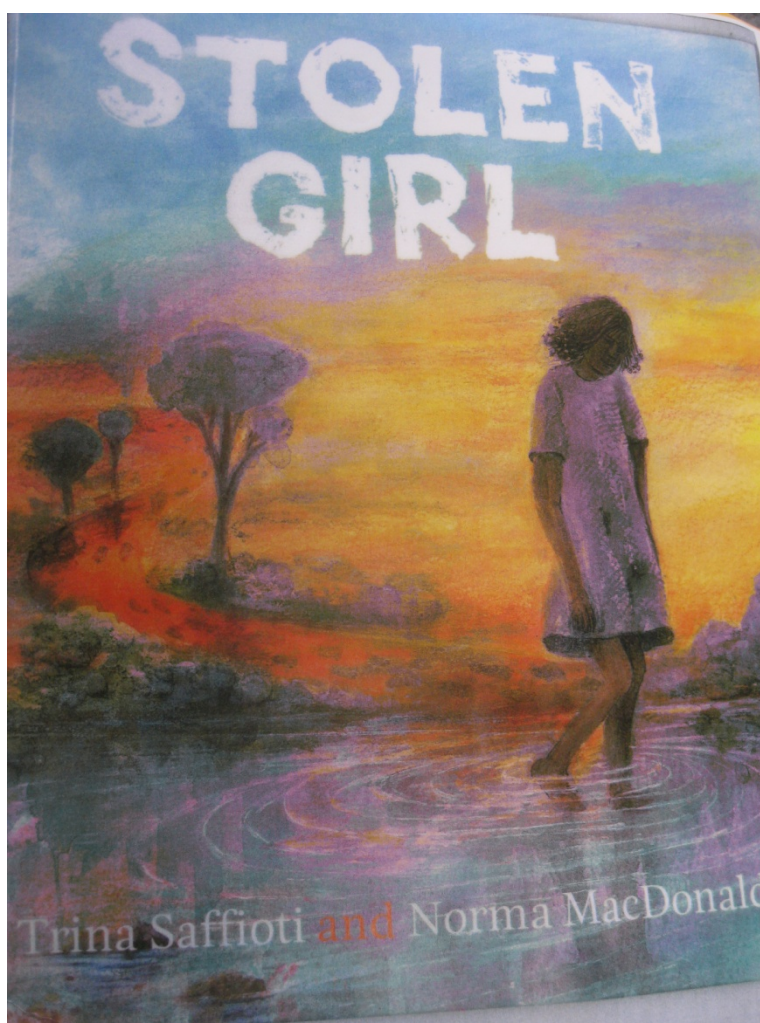


Figure 6. Stolen Girl Cover

With little discussion I asked the children to paint a response to the story. While they were painting I recorded an explanation by each of their images. Many painted a direct reproduction of the most momentous page or image in the story.

"I have painted when she is swimming back to her Mum. I felt sad because it is really sad. I think she gets home to her mum." Peter

"I am painting when she went out to swim because I know how to paint that bit. I learnt that it is not good to be away from your family because you miss them and what you do together." Cathy

"This painting makes me think of the Stolen Girl because it's when the girls go out in winter and do their warm up routines and it was when they were snuggling up together. I painted it because it is when she is daydreaming of her Mum standing at the gate. For me it is one of the saddest bits. It makes my heart feel sad." Evie

In other paintings I saw evidence that the process of learning about others in relation to oneself continues. By this I mean the children seemed to be learning by creating connections to their own lives. The paintings showed children actively comparing their own experiences of family love, absent family, or loss to make sense of the impact of removal and then empathise with the girl.

"Me and my grandfather are playing in the garden. I thought of him today because I love him." Sarah

"I am expressing how I feel about when the children were taken away. I think how sad it was when I wanted my poppy back." Serena

"This is the little girl's first step home to see her mother and she didn't ever want to leave her mother. She never wants to get stolen again. She wants to be cosy, nice and warm in her mother's arms." Annabelle

Another set of children approached their painting responses quite differently. These contained abstractions and in general were far less figurative. However, in them there can be found some unique representations of the deeper concepts with which the children were making connections. These paintings excited me because I could see that a culture of deep listening and deep thinking about Indigenous perspectives was possible and was indeed developing. The following are a selection of these paintings and the explanations provided by each child for their responses.

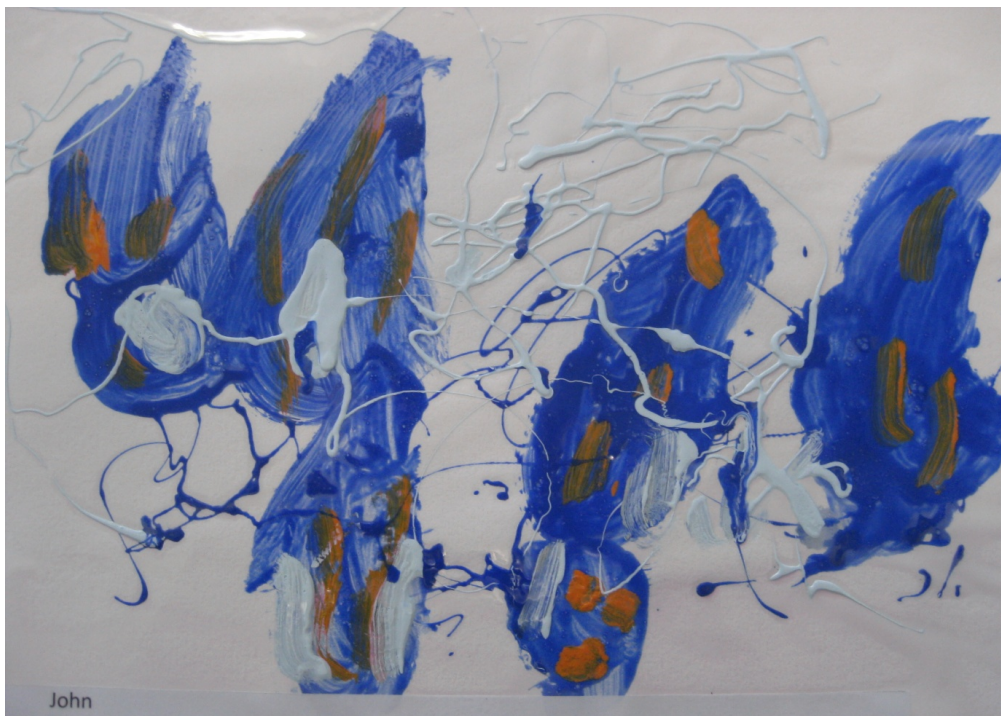


Figure 7. John's painting

This picture is the white people getting aboriginal people's children. The dark blue is the aboriginals and the white is the white people. I am painting tears because it makes Aboriginal people feel better because people who came to their world are sorry. John



Figure 8. Leo's painting

There is a space for crying. The girl has no identity because she was taken from her Mum. The fading bits show that she is missing. Leo



Figure 9. Isabel's painting

My story is about the people in the book crying. The swirls are for the people who are praying. The dots are for crying. The yellow bit is for the sun in the desert. Isabel

Despite the richness of what I have already described, perhaps the reflection which surprises me most is where an explicit connection is made between the young girl in the story and one of the elderly women weeping in Parliament House. Emerson conveys understanding of the historical significance and a sense of time in relation to the experience of the Stolen Generation. This is seen in her construction of the idea that one of the women she sees in today's footage could even be the girl in the story. She also brings a truth to the story by finding verification and acknowledgement in the then Prime Minister's words. She says:

The girl is going into the water to see how many steps she can take before she gets tired and see how long it takes before they try and find her. She is going back home. I know that the story is true because the Prime Minister said it was true and it might have been the girl listening.

In this story I look specifically for evidence supporting an outcome for students to gain knowledge that is of genuine importance in understanding

the human condition. It is this that will take children well beyond just an awareness of another cultural group and an appreciation of that group. I hope that within the thread so far the residuals of learning are students who are more aware of their responsibility to be principled, caring, reflective, inquiring and knowledgeable in their attitude towards Reconciliation. We are educating for long term awareness and understanding. When we include Indigenous perspectives in our teaching we have in mind who we want the children we teach to be as adults.

Then as if to encapsulate the whole spirit of this story there is John. He had been struggling with the idea of writing a fully realised story, while at the same time he was enthralled by the narratives in Indigenous Art. One day he presented to me, in his journal, a story in numbered chapters. However, John hadn't written in words - instead he had used Indigenous symbols. He proceeded to tell his story to the class and as he spoke, page by page, word by word, I realised that his symbols perfectly matched the narrative. Here was a story influenced by European tradition, presented on pages and using chapters but told in the symbols of our First People! This work epitomised the cross cultural awareness that I had hoped for. I hope John's work can be seen not as an attempt to appropriate Indigenous symbols but instead a way of combining two very different forms of literacy and finding a way to link cultures to fulfil his own creative expression. Perhaps here is evidence of a child gaining a secure understanding of his own identity in Australia alongside our Indigenous People. http://youtu.be/XHntoqu_07o

Philippa Morgan is currently a Year 1 teacher at Toorak College in Victoria and has worked in education for twenty years. In 2011 she was awarded a Master Teacher position at Toorak College. In this capacity she works to shift the cultures in her school by engaging the school in broader educational issues. Currently, Philippa is working to promote the inclusion of Indigenous Perspectives in teaching and learning throughout the school. This year she presented a workshop entitled "Moving your schools cultural links beyond the existing culture to an understanding of local indigenous cultures, past and present." at the Exploring and Implementing the Australian Curriculum Conference, hosted by Toorak College in July.

ⁱhttp://www.mceecdya.edu.au/verve/_resources/national_declaration_on_the_educational_goals_for_young_australians.pdf

ⁱⁱ Ministerial Council on Education, Training and Youth Affairs. (2008). Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. (Page 9).

http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/verve/_resources/national_declaration_on_the_educational_goals_for_young_australians.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Ron Ritchhart .(2011). Plenary Session, 3rd Cultures of Thinking Conference, Bialik College. Melbourne, Victoria.

^{iv} Ron Ritchhart, Mark Church and Karin Morrison.(2011) Making Thinking Visible. John Wiley and Sons. San Francisco, California

^v National Reconciliation Week celebrates the rich culture and history of the first Australians. This week provides opportunity for all Australians to take part in “reconciliation dialogue” and to think about possible ways in which to bring about positive change to the lives of disadvantaged Indigenous Australians.

^{vi} Under official government policy in Australia between 1909 and 1969 an estimated 100,000 Indigenous children were taken from their families and raised in homes or adopted by white families. The policy was designed to ‘assimilate’ Indigenous people. These children became known as the ‘Stolen Generations’. Sorry Day was established following the publication of the ‘Bringing Them Home’ report. This report was tabled in Federation Parliament on 26 May 1997. In 2007 a new Labor Government was elected, and promised to make an official apology to the Stolen Generations. At the first session of the new Federal Parliament, on 13 February 2008, the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued an official apology to the Stolen Generations on behalf of the Australian Government. Members of the Stolen Generation were invited onto the floor of Parliament and to watch the apology from the gallery. Each year, on 26 May, Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities across Australia conduct a range of events to acknowledge Sorry Day and the Stolen Generations. <http://reconciliation.org.au/nsw/education-kit/stolen-generations/>
https://www.humanrights.gov.au/social_justice/bth_report/report/index.html.

^{vii} Trini Saffioti, (2011) Stolen Girl. Magabala Books. Broome, Western Australia