



## LISTEN AND LEARN, TO EMPOWER AND EDUCATE

*By Emily Hui, Year 5 teacher, Auburn South Primary School*

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*“Gather ‘round, people, and I’ll tell you a story  
Two hundred years of history that’s falsified  
British invaders that we remember as heroes  
Are you ready to tell the other side?”*

~These are lyrics from ‘From Little Things, Big Things Grow’, a Paul Kelly and Kevin Carmody song, reimagined by Wik and South Sea Islander creative, Ziggy Ramo.

There has been a call for TRUTH telling, VOICE and TREATY, as part of the Makarrata - a word in Yolngu matha (Yolngu language) meaning “a coming together after a struggle, facing the facts of wrongs and living again in peace.” These elements were shared in the [Uluru Statement of the Heart](#), showing that we have much work to do in igniting our passion and purpose in education.

From little things, big things grow...this is some of the work we have done so far, with thanks and gratitude to all the First Nations voices and knowledge that have contributed to this journey of celebrating the longest living culture.

**Above:** Year 5 students learn to grow, harvest, and use saltbush as part of their learning about native, sustainable foods in the kitchen garden program. **Photography:** Auburn South Primary School

## KNOW YOUR COUNTRY

Our school, Auburn South Primary, is located on the sacred, unceded lands of the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation. We have learnt that Wurundjeri Country or 'biik' in Woiwurrung, the language of the Wurundjeri People, has six layers. Woiwurrung specialist and cultural mentor, Mandy Nicholson, shares this knowledge through the *Djirri Djirri* cultural dances and a video series created with local brand, *Clothing the Gaps*. From biik-ut (below Country) to baanjin and binbeal (rain and rainbow), we have been exploring the concept of Country (note capital 'C') as a way to better understand place-based relationality.

“ I believe that if you are born on Country, you are part of Country. We all share this story.”

-Gadigal Elder, Ray Davison

We are part of Country - a concept that Wemba Wemba/Wergaia cultural educator and ecologist, Dean Stewart, has encouraged our community to learn, as we are responsible as the “modern custodians” of this Country, too. The importance of connecting to Country, healing Country, and being part of Country, has played a big part in developing our understanding of First Nations perspectives.

What Country are you on?  
What are the local landmarks, seasonal markers and places of significance in your local area?

**Right:** Year 2 artwork featuring the layers of Wurundjeri Country as shared by Mandy Nicholson. **Photography:** Auburn South Primary School



## ACKNOWLEDGING COUNTRY

How do we go from tokenistic to authentic practices? When we first began sharing an Acknowledgement of Country at meetings, assemblies and classrooms, there was a concern that it was 'tokenistic'. What we have since learned from Wailwan/Dja Dja Wurrung and Mullum Mullum Elder, Aunty Irene Norman, is that you ensure your heart and intention is in the right place and you invest enough energy into it to make it genuine. It's a journey.

We have been exploring the meaning of Country, the purpose of Acknowledging Country, and that it is ever evolving.

To invest the heart and energy is to continue practising Acknowledgements and personalising it. Whether this is linking to the learning focus for the day, or weaving in learning opportunities. For example, when mentioning baanj biik / Water Country, we can also acknowledge our local creek, Kooyongkoot / Gardiners Creek.



**What have you been connecting to today? How can you incorporate it to continue evolving your Acknowledgement of Country?**

## INCORPORATION

It is not separate. Schools are multicultural places, and Aunty Irene advises us to "let people talk about who they are so they feel a sense of belonging." It's a balance. So when we're learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, music, sports, science, geography, plants, history and perspectives, we incorporate it into the curriculum and units of work, and generally not as a stand-alone. We have incorporated Indigenous ingredients into our kitchen garden program inspired by Warndu, Mabu Mabu and Indigiearth, including a delicious native thyme and native basil pasta sauce with warrigal green pasta, served with a wattleseed damper side, and a Geraldton wax and strawberry gum muffin for dessert.

Investing in resources has been helpful to incorporate First Nations perspectives through a range of maps, books, songs, cards, material, yarning mats, and native ingredients in the kitchen. The Riley Callie bush foods matching cards can be used to learn bush foods, play memory, and to pair up students together. Buying from First Nations businesses like local Kinya Lerrk are opportunities to 'support blak' and 'buy blak'. There are many collaborations, too – it's an exciting time!

There are moments where First Nations perspectives are the main focus, in particular during NAIDOC and Reconciliation Week.

A highlight for staff has been a 'Connect to Country' walk with Dean Stewart, which opened staff members' eyes to a First Nations perspective of our school and surrounding areas.

First Nations representation is also incorporated throughout our spaces, as demonstrated in a commissioned artwork of our local area and school by local Wiradjuri artist and

Elder, Uncle Glenn Loughrey of Murnong First Peoples Gathering Place (MFPGP). This beautiful artwork welcomes all who come to our school. The school's new landscape concept designs for the upcoming play spaces, incorporate two of our collaborative ongoing projects: the Indigenous Garden (including native foods, tools and uses), and Eco-space Grasslands (re-indigenousing to what once was) - that we continue to plan in consultation with Dean. We are approaching it this way so that First Nations perspectives are not only incorporated into the curriculum, but also visible in professional learning and the learning environment.

**How can your school incorporate First Nations peoples' perspectives and representation in your curriculum, resources, professional learning, and physical learning environment?**

*Above: Kitchen recipes featuring native and sustainable ingredients grown in the garden, including strawberry gum and Geraldton wax muffins. Photography: Auburn South Primary School*

## CONNECTION

Reading up to here, you can probably hear the importance of connection. Building and maintaining relationships is the key to this journey. We have been listening and learning, even more so after the Black Lives Matter call in 2020. There has been a wave of pivotal opportunities to do so. Such as connecting with the [Department of Education and Training's Koorie Engagement Workforce \(KEW\)](#). Their guidance, knowledge and resource sharing has empowered us to become better educators.

From initial staff concerns including, "I've never met an Aboriginal person before" (to which was replied "how do you know?"), to now, where the KESO team (Koorie Engagement Support Officers) and First Nations families, are part of our curriculum planning, incursions, consultations, RAP (Reconciliation Action Plan) and assemblies.

Our school has also connected with Elders from the local gathering places, as well as local artists, and knowledge holders. Providing opportunities for our school community to hear, learn and connect directly with First Nations people, has been a key focus - and a recent survey with staff showed that this has been the most empowering method for them.

We have also been building the collective genius of Koorie allies, by connecting an allyship of educators and leaders from local schools in the Marrung Education Community Network (MECN), Aboriginal Self Determination in Education Reform Community of Practice, local reconciliation networks, and through our local council, City of Boroondara.

[Who are some of your local Elders, KESO, First Nations connections and allies?](#)

## CELEBRATE

'Deadly' and 'Blak excellence' are terms we hear a lot and are great reminders that when we acknowledge and teach the truth-telling of the horrors and history of the treatment of First Nations peoples ([VAEAI's Koorie Education Calendar is an excellent resource for key dates and resources](#)), that we must remember to steer away from a deficit model, and instead utilise a strengths-based approach to highlight the strength, resilience and excellence of First Nations people.

Kamilaroi scientist, author, and social entrepreneur, Corey Tutt of [Deadly Science](#), highlights some well-known stars in sports, and also in art, activism, science, politics, education and literature, in the brilliant 'This Book Thinks Ya Deadly! A Celebration of Blak Excellence.'

On Wurundjeri Country, [Narrup Rangers](#) are doing wonderful restoration and regeneration of landscapes, including cultural burns.

To hear some more incredible names of First Nations heroes, have a listen to Adam Briggs' song 'The Children Came Back' - a sequel to Uncle Archie Roach's original song.

[Who are some of your local First Nations heroes?](#)

## PROVOCATION

'Keep it fresh, front and centre' - this is our motto! From our first little table of native food plants with a 'See Think Wonder' thinking routine, to the whole school listening to Briggs' song 'The Children Came Back' in their classes and coming together to sing it at our NAIDOC assembly. As an International Baccalaureate school, we love a good provocation and inquiry. At staff meetings, we have featured food and drinks with Indigenous ingredients, and had an excursion to the local MFPGP, [Murnong Art Gallery and Wominjeka Gardens](#) for a yarnning circle with Uncle Glenn.

Through this, cultural protocol has been important to follow. As Koorie Education Coordinator, Arbut Peters (Wurundjeri/Taungurong) and the KESOs shared: it is about "building cultural understanding as opposed to teaching culture." Sensitive topics may come up, such as when teaching about certain sacred sites, the stolen generation, deaths in custody, and Frontier Wars. It can be important to forewarn students about this - particularly Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. Being mindful of cultural protocols, we began building slide decks of provocations, questions, videos, activities and links. This supports staff to take an easy, guided step in, while encouraging them to add their own resources and share their students' work as exemplars. Then continue building from there.

[How can you engage and provoke your students'/fellow teachers' thinking to go deeper?](#)



## RECONCILIATION

From the [Cultural Understanding and Safety Training \(CUST\)](#) by the Department of Education and Training with Alice Young (Yorta Yorta) and Aunty Daphne (Yorta Yorta), our school has been on a deep reconciliation journey. We recently celebrated [Narragunnawali's](#) approval of our Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) with our school community and connections. We found that it has been important to include all stakeholders in the process (including First Nations voices, students, staff, community), be driven by the passionate 'Always was, Always will be' student action team and staff team, and to celebrate each step - e.g. share it on our newsletter page.

It has indeed been a learning journey, and an accumulation of work, energy and effort from all involved. We are grateful for the support of all the First Nations voices that have been part of this so far, and look forward to continuing our reconciliation learning journey together. As Arbut Peters says, "gib (give) it a go"!

How will you continue to energise your school's reconciliation journey?

***Above:** Staff yarning circle with Uncle Glenn Loughrey talking about Makarrata at the Murnong First Peoples Gathering Place in Glen Iris. **Photography:** Auburn South Primary School*

***Emily Hui** is a Year 5 teacher at [Auburn South Primary School](#), as well as the school Sustainability Coordinator, and a Marrung Lead and Campfire Conversations Convenor. She is part of the Marrung Education Community Network (MECN), Aboriginal Self Determination in Education Reform Community of Practice, Boroondara Reconciliation Stakeholder Network, 'Our Songlines Our Survival Day' event volunteer, and a volunteer at the Murnong First Peoples Gathering Place and Gallery.*