Dreaming Stories: A springboard for learning
Jenni Connor

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are warned that this book may contain images of deceased persons.

www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au
About Early Childhood Australia

Early Childhood Australia actively promotes the provision of high quality services for all young children from birth to eight years and their families, and supports the important role of parents. Early Childhood Australia is also the national umbrella organisation for children’s services and a leading early childhood publisher.

About the Research in Practice Series

The Research in Practice Series is published four times each year by Early Childhood Australia.

The series aims to provide practical, easy to read, up-to-date information and support to a growing national readership of early childhood workers. The books bring together the best information available on wide-ranging topics and are an ideal resource for children’s services workers and others interested in the care and education of young children.

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About SNAICC and the SNAICC Resource Service

The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, SNAICC, formally established in 1981, is the national non-government peak body in Australia representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

In 2005 SNAICC received funding through the Australian Government’s Early Childhood - Invest to Grow Initiative of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy to establish a national Indigenous family and children’s resource service, which was officially named the SNAICC Resource Service (SRS) in 2006.

The SRS works across the family and children’s services sector with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-based services and other services working directly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to produce and distribute resources and information in four priority areas.

The Dreaming Stories: A springboard for learning RIPS publication fits under SRS Priority Area One: Early childhood development, parenting and child rearing.

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Jenni Connor has worked as a teacher, principal, superintendent and curriculum manager. She has developed national and state documents on learning, curriculum and assessment, and managed Equity Programs for schools, including Indigenous education. She has worked at all levels of education, and is highly regarded for her expertise in relation to young children and their learning.

Jenni is currently teaching units for a new course in early education and care at the University of Tasmania. She has written a number of publications, including co-authoring Early Childhood Australia’s *Your child’s first year at school: A book for parents.*
Introduction

‘Dreaming stories tell the origins of the environment, how the Spirit Ancestors formed and gave life to the land and laid down the Law: structures of society, rituals to maintain the life of the land, rules for living. Above all, Dreaming stories are the stories of the land, living with the land and belonging to the land’ (SNAICC, 2005, p.1).

Dreaming Stories were originally created by Indigenous communities, for Indigenous people. They play an important part in the cultural heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples because Indigenous values, responsibilities and spiritual beliefs are woven into the Stories. Since the Stories hold great wisdom for us all, children from a range of cultural backgrounds can gain valuable understandings from them.

Mainstream educators want to be certain that materials relating to Indigenous cultures and beliefs are authentic, and they want advice on how to use them appropriately. That is why The Dreaming series produced by Aboriginal Nations (www.ablnat.com.au) is such a valuable resource.

As Keith Salvat, the series Producer, said: ‘As an education resource, The Dreaming series is regarded as the most credible and informative product available to Australian schools and educational institutions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait culture[s] … ’

‘Mainstream educators want to be certain that materials relating to Indigenous cultures and beliefs are authentic, and they want advice on how to use them appropriately.’
Sharing Indigenous stories with children prior to school age

In 2006, SNAICC and Early Childhood Australia (ECA) wondered if some of the stories might be suited to younger children in childcare and preschool settings, so they initiated this research project. They thought the animation style of the production would appeal to young children, providing an introduction to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and beliefs, and a springboard for discussion about significant values and ideas.

As Josie Boyle, the narrator of two stories in this collection, tells us:

‘When I go to schools and show these stories, both the black kids and the white kids respond in a very positive way; even those children who do not normally participate in class discussions do get involved and want to talk about the stories.

‘When I visit preschools it helps to bond the children who are from different ethnic backgrounds, because they all have a common response to the stories. They laugh and see the fun and humour in many of the stories.

‘For the black kids this is important because it helps the other children in the group understand their culture at a very early age. For the white kids it helps them understand the adventurous nature and the important things in Aboriginal culture. Generally there is a sense of pride that comes from the children that these stories are about them and about their country.’

SNAICC and ECA were interested in how educators in Indigenous and other settings might use the stories for children’s learning. The result is this book, which focuses on young children, prior to school age. It complements the teachers’ guide SNAICC has distributed for Year One upwards and offers ideas for practitioners working in the pre-school sector.
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Centres involved

The centres that agreed to participate in the project were an open childcare centre in Darwin, a preschool with a culturally mixed population in South Australia, a Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Service (MACS) near Adelaide, two MACS in rural Victoria and an Aboriginal Child Care centre in northern Tasmania. Fourteen stories were chosen to trial in the six centres.

Selected stories were copied onto DVD and sent to each location with a request that staff:

- view them
- show them to children
- note children’s responses
- document the activities they thought appropriate for the age groups, following the viewing
- provide ‘words of caution’ about the suitability of particular stories for different age groups.

Practitioners were invited to show the DVD to any of the children in the centre, but particularly to engage children in the three–five age group in making meaning from the stories and responding to them. This book records early childhood educators’ responses.

Information arising from the research is organised around:

- brief synopses and interpretations of each story, derived from the original story narrators and other research by this writer
- key messages identified by centre staff and this writer
- comments from staff in early childhood settings
- activities arising from the story, documented by staff.

Some stories were trialled in more than one centre. The centres are not identified in connection with specific activities or comments.
Dreaming Stories: A springboard for learning

‘Dreaming stories are the stories of the land, living with the land and belonging to the land’.
—From Teachers’ guide: The Dreaming (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, 2005).

Experienced educator Jenni Connor worked with the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care to produce this resource for all early childhood carers and educators. This unique DVD set includes 13 short films from The Dreaming; Aboriginal Nations’ award-winning animated series.

Dreaming Stories: A springboard for learning records the experiences of several diverse services using the The Dreaming films to introduce young children to a huge range of concepts:

- Explaining the seasons, life cycles, the importance of rain and responsibility for the environment.
- Appreciating diversity in appearance, language and culture.
- Exploring emotional concepts such as jealousy, fairness and the value of sharing.
- Encouraging communication, cooperation and teamwork.
- Activities involving music, movement, art and computer design.

The Dreaming Stories are an important part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ cultural heritage. As the world’s longest continuous record of historic events and spirituality they provide valuable wisdom for all people.

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