



Candace Fitzgerald

Early Childhood Teacher, Arnhem Land (NT)



My journey so far in teaching has been far from not being challenging and boring. It has been completely the opposite, by embarking on a not so 'traditional' career path for a first year teacher. Following my graduation from Macquarie University, my initial teaching plan was to work as a casual teacher in EC centres or primary schools around the Sydney metropolitan area. Instead, I have ended up 4045 km away from Sydney, in a school located in a remote place up north in a town with a population of approximately 1200.

During my fifth year at Macquarie University, studying a Bachelor of Education (Birth to 12 years), I was one of three students who completed the final practicums up in the Northern Territory at the local school in a remote Aboriginal community. I loved it so much that the following year I decided to pack up and move to this community. The remote school was located approximately three hours from Darwin in Arnhem Land, on the other side of Kakadu National Park. Arnhem Land is the home of traditional landowners, which requires non-Aboriginal people to get a permit to work or visit the land. The school caters for all ages of children with a crèche, a playgroup, a preschool, a primary school and a high school. During the first six months of my employment as a teacher, I was managing and running the playgroup, followed by a transition into the primary school for the rest of the year.

Many lessons have been learnt from engaging and working in this very 'foreign' setting that I have not grown up in and where they speak a different language. There are, however, two particular lessons I have learnt that I wish to highlight from this experience in this locality:

1 Building relationships with parents and children is the key to education

Relationship building can take a while, and depending on the cultures of the families you interact with, it may take longer. When I first started managing the playgroup I needed to hold myself back from my personal beliefs, such as asking parents questions about their child, shaking hands or talking loudly. All the things that may be very inviting for parents in urban settings were very intrusive for the parents I was working with, who were Aboriginal. It took me at least a month to see the trust being built between the children, the parents and me. Once the trust had been created, it was as if a wall was knocked down between us and I had been adopted into the community. First I was given a skin name, and from that point onwards the parents, particularly the women, taught me a lot about their culture and life. More importantly, I was able to develop meaningful relationships over time. This in turn reflected through my planning for activities and lessons because of my deeper understanding of their culture, as well as knowing how to communicate with parents to better understand their children.

2 Educating children and interacting with parents is not limited to the four walls of your EC centre or school

For some cultures, to set foot into a large, air-conditioned, clinical building can be very intimidating and an unwelcoming experience. When I initially was running the playgroup in the community, the attendance of children and parents was very low and I needed to find a way to encourage more people to attend. In collaboration with my colleague, who had lived in the community all her life and knew what community members wanted, we decided to take the playgroup to the community instead of them coming to us. We developed a mobile playgroup a couple of times a week where we took 'the classroom' into communal areas within the community. As a result, children's attendance grew because families could come and go, it was

close to their homes, and teaching and learning occurred outdoors—on the land. I was so surprised at the difference in not only the attendance, but the difference in how comfortable both parents and children were being in the ‘outside classroom’. I used a similar technique when teaching in the primary school. When a child’s attendance was low or I wanted to share a good news story, I would reach out to the parents by personally visiting them at their homes instead of waiting for them to approach me. These EC strategies also helped to increase high school attendance and relationships.

Teaching is a career that can go far and beyond cities, buildings and fences. Putting yourself out there and letting go of traditional ‘white man’ environments where children are typically given an education is something I think all teachers should reflect upon within their own practices when teaching. Get out there and be a part of your community to make a difference in the child’s world.