Acknowledgement of Country

Anna Taylor

The following is a written transcript of Dr Anna Taylor's Acknowledgement of Country, presented at MultiLit's inaugural 'Advancing Effective Education' Summit in May 2025.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this article contains the name and image of an Aboriginal person who has passed away.

Thank you for inviting me to acknowledge the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation as the traditional Custodians of the land on which we gather today. I'd like to recognise their continued connection to the land and waters. I pay my respects to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People joining us today.

I'd also like to highlight that we are currently in Reconciliation Week, a time in which we remember and acknowledge the mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People who were forcibly removed from their families and communities, who we now know as The Stolen Generation.

My grandmother, Cecilia Earnshaw (nee Turvey), was a Noongar Balladong woman who was born on an Aboriginal Reserve on the outskirts of Kellerberrin in Western Australia (WA) around 1932. At around age six, along with her younger sister, my Nan was forcibly removed from her family by the Australian Government under a policy deeply imprinted with racism – assimilation. The government hoped that Aboriginal people, especially those of mixed descent, could be absorbed into white society over generations.

Cecilia with her granddaughters (Anna on the left and her sister Jill on the right).

Nan remembered being told they were going on a holiday. She was given a new dress and shoes before travelling a very long distance by train to Moore River Native Settlement. Every day at Moore River, my Nan and her sister stood in the yard behind the high wire fence, waiting for their father to come and take them home. But of course, it wasn't a holiday and their dad never came. Like many children sent to the settlement, she had no way of knowing that her family had little control over their removal or the possibility of their return.

About twelve months after arriving at Moore River, my Nan and her sister were transferred to Sister Kate's Children's Home in Queens Park, Perth. Nan started school at age eight at the local primary school not far from Sister Kate's. She remembered jumping from bush to bush on her walk there and back each day to keep her bare feet off the hot sand. She said she was put in a class with much younger children and had to learn very quickly. Other children at school often called the girls from Sister Kate's 'homies' and other racist, cruel names. Nan said she never made a white friend at school – never. Teachers were very strict, and she recalled being struck across the back of her legs in front of the class as punishment for even the smallest mistakes. Speaking her first language, Noongar, was forbidden and for this she was punished by having her mouth washed out with soap.

Nan finished primary school and briefly attended Perth Girls' High School. At just fourteen years of age, instead of being returned to her family, Nan was sent away to work without pay as a domestic servant. She spent about a year in the small town of Three Springs before being sent to work on a farm at Arthur River. The push to absorb Aboriginal girls leaving care into white society did not end there. They were actively encouraged to marry white men, which would support the government's broader aim to eventually 'breed out the black'. Before long, Nan fell pregnant, married soon after and went on to raise four children.

As my Nan grew up as an Aboriginal person disconnected from her family and culture, but in a world built around white values and systems, she continued to face racism and barriers that limited her opportunities. She never finished school, never learned to drive, never belonged to a group, never had a bank account, never had a paid job, and never travelled interstate or overseas. And yet, despite all she endured, I remember my Nan as a deeply kind and compassionate woman who faced the world with quiet resilience. She made the most of what she had, seldom complained, and found joy in knitting, cooking, gardening and reading.

I often think of how she would care for abandoned lambs on the farm – bottle-feeding them until they were strong enough to survive on their own. Looking back, it was more than just kindness. It was her way of showing that every life matters, and everyone deserves a chance. I'd like to hope that same spirit of compassion and determination lives on in me.

Being removed from her family at a young age meant that my Nan lost her connection to Country, to her family and to her language and culture. As a result, my mum and my sister and I, and my own children, also missed the opportunity to grow up with these connections. So here I am – perhaps not the Aboriginal woman you might expect. But I'm also not the Aboriginal woman I might have had the chance to be. The truth is that I have only begun to actively learn about my Aboriginal family and culture in recent years.

While telling this story is a little difficult, and I know that my Nan would not have wanted pity or to be thought of as a victim, it is through sharing this that I hope people will better understand the lasting impact of assimilation policies. There is no denying that the removal of Aboriginal children caused deep and lasting harm. The effects are still felt in our communities today, in the form of socioeconomic disadvantage, mental health struggles and a continued fight for justice.

I know my Nan would be incredibly proud of us today. My mum, Nola, trained as a teacher, graduated with honours in a degree in social work, and is still working almost full-time at the age of 73. My sister, Jill, has had a long and successful career at the University of Western Australia. And I'm getting pretty close to completing my PhD at Curtin University. We've also been deeply fortunate in recent years to reconnect with lost family members, including our Aunty Lois, who has generously shared with us stories and cultural knowledge passed down through generations.

Unfortunately, my family's story is a very common one, especially in WA where it is estimated that 1 in 3 Aboriginal children were removed from their families under the policy of assimilation. But I'd like to think our journey is living proof that education can drive intergenerational change. Education can break cycles of disadvantage, it can empower future generations, and it can help us to rise above and move on from the injustices of the past. That's why, as educators, we must do everything in our power to keep all children in school and ensure they learn to read – irrespective of their background or circumstance.

Top L–R. Anna, Jill, Aunty Lois and Nola.
Bottom. Anna and her daughter, Isla.

I'm particularly inspired by the important work of my colleague and friend, Chloe Allen, Project Director of Closing the Gap at MultiLit. While this work isn't easy, the compassionate and determined way in which she is enabling the delivery of evidence-based literacy instruction to students living in regional areas is having a profound impact.

Let's not forget the difference we can make as we walk forward together – not just in classrooms, but in lives, in families and across generations. Thank you.

Anna Taylor, a proud descendant of the Noongar Ballardong people, is a speech pathologist. Anna currently works as a Speech and Language Specialist for MultiLit, and as a Sessional Academic in the School of Allied Health at Curtin University.