
The Cultural Construction of Family Involvement in Early Childhood Education: Some Indigenous Australian Perspectives

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Abstract

Socio-cultural theory has provided researchers with a powerful cultural tool for examining many taken-for-granted practices within early childhood education (Wertsch 1991). In drawing upon this tradition, this paper outlines a study that investigated the learning experiences of Indigenous Australian preschool-aged children at home, in the community and in schooling contexts. Each family was given a video camera and asked to record aspects of their child's life that they considered important for growing up in Australia today. Rogoff's (1998) three planes of analysis were used to examine the video and interview data gathered. The study documented important cultural understandings relevant to early childhood education from the perspective of a range of Indigenous families.

Introduction

[I]t is easier to assimilate a thousand new facts in any field than to assimilate a new point of view of a few already known facts. (Vygotsky 1997, p. 2)

In Australia what perspectives do we have of early childhood education and what are the dominant discourses guiding early childhood? This paper presents the findings of a study that sought to investigate Indigenous perspectives on early childhood education. The findings invite mainstream early childhood educators to become conscious of the taken-for-granted practices of western education and to re-appraise their beliefs and practices, recognising the need for multiple pedagogy rather than adhering to universal truths about early childhood education (Dahlberg, Moss and

Pence 1999, Penn 2001). In the first section of this paper, an analysis of the Australian literature featuring research involving Indigenous peoples is presented. This is followed by the study design and the findings.

Australian Indigenous early childhood education

The development in thinking in Australia on cross-cultural research is evident when we look historically for changes in how 'Indigenous early childhood education' has been viewed. An important article by Gibson (2001) published in the *Australian Journal of Early Childhood (AJEC)* extracted quotations from the journal from the period 1960–99. In celebrating 40 years of research in Australia, Gibson (2001) drew our attention to the way Indigenous peoples have been represented in early childhood education. Some of these important quotations are included in this section.

The first paper appearing in *AJEC* exploring 'Indigenous education' was written by Mellor in 1963. Her description of Indigenous peoples reflects a disturbing picture:

The characteristics of the aborigines [sic] to go 'walkabout', to move slowly and show little enthusiasm in the usual occupations that we anticipate will be of interest, must be understood by a teacher, and her approach to the work with parents and children adapted to meet them. In spite of discouragement she must keep on trying and renewing her attempts to arouse them to take pride in the appearance of their homes and themselves, and to face up to the responsibility they must take when they live in a settled community. (Mellor 1963, pp. 24–5, cited in Gibson 2001, p. 16)

Considering that this was a peer-reviewed paper published in the major professional early childhood journal, *AJEC*, the accepted perspective of Indigenous peoples as 'other' to Australians is evident. In that philanthropic period, the role of the early childhood teacher was to understand and take into account the context of the child when working with families and to move children towards holding the same white, middle-to-upper class values that were held by many of the early childhood teachers at that time (e.g. Gardiner 1982, Lyon 1994).

Nearly a decade later, a more empirical perspective was being considered. Dexter wrote:

We have no hidebound ideas about what particular forms of pre-schooling are the most suitable and we would like to see more research and classroom experimentation designed to produce a range of

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methods and materials which are effective in a variety of circumstances.
(1971, cited in Gibson 2001, p. 16)

In advocating for more research into pedagogy, Dexter (1971) acknowledged the importance of better understanding Indigenous education. However, in reading on further, it is clear that it was not an Indigenous voice or perspective that was being sought, but about how best to ensure that Indigenous children can be saved, as ‘many teachers see their task as one of overcoming the effects of Aboriginal community life on the children, and of helping them to “escape” from its “bondage”’ (Dexter 1971, cited in Gibson 2001, p. 17).

This deficit view of Indigenous children continued into the late 1970s when the beginnings of critical reflection into the universals of early childhood beliefs and pedagogy were called into question. O’Neill (1978, cited in Gibson 2001, pp. 18–19) wrote at that time for a need ‘for change in the majority culture’. Early childhood educators were beginning to look at their own practices more thoughtfully and recognise the need to re-think existing practices. Although an elitist view of western early childhood education was still evident, writers were beginning to draw attention to the need for critical appraisal.

It was not until the 1990s that calls for Indigenous perspectives featured in the early childhood education literature in Australia (see Butterworth and Candy 1998, Colbung and Glover 1996, Flear 1995, 1996, Glover and Black-Gutman 1996). For example, Butterworth and Candy in explicitly examining traditional early childhood theory and practice stated that ‘there is an increasing realisation that, while Aboriginal children need to participate in mainstream society, they have a right to retain their Aboriginal identity while developing “white fella” skills’ (1998, p. 21).

Their analysis foregrounded the ethnocentric view of early childhood education found in Australia, stating that ‘education policies, curricula and methodology, shaped by the dominant society of Anglo-Celtic origin, are inappropriate and irrelevant for Aboriginal children because of fundamental differences in culture, language and learning styles’ (Butterworth and Candy 1998, p. 20). Whilst ‘learning styles’ has proved to be a contested term, their paper was mindful of the historical context that Indigenous families had endured, suggesting that Indigenous families were mistrustful of schooling because of bad experiences in the past.

As a result of the omissions in the general historical records regarding Indigenous experiences since colonisation, we have seen a general denial, or even limited acknowledgment or understanding of, the injustices and barbaric treatment of Indigenous peoples since European invasion (Colbung and Glover 1996). Very little

research has been directed to the intergenerational impact of the removal of children from their families. The early childhood education literature in Australia has not been mindful of this important contextual factor and has been slow to critique traditional taken-for-granted practices and beliefs in early childhood education. For instance, Colbung and Glover state:

Aboriginal children and adults share a unique heritage. As descendants of the original inhabitants of this country we share a history dating back many thousands of years. We also share the experience of being dominated for the last 206 years by a system which sought to destroy us. (1996, p. 35)

Only recently have we seen more research that foregrounds Indigenous perspectives (see Ford and Fasoli 2001, Hanlen 2002, Kennedy 1996, Procter 1992) and critiques traditional early childhood practices in Australia (see Williams-Kennedy 2001).

In Australia, there has been a slow but steady realisation that early childhood ideology has privileged a western view of the world. In the past, Indigenous children were positioned as deficient when they did not match what was expected as the norm for children in early childhood educational settings. Western development, with its enactment through curriculum, positioned children from western cultures as the dominant and privileged group. Their experiences and their family expectations were more closely in tune with our early childhood educational settings. As such, the 'taken-for-granted' practices of early childhood education had become the accepted community of practice (Wenger 1998), the predominant way things are done, becoming habitual. Bourdieu (see Grenfell and James 1998) suggests that the dominant habitus becomes a form of cultural capital that early childhood professionals take for granted. A critical analysis of the taken-for-granted practices from the perspective of those who are not part of the culture with power is necessary if change is to take place within early childhood education in Australia. Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke (2000, p. 91), citing Lubeck (1996, p. 20), urge educators to understand 'how early childhood practices help to maintain social inequality by creating status differentials between and among people and by reinforcing ideologies most likely to have been acquired by the dominant classes'.

Although greater awareness of our ethnocentric early childhood education ideology and practices is now evident in the literature, as a profession we are a long way from knowing how to disrupt and therefore change early childhood education in Australia. More needs to be understood about the diversity of ways that early childhood education can be enacted in our centres and classrooms. Indigenous perspectives on early childhood education are urgently needed within the context of re-examining mainstream early childhood education in Australia.

The study

This study sought to document important cultural understandings relevant to early childhood education from the perspective of a range of Indigenous families. Socio-cultural theory was used to frame the study design and to analyse the data. Socio-cultural theory, particularly the work of Vygotsky (1987, 1997) has broadened our gaze from studying the individual to also examining the culture in which the individual exists. Vygotsky was influenced by many social theorists, including Durkheim, Hegel and Marx (Panofsky 2003). Socio-cultural theorists have drawn attention to ‘students’ lived experiences in schooling and the formation of student identities, their ways of acting or forms of agency, and their transformation over time in the cultural process of schooling’ (Panofsky 2003, p. 414). Daniels, drawing upon Mercer’s (2000) and Lee’s (2000) research, suggests that ‘through studying classrooms we make explicit that which is tacit in the rule systems that regulate and typify patterns of communication and participation in classrooms’ (Daniels 2001, p. 127). This perspective is equally relevant for examining communication between schools, centres and families.

An important feature of the present study design was gaining the perspectives of Indigenous families. As such, I have drawn upon the work of Wertsch (1991), Bakhtin (1986) and other socio-cultural theorists to gain a better understanding of the lived cross-cultural experiences of early childhood education by some Indigenous families from different parts of Australia. The term ‘voice’ has been used in a Bakhtinian sense for framing elements of this socio-cultural study.

Wertsch notes that ‘Bakhtin stressed the idea that voices always exist in a social milieu; there is no such thing as a voice that exists in total isolation from other voices’ (Wertsch, 1991, pp. 51–2). Of importance to this study is the question posed by Bakhtin (1986): ‘Who is doing the talking?’ In examining ‘voice’ from a Bakhtinian perspective, it is possible to see that not only do we need to foreground the idea that there are multiple voices inherent in each ‘speech situation’, but that some voices are spoken without the presence of the speaker – both in time and in space. This voice can be temporally, spatially and socially distant.

Bakhtin also gave us the concept of ventriloquation, whereby the speaker in a given ‘speech situation’ allows other voices (some from the past) to be presented. Wertsch (1991) argues that western views tend to consider meaning elucidated through each ‘speech situation’ as being owned by individuals. However, a Bakhtinian perspective sees users of language ‘renting’ meaning (Holquist 1981). Wertsch argues that renting

is a metaphor that emerged more naturally and was more readily accepted in the sociocultural setting in which Bakhtin worked, which

did not stress the individualism and atomism characteristic of the modern West. Instead of seeking the source of meaning production in the isolated individual, it follows the more collectivist orientation of Russian culture and assumes that meaning is always based on group life. (1991, p. 68)

In bringing together Indigenous families and early childhood professionals, a dialogical space was created. The 'speech situations' focused on many 'taken-for-granted practices' of early childhood education. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a complete analysis of all the identified cultural features pertinent to early childhood education (see Fleer and Williams-Kennedy 2002, Williams-Kennedy 2001).

Sample

Indigenous preschool-aged children and their families from different regions of Australia were invited to participate in a study that sought to identify learning experiences in children's prior-to-school experiences. Aboriginal Liaison Officers from each state and territory nominated families who had preschool-aged children to participate in the study. Local members of the Australian Early Childhood Association (now termed Early Childhood, Australia) worked together with the Aboriginal Liaison Officers to solicit family involvement. Six families from rural and urban communities took part in the study. The extended families were from different cultural regions from within Australia. Each family was an extended family, usually including parents, grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles and siblings. However, other important elders within a particular community were also frequently involved. Each family was given a video camera and asked to record aspects of their child's life which were an important part of growing up as an Indigenous child in Australia today.

Data gathering

Over the course of three months, six preschool-aged children were filmed by their respective families. Families video-taped their child at home, in the community and in preschool, undertaking normal everyday activities.

A major aim of this project was to provide Indigenous families with an opportunity to act as central agents, selecting those valued cultural skills and knowledge exhibited by their young children (Williams-Kennedy 2001). All of the tapes were copied with numbering so that sections of the tapes could be easily identified by the families. Each family selected from the hours of video-tape those aspects of their child's life that best represented to non-Indigenous people important aspects of being an Indigenous child in Australia.

The six edited tapes were shared at a one-week workshop in Alice Springs (central Australia). On the first day, family members shared with each other what they had

filmed, discussing their selection, and specifically commenting upon what was important for them. The full tapes were also available and were used by some families as they further reflected upon what they wished to share. Three guiding questions were used for sharing their videos:

- What can everyone see?
- What can only the family see?
- What can we no longer see because it is so much a part of our lives?

These interactional sessions were transcribed by a researcher on computer in situ. All data were analysed for common themes and shared understandings by the Indigenous people themselves. On subsequent days the families shared their video and analysis with a broader group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous early childhood specialists. The broader group was instructed to listen and to seek clarification as the families discussed their understandings. Once again, all whole-group and segments of small-group work were transcribed on computer in situ by the researcher. This element of the study design was important for identifying not only 'taken-for-granted' cultural practices, but for locating these alongside of the institutionalised practices of early childhood education. In particular, Vygotsky's concept of 'fossilised' forms of behaviour was central to 'liquefying' (Vygotsky 1997), and therefore better understanding, the specifically cultural nature of early childhood education in Australia. Fossilised forms of behaviour are those that 'become automated through repetition' and that 'lose all traits of their genesis' (Vygotsky 1997, p. 71). For example, alternating attention from one person or object to another (as apposed to simultaneous attention, using non-verbal channels of communication) may be viewed as a normal interactional pattern in schools and centres, and therefore it is more difficult to 'notice' other patterns of interaction.

The study was designed to document important cultural knowledge needed for better understanding the educational needs of Indigenous Australian children. Moll proposes that

in studying human beings dynamically, within their social circumstances, in their full complexity, we gain a much more complete and ... a much more valid understanding of them. We also gain, particularly in the case of minority children, a more positive view of their capabilities and how our pedagogy often constrains, and just as often distorts, what they do and what they are capable of doing. (1992, p. 239)

In examining the data, Rogoff's view of culture was important, as she states that we need to 'think of cultural processes as dynamic properties of overlapping human

communities rather than treating culture as a static social address carried by individuals' (Rogoff 2003, p. 63). Further, Rogoff contends that

We should also turn our focus to questions of generality of *cultural processes*, not just generality or representativeness of *groups of people*, as in the categorical approach. By suggesting that we search for patterns of regularities of cultural processes, I am arguing for a dynamic approach to examining culture, to replace the static approaches involved in categorizing people in supposedly homogeneous groups. (2003, p. 84, emphasis in original)

Analysis of the transcribed data required a sophisticated level of analysis. Rogoff (1998) has provided a powerful tool for analysing the socio-cultural activity that takes place in a range of contexts. In this context, her three foci of analysis were important for viewing elements of data, but not losing sight of the whole socio-cultural context in which conversations took place. The unit of analysis is not just the individual, but also the interpersonal and community/institutional context. Whilst focusing on the individual, the interpersonal dimensions and the community/institutional context are still considered. Different dimensions are brought into focus at different times.

In using a personal focus of analysis the traditional focus on the individual in research contexts is shown, for example, finding out what the individual thinks about a particular aspect of education. In using an interpersonal focus of analysis the focus is on the interaction between the individual and another Indigenous person. Here the focus is on finding out what the individual thinks whilst engaged in experiences or conversations with others. The social context is featured. Finally, in using an institutional focus of analysis the focus is on the whole cultural or institutional context. This is symbolically represented by the video material being discussed in this context. However, the discourse of schooling, the codes of behaviour and ways of learning are all part of this third focus.

Findings and discussion

Although a range of cultural understandings were documented, only two main outcomes of the study are reported in this paper. They are reported under the following themes:

- We take our family to school
- Having a voice

Please note that the term ‘school’ or ‘schooling’ was used by the families to represent the cultural practices found in institutional learning contexts for young children, including child care and preschool.

We take our family to school

Early childhood education in Australia has on the whole valued family involvement (see Hughes and MacNaughton 1999, 2002, Press and Hayes 2000). The barrage of publications surrounding early childhood education, including policy statements, leaflets, curriculum documents and web sites, have all tended to advocate the central place of families in early childhood programs (e.g. OECD 2001, Press and Hayes 2000, Smith et al. 2000). Whilst much has been written for teachers in support of family involvement, research would suggest that early childhood teachers have great difficulties in realising this philosophical belief:

The traditional approach to improving staff–parent relationship has been to train staff to become better communicators ... Two elements of our research suggest the need for a radical shift in such training. First, by itself it clearly doesn’t work: the research literature shows that staff regard parent involvement as a continuing problem that crosses national boundaries. Second, we have shown in this study that ‘the problem’ in staff–parent relationships is the particular politics of knowledge, of which ‘poor communication’ is but a symptom. (Hughes and MacNaughton 2002, p. 19)

The findings of the present study would suggest that understandings of what family involvement may mean across cultures is also problematic. The fundamental shift in understanding that is necessary lies not in the organisation of structures to support effective communication, but rather in taking a view that the child is a composite of an extended family, community and set of cultural beliefs that do not always match those of the centre – as explained by Karen:

Children take family into school, language beliefs, obligations. When the children go to school they take their family with them. They take their skills, their knowledge, their beliefs. All these things go with them. You don’t just leave all of that at the door. You take it in with you, so you can’t change and be something else as you enter the classroom. (Karen)

Whilst many facets of Indigenous beliefs are contained within Karen’s words, the notion of obligation is possibly the most difficult concept for non-Indigenous teachers to fully appreciate. For instance, one element of obligation is what takes place outside of the school or centre contexts:

Sometimes the cultural gulf between teachers and students is vast. A girl may appear tired and naughty and uninterested, but in fact that girl goes home from a long day at school to cook dinner for 11 people! She has no choice. It's her culture. (Jennifer Carr, ATAS Tutor) (Schwab 2001, p. 69)

This strong sense of obligation has been expressed elsewhere (Colbung and Glover 1996). In the present study the depth of this obligation was illustrated by many family members:

We take our families for granted. We assume they will look after our family. That is how it is. Family first. (Sharon)

Family should look after family. We know our family to be there but don't expect it. Unwritten obligation. It is understood. Little kids will look after the babies. They will look after them. But we shouldn't. We all grew up looking after each other. We like learning around our cultures. (Vicky)

Reframing parent involvement to be inclusive of the extended family and their community means thinking about this area in quite a different way. The child is not an individual unit, but rather a part of a tightly woven family system that is bound together by a real sense of obligation. Ford and Fasoli (2001) speak of the trust, obligation and commitment in accepting a child into the educational context. Notions of trust were also seen as very important by families in the present study. For example:

An important thing in Aboriginal families, in any family, is trust. If you send your child to some other place that isn't your usual place, or part of where your family usually goes – who is going to be taking care of them? Are they going to be responsible for them? Are they going to care for them in the same way as your family would? Can they do that? Often it is hard to do that if you are sending your child to a strange place. Often teachers are strangers to Aboriginal people; you don't know anything about them. If they tell you, how can you entrust the most valued and important person to you to a stranger? That is who your teacher often is, unless they are someone from the local community. (Laura)

This can be better understood when broader cultural practices of mutual dependencies (Ford and Fasoli 2001, Schwab 2001) are considered outside of early

childhood education. In complex relationships structures, as is often seen in many Indigenous communities, many different family and community members have responsibility for 'looking out for each other'. Older siblings may care for younger siblings. Ford and Fasoli (2001, p. 21) argue that in 'a foreign context, with no recognisable family "looking out" for a child, the child may become stressed and want to stay with the one adult the mother has signalled is trustworthy'.

Overall, the study highlighted the need for early childhood educators to think differently about parent involvement. Past practices and thinking about parent involvement were not useful for some Indigenous communities. Reframing 'parent' involvement to 'family' involvement highlights the interconnections between the preschool child and all those who take an active role in the child's care and education. Similarly, the depth of responsibility for 'looking out' for the child was also evident, suggesting a reconsideration of roles and responsibilities by early childhood professionals (e.g. rosters), and a re-framing of how they have constructed the child (Dahlberg et al. 1999).

In this cross-cultural study, families argued that the child should not be viewed as an individual, but rather seen as part of a complex family and community system. The child was bound together within the fabric of the family through obligation and trust. This obligation – as the binding principle – is expected to be carried through into the school or centre. The teacher is not only expected to think of the child as 'the family', but to recognise and maintain the obligation associated with the concept of family. In having an Indigenous child in an early childhood centre, staff are accepting the family unit (not an individual child) and the cultural obligations associated with this responsibility. In discussing this worldview, Karen proposed the following metaphor:

I was thinking we need better teachers. We need teachers with one teacher eye and one mother eye, instead of teachers with two teacher eyes. (Karen)

Having a voice: liquefying fossilised forms of behaviour

The reasons given by many scholars and educators in the field for encouraging family involvement or parent partnership are diverse. However, the most common reason reported relates to giving families a 'voice' in their child's educational experience (Hughes and MacNaughton 2002). In the present study, giving a voice to Indigenous families was noted as important for both families and children alike.

By being there you are a powerful woman, when there are two of you going, then you are passing on the information ... knowledge; kids are saying 'Look, there are all my friends'. (Narjwa)

Narjwa articulates the sense of power gained through being involved – particularly when involvement is supported through being accompanied by other Indigenous family members. Hughes and MacNaughton (2002, p. 18) have recognised ‘that staff–parent relationships are suffused with knowledge–power relationships’. This power is a double-edged sword, as power gained through attending is quickly reduced when families only feel the educational needs of their children are met through their physical presence:

On the bank, those people work there with the children in the classroom and work with them kids; because you took the time to be there; all of a sudden they say this is valuable, 'cause mum is here and aunty is here.
(Sharon)

Power gained through involvement is quickly lost if Indigenous families notice that western practices are enacted as the norm, and teachers only give thought to disrupting these practices when Indigenous families are physically present. Hughes and MacNaughton (2002, p. 18) suggest that staff and families should collaborate ‘to build sustainable “interpretive communities” based on shared understandings of the child’. Collaborative processes are more likely to build trust and demonstrate to families that their perspectives are valued. However, some channels of communication are especially bureaucratic and formalised to the point of being ritualised (Hughes and MacNaughton 2002). This formalisation was noted by Sharon:

We have meetings. Why don't I get involved? Well I suppose there were Aboriginal mums; the other mums were like ‘ducks in formation’.
(Sharon)

Sharon’s metaphor describes her awkward feelings towards being involved in the centre that her preschool child attends – feeling like a ‘duck out of water’. She considers the non-Indigenous parents who were involved as ‘ducks in formation’. The ritualised and bureaucratic enactment of ‘being involved’ in the school or centre is understood by the other parents – a universal approach is applied. It has become ‘fossilised’ (Vygotsky 1997), and does not easily accommodate Indigenous families.

Some Indigenous families discussed the notion of agency in relation to family involvement. They described the need to be involved to make important changes, but genuinely felt fear, discomfort and a sense of worry. For example, K states:

A lot of parents are afraid of going to the school, the teacher is still someone they don't feel comfortable with, having personal relationships with. If you have a problem need to go and talk to the teacher, if no

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satisfaction go to the Principal they say no; I say yes. You can make suggestions about what you want to see changed. Our cousin had a hearing problem. He was missing out on stuff. He was sat down at the back of the classroom 'cause he was fidgeting. So move him down the front and make some allowance and Edward started to improve. Go and have your say. You are valued as parents. I don't know if I can help them read. You do it all the time at home with our kid. If you feel comfortable do it. Good to see their confidence build up as they have a say. (K)

K states that Indigenous families should think about approaching the school with a different frame of reference:

Parents worry about going to school... think about it in a different way
– education is a service, something everyone is entitled to. (K)

Here she considers the agency of the family members – agency to disrupt the western normalisation of family involvement which has become fossilised. In re-framing – to think about it differently – she advocates positioning schools as service providers and not stations of power and control.

A further difficulty for Indigenous families being involved in education is how families from different communities, and regions of Australia, are positioned:

because you are Aboriginal you are expected to know everything about Aboriginal culture; teachers assume children will know a lot about being an Aboriginal. But Aboriginal people express their identity differently, where they come from, not all Aboriginal people are the same. Teachers need to be aware of those things, to recognise the diversity. (Sharon)

Colbung and Glover have challenged early childhood professionals to better understand diversity within and across the diverse range of Indigenous communities and families:

As early childhood teachers we have found that most teachers need to move away from stereotyping or grouping Aboriginal children into rigid categories. While they need to acknowledge each child's Aboriginality, they also need to see each child's individuality, and program accordingly. In planning for individuals it is important to work closely with families, as they provide the greatest insight into the individual and her/his special needs and strengths. (Colbung and Glover 1996, p. 35)

In re-thinking stereotypical perceptions of Indigenous peoples, Schwab challenges us further:

how culturally complex education is in that it is not merely something bounded by classroom walls or playground fences; rather it is underpinned by both history and opportunities that vary greatly from family to family, community to community and culture to culture. (2001, p. 63)

However, the following dialogue provides us with the clearest direction:

Parent involvement – We often make assumptions about what that means for Aboriginal people, what are the ways parents feel they can be involved? (Karen)

In problematising family involvement, we begin to see that there is not a universal approach (Dahlberg et al. 1999) or perspective, but rather a diversity (Schwab 2001). In giving families a voice – not just through physical appearance (Narjwa), or following bureaucratic processes (Sharon), families are positioned with power and considered to be knowledgeable about their children and their children's needs (Hughes and MacNaughton 2002). In this process, Indigenous family involvement in their child's early childhood education is not made to be exotic, but rather as central. As Sharon reminds us:

It is not special needs; it is need. (Sharon)

Conclusion

One's history-in-person is the sediment from past experiences upon which one improvises, using the cultural resources available, in response to the subject positions afforded one in the present. The constraints are overpowering, yet not hermetically sealed. Improvisation can become the basis for a reformed subjectivity. (Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte and Cain 1998, p. 18)

This study has identified the sediments that make up the 'history-in-person' for some Indigenous Australian cultures and discussed these practices against the backdrop of western education. The cultural resources available to families in this study were examined and considered in light of how families are positioned within the education process. The findings demonstrate that the 'taken-for-granted' practices common in most schools and centres in Australia do not easily support or match those of the

children and their families in this study. Schooling was shown to be a form of ‘mono-cultural schooling’. The culture of western education was clearly privileged above other ways of acting and being in centres and schools, making the transition into preschools and schools very difficult for children and their families.

Within ‘mono-cultural schooling’, many perspectives are unknowingly silenced, as noted by Holland et al. (1998, p. 5): ‘human agency may be frail, especially among those with little power, but it happens daily and mundanely, and it deserves our attention’. What is often silenced is the known socio-historical and cultural world of Indigenous families, the familiar signs and symbols, and established social and cultural practices and beliefs.

Teachers from western middle-class backgrounds bring to the mediation process a particular worldview, cultural understandings and ways of mediating. Effective mediation links new pathways with known and understood patterns of knowledge and ways of doing and learning. For many western teachers effective linkages cannot take place and appropriate mediation cannot occur since Indigenous cultures are not well understood by non-Indigenous teachers.

Non-Indigenous teachers have to work hard to find the diversity of values, assumptions and ideals subscribed to by Indigenous families and communities in which they work.

You can't earn it, can't expect it. You have to find it; you have to wait...
(Denise)

The disparity between Indigenous cultures and western education highlights the presence of mono-cultural perspectives within early childhood education that have not been widely problematised. There is an urgent need to undertake further research in order to build multiple approaches for multiple cultures in culturally and linguistically diverse schools and centres in Australia. However, as we wait for this important work to filter through to all areas of early childhood education, we should remember that

it is nearly always possible to find several authors or voices in the same story. It requires, however, the listener to make an analysis in order to differentiate between the different voices. The narrator is now always conscious of the dialogues he [sic] embodies, or of whom his ‘partners’ are in his inner dialogues or in his formation of opinions. By analysing the genesis of a person’s dialogues with other people, one can obtain an insight into how the different voices become part of his thinking. (Hedegaard 2002, p. 52)

Acknowledgments

This research project was undertaken by the Early Childhood Australia and funded by the Australian government (Department of Education, Science and Training). Family involvement was critical to the success of the project. Special acknowledgement must be made of the leadership of Pam Cahir and Denise Williams-Kennedy.

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