

Asking the experts: Indigenous educators as leaders in early education and care settings in Australia

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The educational rationale behind the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in early education and care services in Australia is grounded in effective engagement and support of Indigenous families. Additionally, this inclusion aims to promote non-Indigenous understanding and recognition of Indigenous peoples, with a view to strengthening reconciliation and improving outcomes for Indigenous children. However, a lack of confidence and capacity of a largely non-Indigenous early childhood educator cohort has resulted in either the absence or misrepresentation of Indigenous knowledges and/or perspectives. This paper presents research that identifies Indigenous peoples as the owners and experts of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives. Employing a qualitative approach from within an Indigenous methodological framework, the research engaged the expertise of Indigenous educators to identify and recruit additional research participants. From this research, it is clear that specific characteristics related to knowledge, experience and understanding position Indigenous educators as the most valuable and capable leaders in the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in early education and care settings.

Keywords: early childhood, Indigenous families, Indigenous educators

Introduction

Western-based early education and care settings (EECS) in Australia provide an exemplar of Nakata's (2002) "cultural interface" as they are environments in which Western-based values and theories of child development dominate. Such environments are contested spaces for Indigenous families whose child-rearing practices and cultural beliefs are likely to be contradicted by the policies and procedures of Western-based early childhood services (Behrendt, 1995; Guilfoyle et al., 2010; Martin, 2007). Therefore, research into effective and meaningful inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in EECS must be guided by, if not be conducted by, Indigenous peoples. Indigenist research positions Indigenous people as participants with power and control over the research project rather than as the subjects of research (Martin, 2008; Rigney, 2001; Smith, 2012). This approach to research recognises and empowers Indigenous people to identify the challenges and solutions they face in a Western-driven and -dominated society.

Rigney (2001) defined Indigenism as "a body of knowledge by Indigenous scholars in the interest of Indigenous peoples for the purpose of self-determination" (p. 1). This statement specifies the use of

Indigenous knowledges for the benefit of Indigenous peoples to attain and secure control over our own intellectual property and cultural knowledges. Martin (2008) builds on Rigney's (2001) principles of Indigenist research with her work that identifies the meaning and value of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing from an Indigenous perspective. Through the decolonisation of Western research in the Indigenous space, Martin's (2008) work brings to light the crucial components of belonging and accountability to one's own country. This work serves to challenge various stereotypical views of Indigenous knowledges and culture that have been created and sustained by non-Indigenous researchers and educators.

Research that seeks to investigate the proper inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in early childhood settings must recognise that,

The purpose of Indigenous education and the production of Indigenous knowledge does not involve "saving" Indigenous people but helping construct conditions that allow for Indigenous self-sufficiency while learning from the vast storehouse of Indigenous knowledges that provide compelling insights into all domains of human endeavour. (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008, p. 135)

With this understanding, Indigenous agency over research and education is honoured in two distinct ways. First, Indigenous knowledges and perspectives are recognised as valuable and valid to all those involved and engaged with EECS. Second, Indigenous narratives are voiced by Indigenous peoples who are recognised as the owners and experts of Indigenous knowledges. Therefore, Indigenous educators must be recognised and employed to lead the inclusion of our knowledges and perspectives in Western-based EECS.

Research involving Indigenous families expounds that Indigenous ways of knowing must be embedded and valued in educational settings to repair the damage done by the political and social stereotyping and shaming of Indigenous Australians, and to provide education that is both culturally respectful and relevant for Indigenous children. The findings of Dockett et al. (2010) and Kearney et al. 2014 evidenced that Indigenous parents value and advocate for equitable access to early education and care for their children. Moreover, in a case study that investigated the educational experiences of three Indigenous people in Sydney, Morgan (2006) noted that Indigenous families want access to quality Western-based education with the provision that it does not prevent Indigenous children from learning and engaging with Indigenous ways of knowing.

In a later study, Grace and Trudgett (2012) also reported that learning environments need to be culturally safe if they are to foster the full participation of both Indigenous families and Indigenous staff. However, providing education and care that is both relevant to and inclusive of Indigenous families and their ways of knowing is yet to be achieved in many services, particularly when services are staffed exclusively by non-Indigenous educators. Nakata (2010) and Baynes (2016) agree that non-Indigenous teachers are struggling to include Indigenous perspectives in their classrooms. Herbert (2013) cites the work of (Osborne, 2001) who argues that many non-Indigenous educators lack an understanding of the diversity of Indigenous Australian culture, which can inadvertently result in the use of culturally inappropriate and insensitive teaching methods in EECS.

There is a substantial amount of literature which confirms the view that misrepresentation of Indigenous knowledges often occurs when interpreted from a non-Indigenous perspective (Grace & Trudgett, 2012; Harrison & Greenfield, 2011; Santoro et al., 2011; Semann et al., 2012). Differences between the aims and

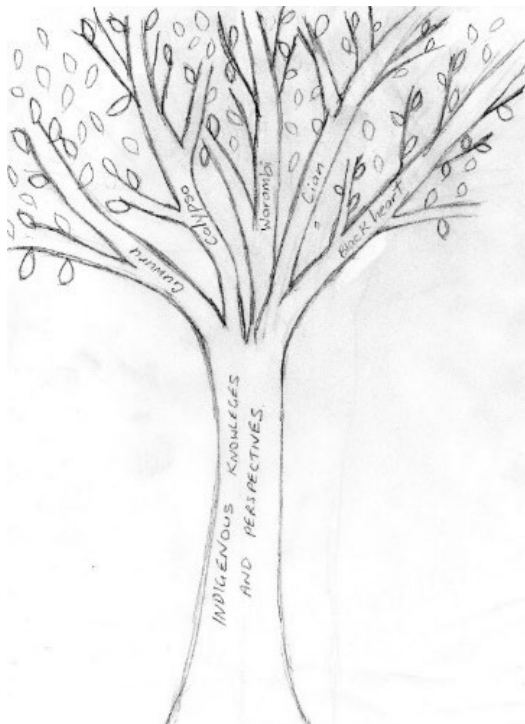
perspectives of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing and the curricula of formal Western-based educational institutions result in Indigenous content that is superficial at best (Nakata, 2010). Grace and Trudgett (2012), Semann et al. (2012) and Santoro et al. (2011) all subscribe to the view that the only way to overcome misrepresentation is for implementation of EECS policies and curricula to be led by Indigenous peoples. Thus, this paper positions Indigenous educators as leaders for the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in EECS.

Methodology

This paper presents the data collected in phase one of a larger research project which aimed to engage the expertise of Indigenous educators and families to identify the most culturally appropriate and successful approaches to the inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing in EECS in Australia. Phase one of the research focused specifically on the experiences, views and expertise of five Indigenous educators engaged with EECS. For the purposes of the research, Indigenous educators were identified as any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person engaged (paid or voluntary) on a regular basis by one or more EECS to share knowledge and guide educators on the inclusion of Indigenous cultures, languages and/or ways of knowing.

Participant recruitment for this research was akin to a snowball or chain sampling method (Punch & Oancea, 2014; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Participants in phase one were deliberately invited by the researcher to meet the research aim of centring Indigenous voices and perspectives. In accordance with this aim, the method of snowball sampling was reimaged by the researcher to enable participant recruitment from an Indigenous perspective. The Research Tree (Figure 1) uses a crucial component of country, a tree, to illustrate the research method employed.

Figure 1. Research Tree



In the figure above, Indigenous knowledges and perspectives are symbolised by the main body (or trunk) of the tree, as this is the core focus of the research. There are five main limbs which represent and name

(using pseudonyms) the five Indigenous educators who participated in phase one of the research. These are the strong, solid main limbs of the tree, as these are the first people to participate in the research. These Indigenous educators, who led the researcher and identified relevant EECS, are making positive steps towards effective and respectful inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in educational settings.

Four of the five Indigenous educators were familiar to the researcher through community and/or professional networks. The fifth Indigenous educator was introduced to the researcher by one of the four Indigenous educators already participating in phase one. The Indigenous educators in this first phase were asked to share their experiences and expertise on the ways in which Indigenous knowledges and perspectives are included in Western-based EECS.

Method

In order to effectively ascertain the perspectives of Indigenous peoples, it was necessary to use a method which engaged Indigenous participants in a culturally respectful and meaningful manner. Grounded in Indigenous ways of doing, the use of yarning as a data collection method has only recently been accepted in the academy (Dean, 2010). Other methods with similar attributes that were employed in research prior to the inclusion of yarning include semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2018) and conversation methods (Feldman, 1999; Kovach, 2009; Kovach, 2010).

The work of Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) has been instrumental in the development and recognition of yarning as a research method. They advocate that research yarning involves the collection of data from a shared narrative of a participant's perspective about a particular event or experience (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Walker et al., 2014). From their own research, Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) identified four types of yarning: social yarning, research yarning, collaborative yarning and therapeutic yarning. Each type of yarning has its own role in establishing and maintaining respectful relationships throughout the research project. Specifically, Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) point out that the social yarn enables researchers to develop trusting and respectful relationships with Indigenous participants prior to engaging in research yarning. They stress that the social yarn does not need to be extensive. In this research the length and content of the social yarn depended greatly on the level of contact that the participant had with the researcher prior to the research meeting. For instance, participants from phase one were all familiar to the researcher through community and/or professional networks. Thus, the social yarn involved a "catching up" conversation, in which the participant and researcher updated each other on shared community and professional information before moving onto the research yarn.

The research yarning process is indicative of Indigenous research methodology (Martin, 2008; Rigney, 2001), as protocols of respect and reciprocity are adhered to throughout the entire process. As a result, it allows for the recognition and inclusion of Indigenous worldviews (Martin, 2003; Wilson, 2008), as opposed to dissecting Indigenous experiences with pointed research questions. During this project, all research yarns were recorded after receiving written and verbal permission from each participant. Once the recordings were transcribed each participant received both a hardcopy and digital copy of their transcripts to provide them with an opportunity to make any changes that they felt appropriate and to ensure that they retain ownership of the knowledge and information they shared. It is important to note that the social yarning aspect of this research was not audio recorded, as the aim of the social yarn is to allow the participant time to become comfortable and build trust with the researcher (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010).

Indigenous research methods and methodologies, which aim to achieve Indigenous emancipation and self-determination (Rigney, 2001), provide sound examples of critical qualitative approaches to research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Martin, 2008). Liamputtong (2010) offers an insight into the emancipatory nature of qualitative research, noting that it enables researchers to go beyond undertaking studies about peoples who are silenced, othered and marginalised, to conducting their inquiries with and from the perspectives of these people. Therefore, research undertaken with an Indigenous research methodological approach is compatible with critical qualitative research, as it critiques and re-positions dominant epistemologies by privileging and employing Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Martin, 2008; Wilson, 2001; Wilson, 2008). With this focus on Indigenous perspectives and experiences, the research pursued an alternative to the views and practices of Western-based EECS.

Findings

A comparison of Indigenous and non-Indigenous literature illustrates the vital role that perspective and positionality plays in how knowledge is interpreted and defined. As Indigenous peoples, we view our Indigenous knowledges from a very different perspective to that of non-Indigenous people (Behrendt, 1995; Behrendt, 2016; Semann et al., 2012). This position was strongly asserted by Indigenous educators in the study, who determined that non-Indigenous educators cannot and should not attempt to teach children about Indigenous peoples and/or culture until they understand the perspectives and lived experiences of Indigenous peoples. Specifically, it was noted that non-Indigenous educators must gain a sound understanding of country, family and the history of Australia.

Country

The most pertinent theme that was raised passionately by all five Indigenous educators throughout the research yarns was country. Thoughts and experiences shared in the research yarns revealed that country is inextricably linked to education, but many non-Indigenous teachers do not understand what country means to Indigenous peoples and, more to the point, many non-Indigenous educators remain ill-informed that there are many Indigenous countries across Australia, as the quote from Warambi clearly attests:

Because it's [country] not separate [to education]. Well, it's not only important for the children it's important for the early childhood teachers to learn because more often than not that I go in there and they don't know anything about Aboriginal culture.

In relation to this lack of understanding, a resounding observation throughout all research yarns reiterated that, before anything else, educators must know whose country their early childhood service is on and what this means to Indigenous peoples, as the concept of country and belonging is central to the lives of Indigenous families. "It's not about where you live it's about where you're connected to. Oh it's, it's essential, essentially it should underpin everything" (Calypso).

All Indigenous educators spoke about country as an entity that is core to who they are and the roles and responsibilities they have. Warambi also frequently used the term "mother" when referring to country, which personifies land in a way that may be unfamiliar to non-Indigenous people. Indigenous educators explicitly endorsed the fact that country is not a separate entity to education and that it is in fact the core of identity, belonging and knowing for Indigenous peoples (Behrendt, 1995; Fredericks, 2013; Martin, 2008). It is clear from the comments made by Indigenous educators that these concepts can be challenging

to non-Indigenous people, who are not brought up to view country as an entity that equally includes all other living entities.

They've gotta get beyond that tokenism and build the importance ... There is a need because this is Aboriginal land that you're sitting on and the more that you respect it and understand that and work with it the more the land's gonna give back to you and those rivers and those beaches and those mountains and lands and the community are gonna give back to you the more of a blessing your centre's gonna have working with non-Aboriginal children and Aboriginal children they need to understand that sense of respect. (Cian)

It is clear from the information shared in all five yarning sessions that the importance and value of country cannot be underestimated by non-Indigenous educators if they wish to include Indigenous knowledges and perspectives into their programs. This was particularly significant in discussions around how early childhood services develop and conduct an Acknowledgement to Country.¹ All Indigenous educators recognised some examples of good practice; however, the common crucial factor in what constitutes a culturally appropriate and respectful Acknowledgment to Country hinged on the level of understanding that educators and children displayed about country and, most importantly, that they were not just reciting an Acknowledgement to Country without purpose or meaning.

Well, if you think about our, you think about any government organisation, you think about Department of Education, schools, there is this standard spiel, which I know was developed originally to, [pause] as the first step to Acknowledge Country. But, how many of these primary students hear that they're on [Aboriginal name] land and 10 years at school they don't really know what that means. (Calypso)

Although the comment above is related to primary school, this observation was shared across the participants as relevant to all levels of education—from early childhood to high school and beyond. The emerging practice of early childhood services who are developing their own Acknowledgement to Country scripts was viewed as a positive approach to recognising and including Indigenous knowledges and perspectives, provided they are done in consultation with local Indigenous peoples. However, Indigenous educators also reported feeling conflicted about this practice as a result of a genuine lack of understanding of what country means to Indigenous peoples.

People start doing this acknowledgments "and will look after", you know blah blah blah and then their last sentence will be "we look after the animals the plants and the people too", like they're all separate, and I'm, I'm struggling with that because these are good people that are well intentioned and I'm going, "What do you mean and the people too—we're all one—you don't get that connection to country?" (Blackheart)

An important aspect of country that was discussed explicitly by three of the five Indigenous educators was the Dreaming, which was presented as a crucial component of Indigenous ways of knowing and connection to country. Indigenous educators expressed the Dreaming as the central link between Indigenous lore and identity.

Because we don't have pedagogy, we have the Dreaming [pause] and see once you give it to them [non-Indigenous educators] in that context and you talk to them about the Dreaming

¹ Acknowledgement to Country is a traditional protocol that involves recognition and respect of the Aboriginal custodians, in particular the elders, of the Aboriginal country on which an event or meeting is held. Acknowledgement to Country can be enacted by anyone, whereas as a Welcome to Country can only be offered by an Aboriginal person (usually an elder) who is connected to that country.

and what is, and how it is a set of rules and a set of guidelines that, you know, that the creators and [Aboriginal Creator name] and all the creator spirits left us to live by, then they kind of go, “Yeah people don’t really think that Aboriginal people had law, hey”. (Guwuru)

It was clear in the yarning sessions that the concept of the Dreaming is considered as much of a challenge to non-Indigenous educators as the Indigenous concept of country. Indigenous educators who talked about the Dreaming reflected on the interplay of spirituality, connection to country and Indigenous ways of knowing. It was noted that in EECS the Dreaming is often misinterpreted and related to the past, which fails to recognise the value and validity of the Dreaming in the lives of Indigenous children and their families.

It’s not a religious thing it’s a spiritual thing and that’s the Dreaming. I think that’s what we’ve missed in early childhood education. It’s been talked about a lot the spirituality of a child but in essence that’s you know their connection to country. I like the fact that the elders have said to me “that’s the Dreaming” you know not the “dreamtime” as past time but the Dreaming as the present. (Calypso)

Although the researcher did not specifically mention the Dreaming during the research yarns, all Indigenous educators identified the role of spirit and connecting to the ancestors who guide and support Indigenous peoples with messages sent through country. One Indigenous educator referred specifically to “Sky Country” when talking about ancestral knowledges, while two other Indigenous educators recalled specific experiences in which information and/or messages were communicated to them through country. Such experiences were expressed as an integral part of Indigenous ways of knowing and, more often than not, were noted as being misinterpreted or discounted by non-Indigenous people.

I think that they don’t understand that there are those things that we read in the wind or in the sky or, you know, a shooting star that tells us something’s coming, you know baby’s on its way or just those things that we see and feel. And even if we don’t really understand them, until we sit with our people who tell us. I see it in little kids that kind of [pause] they feel it, they know. (Blackheart)

Indigenous educators have demonstrated that the Indigenous concept of country is multifaceted in that it involves all living entities, including spirit and the Dreaming. This is strongly supported in the literature by Indigenous scholars (Behrendt, 1995; Kerwin, 2011; Locke, 2018; Martin, 2008). Kwaymullina (2017) specifically acknowledges that Indigenous people are holistic and recognises the value and significance of Indigenous peoples’ connections to country. She expresses responsibility to one’s self and to Indigenous children in all time frames: past, present and future. Therefore, it can be argued that an Indigenous educator with established links to the local Indigenous community would be the most appropriate and valuable person to lead the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives.

Family

A common theme that came through most of the research yarns in regard to Indigenous families was the roles of siblings and extended family; specifically, that Indigenous children may have a number of people who are considered directly responsible for their upbringing. This challenges the Western-based notion of family which tends to be more focused on what is termed “immediate” family, such as mum, dad and their children. The policies and documents of EECS, such as enrolment forms, have been identified by some Indigenous educators as problematic, which was clearly expressed by Calypso:

I still cringe [at] the fact that you only got two or three people to pick your child up, you know, on an enrolment form and does, is that because I'm an Aboriginal family, I don't think so. I think just generally you know that view that [pause] Indigenous kids, you know, can have a broader range of people that are responsible for them.

Further to this, Blackheart described an enrolment interview in which non-Indigenous educators were directing all the questions and information towards an Indigenous child's mother, despite the fact that the grandmother was answering and asking the questions. Blackheart explained that the educators were confused by the situation, as they were unaware of the role that the grandmother has in this family:

A mother came to enrol her child, but she had her mother-in-law with her and when they were asking questions of the mother, the mother-in-law answered, and the director was struggling with that and I walk by, and I knew the family, and I said, this is grandma, grandma, you know, because I then said, you know, grandma's really involved, you know, she would be behind these [enrolment and child care arrangements] because they were trying to talk to the parent ... they didn't understand the connection, the relationship between grandma being a mother as well, and also the elder.

In this example, it is clear that an assumption that the child's mother was the most appropriate person to address was made by the EECS director. Despite the best of intentions, this enrolment interview could have significantly hindered the ability of educators to form trusting and respectful relationships with this family. Without intervention from the Indigenous educator, the family would likely have left the EECS feeling misunderstood by the educators, who could easily appear insensitive and/or disrespectful of the grandmother's accountability to her grandchild and daughter-in-law. EECS educator perspectives of the roles grandparents and older siblings fulfil was also commented on by Calypso:

I think grandparents are recognised better now as carers but often because of negative things because the parents can't look after them or the parents can't pick up ... grandparents [are not seen] as the significant person who has a good relationship with that child, that they're the one that, you know – and older siblings. In my case I struggle with ... I have struggled with centres recognising and accepting the fact that my 17-year-old child who has a car is able, you know, is quite capable of coming into a service.

The failure to accept grandparents and siblings as carers in lieu of parents discounts the important and crucial roles that extended family play in Indigenous families. In addition, this view also positions parents in a negative light, as it assumes that they are not effectively meeting their responsibilities to the child. This view was strongly challenged by Indigenous educators, who specifically made mention of the way in which children are considered in Indigenous families and communities. In particular, this comment by Warambi expresses the way in which children are valued and illustrates that there is an expectation for adults to build caring relationships with them:

I see some of those kids mucking up because they are not getting that one-on-one connection and that care and that love, I think. And that's universal but that's really important within Aboriginal culture that, you know, that we hold our children right up there.

Warambi noted that children in Aboriginal families are held in high regard and loving relationships are considered essential to a child's development and behaviour. This is not to suggest that this isn't the case in other families, but to challenge the perception that there is neglect when grandparents look after their

grandchildren in place of parents. Another view that was expressed by all five Indigenous educators clearly recognised the ability of children to share knowledge and experiences with others.

If you've got young children, and we all know children learn from each other better than they learn from adults. And if we've got Aboriginal children there and I have seen two-year-old children whose fathers have taught them to dance and shake leg and all of that. Why would an adult try? (Blackheart)

This perspective about the autonomy of children was consistent across all research yarns. Indigenous educators shared the belief that sometimes children are the most appropriate people to teach a new skill or knowledge. All five Indigenous educators reflected on different examples of Indigenous children engaging in knowledge sharing with other children and/or adults.

You gotta listen to the kids cause within our culture they've just left the Sky Country, okay, and I believe personally they've got old fellas in them and, you know, stories and things like that, and they come out with things and their imaginations. (Warambi)

This approach challenges Western-based educational settings in which adults are positioned as the teacher and children as learners. Most EECS tend to be less structured in this manner than primary and high schools; however, the level of autonomy granted to children in any EECS is understandably reliant on the educational setting's philosophy and each educator's personal viewpoint.

Experiences shared by Indigenous educators support the literature on the importance of cultural safety for families engaged in EECS (Guilfoyle et al., 2010; Trudgett & Grace, 2011). Specific examples provided evidence of how Western-based perceptions and assumptions about family can create stressful and culturally unsafe environments for Indigenous families. Additionally, explanations of the roles of older siblings and grandparents affirm what scholars (Guilfoyle et al., 2010; Nakata, 2002) have written about familial responsibilities that extend an Indigenous child's social engagements and responsibilities. It is clear from the research that non-Indigenous educators often default to Western views and assumptions about the structure and roles of families. Thus, Indigenous leadership and guidance is required to enable non-Indigenous educators to create culturally relevant, safe and respectful environments for Indigenous children and their families.

History

The misinterpretation of Indigenous concepts of country and family was identified as a consequence of invasion. Specifically, Guwuru noted that Western-based education in Australia is founded on the beliefs and values of the coloniser which dominates all others to the point where these beliefs and values have become the norm:

Well, I think that's still us living with a colonial sense of being, people still living with a colonial sense of being. They go to school they hear the colonial sense of being because their parents are still living the colonial sense of being, etc., etc. So, being, belonging and everything else from a colonial perspective.

This positioning of Western knowledges over all else leads to the development of policies and practices that are ignorant of the perspectives and needs of Indigenous educators and families. This means that Indigenous people are faced with uncomfortable and confronting situations that non-Indigenous educators are likely to be oblivious to. A direct example of this was provided by Blackheart in regard to

legal documents, such as enrolment forms in EECS, which require families to divulge personal information: “Not everybody feels comfortable filling out all those forms because of our history and our baggage and our distrust of what, where that information might go”. It can be reasonably argued that non-Indigenous educators, with no knowledge or understanding of past policies and/or treatment of Indigenous families, have no reason to question the suitability of records and documents to Indigenous families.

Ultimately, early childhood policies and procedures are developed and implemented in a Western framework which overlooks conditions that may be contradictory to the health and welfare of Indigenous families. Control over policies and practices is in the hands of a non-Indigenous system and Indigenous educators and families are left to deal with the effects of legislation that they had no hand in shaping. Calypso spoke to the complex issues of proving Aboriginal identity as a result of the forced displacement of Indigenous peoples from country and the policy of assimilation. Specifically, Calypso was denied the right to apply for an Indigenous-identified early childhood position, as it was discovered that her grandparents had applied for Exemption Certificates:²

It was my father that said to me, “Are you going to let them tell you who you are?”, because that’s not okay. He said, “They are basically then saying we are not who we are”, which is denying our identity.

This example provides a personal insight into a real-life experience of the effects of the assimilation policy. Thus, this experience provides a clear example of the way in which past government policies continue to impact on Indigenous families. In relation to this, Harrison and Greenfield (2011) identified a significant issue in which non-Indigenous educators confuse teaching from an Indigenous perspective with teaching about Indigenous peoples. In this way, historical information, such as information about the Stolen Generations, that is often very confronting and painful for Indigenous peoples, is presented in an insensitive and factual manner. For this very reason, it is imperative that non-Indigenous educators seek leadership from Indigenous peoples to identify the conditions under which Indigenous knowledges and perspectives can be shared and included in EECS.

Discussion

Based on the knowledge and experiences shared by Indigenous educators in the research, it is clear that Indigenous concepts of country, family and history are very different to Western perspectives. Thus, to effectively and respectfully lead the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in Western-based EECS, educators must have knowledge and experience in both Indigenous and Western worldviews. This paper positions Indigenous educators as leaders of such inclusion for two main reasons.

The first is based on the recognition that Indigenous educators are inevitably faced with the challenge of imparting knowledge that is often not represented or understood in dominant Western-based systems. “The road to leadership is paved with land ancestors, elders and story—concepts that are rarely mentioned in the mainstream leadership literature” (Kenny, 2012, p. 4). As a result, Indigenous educators

² See Parbury (2011): “In the 1940s, Exemption Certificates were introduced for Aboriginal people who were sufficiently ‘developed’ in their lifestyle to warrant being exempt from the restrictions of the Act—those who qualified were deemed not to be an ‘Aborigine’ or person apparently having an admixture of Aboriginal blood” (p. 135).

often work in environments in which Indigenous knowledges and perspectives are absent. This necessitates an ability to communicate and connect with a variety of people that have very different worldviews (Huggins, 2004; Warner & Grint, 2006).

Secondly, it is evident from the experiences and shared knowledge of Indigenous educators in the research that Indigenous knowledges and perspectives are not confined to the simple transmission of facts and/or cultural practices. Indigenous ways of knowing also involve important cultural protocols that dictate the roles, responsibilities and modes of information sharing. Indigenous scholars Huggins (2004) and Martin (2003) identify that a critical aspect of being an Indigenous leader is the expectation of accountability to Indigenous community over individual interests or benefits. Thus, this view of leadership is less about hierarchical control of knowledge, as it views leadership in a more collaborative way that is responsive to specific community needs. In describing leadership responsibilities of Indigenous women, Huggins (2004) explains: "They are different for each community and situation, as we are not homogenous. Leadership means that you need to respect differences of views and start from where people are at – not where you want them to be" (p. 6).

Again, this perspective was demonstrated in the information shared by Indigenous educators in the research. While each Indigenous educator discussed Indigenous concepts of country, family and history, each had their own specific experiences, roles and responsibilities in the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in Western-based EECS. Therefore, Indigenous educators in this research are leaders in EECS.

Acknowledgements

This paper draws extensively on my PhD which examined Indigenous perspectives on culturally relevant and respectful approaches to the inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing in mainstream early education and care services.

Conclusion

In this research, Indigenous educators have provided insights into the superficial inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in mainstream EECS. A lack in the depth of knowledge and genuine inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives was attributed to divergent interpretations of country, family and history. Indigenous educators involved in this research identified that non-Indigenous educators must gain a sound understanding of country, family and the history of Australia from an Indigenous perspective if they are to respectfully and effectively incorporate Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in EECS. Most importantly, this paper advocates that Indigenous educators, such as those involved in the research, who guide and support non-Indigenous educators to include Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in EECS, must be acknowledged and recognised as valuable leaders.

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