

Chapter 1

First Light

As I wake up I lay still listening to the birds as they sing their greetings to the new day. I am going to tell you a story of my day, of our day, a day in the country of the Bundjalung people. My story tells of three women, and their community. These women have worked together for over twenty-five years in early childhood education. Two of the women, Muriel and Angelina, are from the local Bundjalung people, who are the traditional custodians of the land. The other, myself is non-Aboriginal and from the land of the caterpillar dreaming.

The story of our day: an overview

This thesis is written in the theme of ‘a day in the life of a small rural preschool teacher’. It is my day, our day. I am a non-Aboriginal person and this is the terminology that will be used for all non-Aboriginal people in this story. Angie has told me she is “Aboriginal”, not “Indigenous”, so all Australian Aboriginals will be referred to as Aboriginal or by their tribal group. The term Indigenous will be used to refer to Indigenous people of the world in general. Chapter one begins with waking up to the day. In this chapter I introduce who I am, where I have come from, and share some experiences that have shaped my life. This chapter also explores some cultural issues from my hometown that I have discovered while doing this research. These issues also contribute to who I am, and to this story. Chapter one will conclude with a short history of the preschool where this research was conducted. This will give a background to the preschool, and will help to set the scene for the following chapters.

The day continues in chapter two as I travel a dirt road through native bush then farmland to the bitumen road that takes me to the preschool. This part of the journey offers a discussion on philosophy and how it underpins the choice of methodology as well as my, and our, way of knowing. The methodology is a combination of auto-ethnography and narrative, which has been influenced by the philosophies of phenomenology as described by van Manen and Four Arrows. I feel as an auto-ethnographer I walk a fine line in avoiding a colonial methodology, which is why I have been swayed by phenomenology. In this same vein an in-depth explanation is

given as to why this is not another study of Aboriginal people, but rather it is our three stories; my story, their story, our story. My research will tell a story of how Aboriginal women and a non-Aboriginal woman have created a place for early childhood education; the main focus will be on our story, and the aim is to share it so that others may know of its worth.

On arrival at the preschool, a mug of tea is poured and the yarning begins. Chapter three introduces Muriel and Angie through our yarning sessions. This chapter allows their voices to be heard. The chapter concludes with a comparison of our early lives. We three grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, yet the history we learned and lived in our formal education, was very much that of 'white Australia'. Muriel and Angie have a heritage in this country of over 40,000 years, however when they were born they were not counted as Australians. When these women are introduced and share their story, they share their educational experience. This chapter also introduces the sisters' group. With the introduction of the major characters completed, this background information gives context so the day may begin.

Before we get into the main discussion of our day, I have taken time to add a short interlude. This page is a light hearted snapshot of the serious challenges often faced by a rural preschool teacher.

We embark on the day, with chapter four and the introduction of *gwyine*¹ magic. The *gwyine* or possum is part of the preschool's logo. The magic is encapsulated in our story of leadership growth, from a contact zone to a 3rd space and finally to an ultimate relational space. Yet before we reach relational space, Aboriginal early childhood education and leadership literature are explored. While there is a great deal of quality writing on Aboriginal education, there is much less to be found on leadership and this is the contribution that my research aims to make.

In chapter three Muriel is introduced, in chapter four she has moved on from the preschool to work in another area that supports the community, yet she is still very much part of our lives. So that the leadership story of Angie and myself may continue

¹ Bundjalung for possum

chapter four will address white noise. This is the problem that affects the discourse representing cultural difference in politics, popular media and education (McCoy, 2000).

Before beginning chapter five, I have inserted an awards page. This page has a photograph of Angie and myself receiving medallions, and a short summary of awards we have received. The photograph shows our local Elder who, on behalf of the National Excellence in Teaching Awards, presented a plaque and individual medallions to us. This was a very proud moment for both of us, as we had been nominated by local people and the award was in recognition of our work in our community. A copy of this photograph was also published in the Koori Mail (2005, p. 14) under the title 'Teachers worried by funding freeze'. We had used the photograph and interview opportunity to express our concern that the funding for the preschool had been frozen since 1989. The teaching award and the 2006 Australia Day achievement award, is part of our leadership story.

Chapter five is our day. As the day progresses a more comprehensive space is discussed. In this chapter the discourse explains how participants have moved beyond a contact zone to a 3rd space. Through skilled dialogue the 3rd space is reached that involves a conscious understanding of the diversity of cultures participating in that space. It is a space that is culturally safe, where children and adults may learn and grow together.

The children have gone home as their preschool day has ended. We are left in chapter six with two teachers who yarn to each other as they tidy up the play-space. These two women have reached a point of trustworthy conversation. They have a comprehensive understanding of 3rd space that has evolved into a relational space. This is where partakers are naturally connected to each other. Within relational space, pockets of the in-between may be found, those special moments of wonder. But, there are also the every day issues that must be addressed. They discuss their day and openly share their reflections of themselves, their centre and their community. They are proud of their preschool, but still lament the many frustrations of wanting a better world for all their children. It is now time to go home.

My drive home is along a country road with little traffic so it is a time that is conducive to self-reflection. This final chapter offers a reflection and a summary of my research as well as linking it to the Australian Early Years Learning Framework² (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010). This has been a general overview of the following chapters, now it is time to begin this story.

My story, their story, our story: an introduction

Why should I tell our story about our preschool? There must be thousands of preschools that provide quality early childhood education for children. I had never even envisaged that I would tell of our preschool. Yes, we are three very dedicated women who have worked together for many years, but as I said, there must be many like us. So what makes our story worth telling? What makes us so unique? Nothing! I thought; then as I became immersed in the literature while studying Indigenous history and completing a teaching then an education degree, I began to see that we did have something to share from our experience; something important.

Colbung, Glover, Rau and Ritchie (2007) state that when a collaborative working relationship (that enables Indigenous leadership) is established between Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues, then this may hasten the privileging of Indigenous worldview. They also go on to say that in education, members of the dominant culture have found it challenging to recognise and relinquish the powerful status that is attached to their position. The traditional colonial institutions do not usually work in partnership with Indigenous peoples, and if non-Indigenous people dominate these institutes it can be problematic to establish partnerships with Indigenous people to represent their interests.

To avoid any ongoing colonial institution a new space needs to be created. This space must have the conditions where all contributors feel safe enough to express their own cultural understandings and needs, and only then will there be valid equitable conditions that go beyond meaningless rhetoric (Colbung et al, 2007). Our story will

² The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is the Australian early childhood education curriculum document produced by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2010).

tell of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal collaborative leadership and the creating of our safe space.

This is not a self-indulgent narrative but rather by beginning with my story, I aim to situate myself as a researcher who is also a part of the research. Like Ladson-Billing (2000) my research is part of my life and my life is part of my research. I hope that by sharing stories from my youth the reader may gain a sense of where my beliefs have come from, what experiences I have had, and how they may have influenced me. The following stories are to give context to myself as both a researcher and as part of the research.

Game and Metcalfe (1996) suggest that most sociologists tend to ignore the basic lessons taught in methods courses in Sociology, that being that they pay almost no heed to their own narrative conventions. They state that ‘sociologists tell stories as if they weren’t storytellers, and as if storytelling were a less rigorous and honest pursuit than theirs’ (Game & Metcalfe, 1996, p. 65). Further to avoid narcissism, as it may be considered in bad taste, the sociologist may become inappropriately modest in their refusal to discuss technologies, conventions, disciplinary practices, labour processes and talking about themselves. Thus, I feel justified in including myself, not only as part of the story but also as a sociological writer. As Game and Metcalfe, (1996, p. 66) state,

an awareness of sociological artifice helps create positions from which the sociologists can write stimulatingly and rigorously, positions that do not hide our own desires behind the subject positions that our knowledge creates, positions that allow a more ethical politics.

As stated above, I will begin by introducing myself first, so you will know where I have come from. This is also part of my research in that I may reflect on my lived experiences that were part of shaping who I am. Martin (2008b) advises Indigenist researchers of the ancient philosophy inscribed at the temple of Apollo at Delphi, to firstly ‘know thy self’ in order to engage research in relatedness. I am not of the people who are the traditional custodians of Australia, but I am involved in self and Indigenous research and thus feel it is important to understand and take advice from ‘relatedness theory’ (Martin, 2008b). ‘Relatedness theory’ involves putting yourself in context and will be examined in more depth in chapter two. So on Martin’s advice and

to put myself in perspective for further discussion on relatedness theory, I will introduce myself.

I am an Australian, like Angie and Muriel, but I come from a distinctly different version of history than that of my Aboriginal colleagues. When using the term Australian, Ford (2005) points out that even in a highly interracial and interethnic diverse community, the general stereotypical notion is that of a white person with British or Western European heritage. Thus I would be considered a typical Australian, while my Aboriginal colleagues do not fit the stereotypical notion of Australian. Within this part of the story not only do I introduce where I have come from but I also explore some of the complex issues of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in that region.

Identifying myself: from a loving family

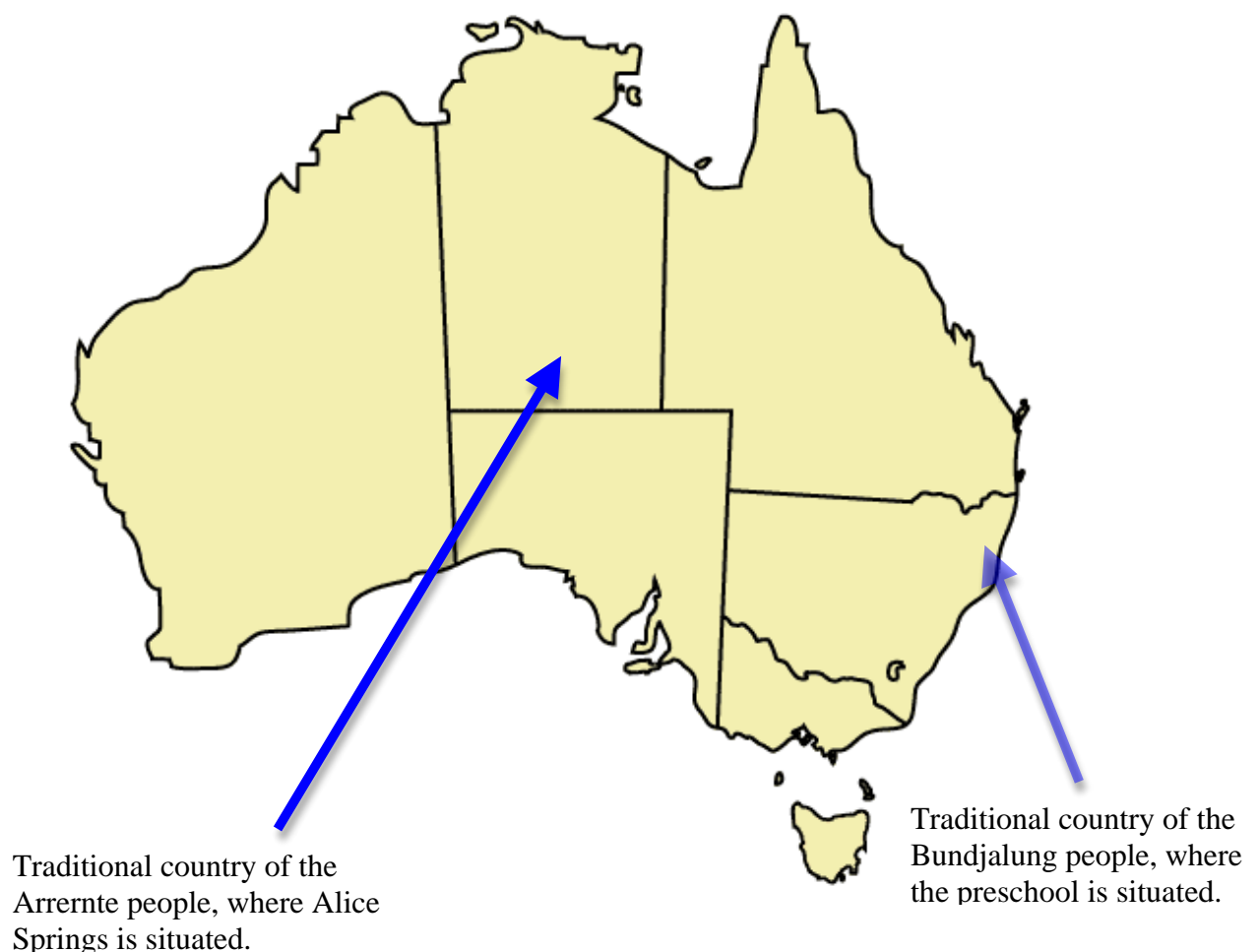
Bronfenbrenner's (2000, cited in Berk, 2003, p. 27) ecological system theory explains how a person develops 'within a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment'. As I share some of my story I will be including elements from the different layers of this complex system. There are the inner layers that include family, friends and those environments that have a direct effect, as well as the outer layers such as cultural values and norms of the time that have been indirect, yet still influential. But, as Game and Metcalfe (1996) counsel, our experiences do not come as natural packages in stories. They go on to advise that I will be working 'with memory and anticipation to create a narrative that renders the world comprehensible and therefore liveable' (Game & Metcalfe, 1996, p. 75). So from my experiences I give you stories that will be fundamental to the process of identifying, making meaning of, and constructing the characters (firstly myself, then my Aboriginal teaching partner, and community members) as humans (Game & Metcalfe, 1996).

I was born in the country of the Aranda³ people who I acknowledge as the traditional custodians (see figure 1.1). They name the country Mgwarrntwe, and tell of it being

³ Also known as the Arrernte or Arrarnta people (www.abc.net.au/indigenous/map/default.htm accessed 7/5/11)

part of the ‘Caterpillar Dreaming’. In the Dreamtime it is said that after the caterpillars created Emily Gap they spread out in different directions from Alice Springs and formed many significant land features seen today (Donovan, 1988). Alice Springs is the major town in this country and is situated on the banks of the generally dry Todd River, in the MacDonald Ranges. Smith (1999) advises that for Maori, one of the ways of identifying one’s self is to name the mountain, the river, and tribal ancestors so that you may locate yourself both geographically and genealogically.

Figure 1.1: Aboriginal language areas



(Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2011, online)

While it is not generally Western custom to do this, I feel proud and comfortable in acknowledging the geographical features of the country where I was born and grew to adulthood. I recognize the desert beauty of this country that has contributed to my spiritual growth. As for my genealogical heritage I am from several generations of

Australians who were originally of English, Italian and German descent. I grew up in Alice Springs within a caring, loving environment that included my parents, younger sister and brother, and extended family.

Even though I only had two siblings, our home-life usually included several extra children. My mother cared for many children including several cousins, when their mothers were working. She also cared for the neighbour's children as their single mother worked. We had a big back yard with plenty of play space for all the children that might be there, with a large mulberry, a pomegranate, and orange trees that provided fruit if we were hungry. We had an even larger area to roam and play, as just over the back fence, we were a short walk from native countryside.

My large extended family provided plenty of opportunity to experience love and care for each other. This included family holidays every two years, which involved a several thousand kilometre drive in the EK Holden (no air-conditioning or seatbelts) on the red dust of the Stuart Highway to Adelaide then Sydney. These adventures were with extended family or friends travelling in convoy on this long hot dusty trip to the beach during the Christmas holidays. There were also many shorter excursions when our family and friends went on camping trips throughout the southern part of the Northern Territory. These camping trips were wonderful adventures of exploring and appreciating the stunning uniqueness of Central Australia.

As children, our parents gave us a choice as to whether we attended and followed the Uniting Church's religion. By my late primary school years I had grown out of my Sunday school hat and also I seemed to have outgrown the religion so I stopped attending church. In those early years I did not feel a need for the Christian religious philosophy and had begun to question many of its beliefs. But, also being a child influenced by popular culture and imagination, I did remember the words to the Lord's Prayer just in case there should be any vampires around. This lack of religion need did not mean a lack of spirituality; from my home life and extended family I had a solid grounding in love, and ethical values. From the beauty of the Northern Territory I had gained a deep spiritual attachment to the country and a sense of place within it.

Growing up in the Northern Territory

As children my siblings and I spent many school holidays on a cattle station with our aunt, uncle and cousins. This station was on the Barkley Tablelands situated near the Northern Territory-Queensland border. It was here we children had the opportunity to meet an old Aboriginal man who sometimes camped in a humpy⁴ beside the yard of the station house. This man had what looked like the traditional initiation scars across his upper chest. I do not know if this man was fully initiated as I was a child and female so it was not my place to know any of these things. We children were sometimes allowed to sit at his campfire for a while and listen to his stories, but mostly we were too busy off playing elsewhere.

Also at the station homestead lived a young Aboriginal woman who worked as domestic help. This young woman, who was in her teens, had a beautiful baby. We children all loved her and wanted to look after her and play with her. There were times when we would sit with this young woman and she would tell us stories of when she was growing up in the bush. One story she told that I recall is about how she as a child had to cross a particular lagoon to go to the schoolhouse. It was a special lagoon and the Aboriginal children had a raft to cross it. Their parents and Elders had told them not to put any part of their bodies in the water, because there was a spirit who lived in the water. The story told how one day one of the children had put his feet over the side of the raft into the water. He had been dragged in and they never saw him again. As a child in the Australian bush, this story was more believable to me than any of the religious stories I had heard at Sunday school.

My teenage years in Alice Springs included many Aboriginal friends who lived in nearby streets. These children held some strong traditional cultural beliefs and the stories they told became a part of my childhood beliefs. To get to the high-school or town we had to walk from the east side of town across the dry Todd River. As we walked many stories were shared, including warnings of the Kadaitcha⁵ man. I was as frightened as my Aboriginal peers of this magical man who wore emu-feather kadaitcha boots to ensure he would leave no tracks (Kimber, 1986). I had also heard

⁴ A humpy is an Aboriginal shelter.

⁵ The Kadaitcha man is a man 'among Aboriginal people of central Australia, a sorcerer who was responsible for avenging the death of a kinsmen' (Rooney, 2001, p. 802).

stories of people who had the bone pointed at them and who had died. So, like my Aboriginal friends, I believed in the power of the Kadaitcha man.

Both my parents were keen sports people with my mother playing hockey, while my father played Australian Rules football. My younger siblings and I followed our parents' example and joined in the sporting activities at the local fields of a Sunday afternoon. Sporting teams were essentially made up of people from Aboriginal, Anglo Australian, Afghani, Chinese, Italian, and English heritage, with the odd American from families working at Pine Gap⁶. Sport was an environment that brought together many of the people of Alice Springs, and could be a time when cultural heritage took a lesser place to that of the game being played (though as in many sports there was the odd passionate fiery moments).

A family value instilled by my parents was to respect my elders and to judge people by their actions, rather than the colour of their skin. Due to my father's work as a mechanic there were times that we travelled out to some of the Aboriginal settlements. So while I did grow up with respect for many local Aboriginal people I came to know, there was also a lot I did not understand or appreciate about them and the history of the Alice Springs region. Like all my class-mates (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) I learnt a settlement version of Australian history in school. I learnt about intrepid explorers, such as Burke and Wills, who braved this harsh land so it could be opened up for equally brave settlers.

Smith (1999), a Maori researcher and writer, points out that under colonialism Indigenous people have struggled against a Western view of history, and schooling has been directly implicated in this process. My early years of schooling were from an era that included a history that Smith (1999) states had redefined the world and where Indigenous peoples were positioned within the world. This is directly opposed to the Indigenous peoples' versions of history. As Smith (1999) points out, history is about power.

⁶ Many Americans come to Alice Springs to work at the Joint Australian - USA Defence Facility at Pine Gap.

Smith (1999, p. 34) goes on to explain that history is about ‘the story of the powerful and how they became powerful, and then how they use their power to keep them in positions in which they can continue to dominate others’. Therefore, as Smith (1999, p. 34) explains, these relationships with power have ensured that Indigenous peoples have been excluded, marginalized and ‘Othered’.

In this sense history is not important for indigenous peoples because a thousand accounts of the ‘truth’ will not alter the ‘fact’ that indigenous peoples are still marginal and do not possess the power to transfer history into justice.

Thus, as a non-Aboriginal student of the 1970s I was impacted and influenced by the colonial power’s propaganda machine that had control of the education system.

The history of the Northern Territory we, as students, were taught covered such explorers as Edward John Eyre and Captain Charles Sturt and how they began the conquest of Central Australia, with John McDouall Stuart completing the mission (Kirke, 1977). This was an inhospitable environment, and Kirke (1977, p. 7) notes ‘but those were the days when the Aborigines lived in complete harmony with the land, while the European explorers struggled to survive.’ This observation was a minor part of our syllabus. We read about how Charles Todd supervised the mammoth task of constructing the overland telegraph line, and with that came workers and settlers. Then in 1887 gold was found north east of Alice Springs, which lured many miners to the area including Chinese fossickers (Kirke, 1977). We learnt that Aboriginal men were hired as trackers due to their unmatched skill for reading tracks. We did not learn about Aboriginal displacement, dispossession, disease, injustices or violence and massacres. I came to learn of this other version of history in my adult years, when I actively pursued it through Indigenous studies in a university course.

My schooling was in the mid 1960s through to the 1970s, the end of the period that government policy refers to as the ‘assimilation era’ and the beginning of ‘self-determination’. It was the time when the Gurindji people walked off Wave Hill station in the Northern Territory in protest against conditions and wages. It was when Margaret Valadian and Charles Perkins⁷ became the first two Aboriginal university

⁷ A local Territorian

graduates. When I turned ten, non-Aboriginal Australians voted in a Federal referendum with a large majority agreeing that Aboriginal people be counted as Australians (Bird, 1999). I do not recall these being important events covered in my school education.

At school, the only language offered other than English, was French. I did not learn French as it did not seem relevant, but I did remain confused for many years as to why we were never given the opportunity to learn any of the local Aboriginal languages. I did learn the odd word from Aboriginal peers, but the local language and culture were very much absent from formal schooling. In my high school years I was fortunate enough to have one English teacher, Dick Kimber⁸, who was interested in sharing knowledge of the local language and culture of the Aranda people. Thus, I was fortunate in being able to learn something of the traditional people in the country where I grew up.

Another area of history missing from my education was that of any murders or massacres of the local Aboriginal people by early Europeans who moved to settle in the Northern Territory. The streets of our town bore the names of many well-known explorers and settlers such as Todd, Giles, Leichhardt and Warburton to name a few. Alice Springs also has street names that the town should not be so proud of, such as Raggatt and Willshire.

Willshire Street

Alice Springs, like many towns in Australia, has streets and landmarks with names that are related to the history of the town. My grandmother lived in Willshire Street near the centre of town, and I have many pleasant memories of family and home made biscuits that were part of that house. Jose Petrick's (1996) book of *The History of Alice Springs Through Landmarks and Street Names*, tells of Willshire street being named after a mounted Constable 1st class, who was stationed in Alice Springs in 1882 and 1883. Petrick (1996, p. 191) notes that 'Willshire wrote pamphlets on tribal customs and Aboriginal life'.

⁸ R.G. Kimber (1986) went on to publish 'Man from Arltunga: Walter Smith Australian Bushman', the story of an Australian bushman born on the mine fields of Arltunga, east of Alice Springs to an Aboriginal mother and non-Indigenous father.

Coughlan's (1991) research notes that Willshire wrote that there was a 'half-caste'⁹ population at every station in Central Australia. Willshire continues with his assessment, writing of the mongrel half-caste with a mental capacity that was inferior: 'If it is a male he is born for the gallows or to be shot; if a female, she becomes a wanton devoid of shame' (Willshire, 1896, cited in Coughlan, 1991, p. 30).

Not only did Willshire write so unjustly about people born of two cultures, he did not acknowledge that there might have been instances where Aboriginal women were raped or abused. Willshire had also been charged with murdering two Aboriginal men. The official version notes that after two station men had been speared by Aborigines and the buildings burned, 'Willshire and his native police had ambushed an Aboriginal camp at dawn, shot two men, had breakfast at the station, and then returned and burned the bodies' (Strehlow, 1971, cited in Coughlan, 1991, p. 26). Constable Willshire was arrested and committed for trial for these murders, but was not convicted although he did not return to the Alice Springs district (Coughlan, 1991).

Walter Smith an Australian bushman, and first son of a Welsh Miner and an Arabana tribeswoman also described Constable Willshire's treatment of Aboriginals to Dick Kimber. Smith spoke several local Aboriginal languages, and when his life story was recorded he was able to pass on information told to him by older Aboriginals, including instances of further murders committed by Willshire's police company, but charges had never been laid:

Old-timers among the Aborigines had told Walter of retaliations which were indiscriminate; Mounted Constable Willshire had led the police parties and Blackfellow's Bones was a place-name to the east where "about eight or ten" men, women and children had been shot (Kimber, 1986, p. 113).

These murders and others took place in the mid 1880s and 1890s, a time of drought. The local Aboriginal people found that the pastoralists' cattle had fouled their water holes, eaten and trampled the grasses causing their traditional game to become scarce. Also their sacred places had been equally trampled and fouled. These traditional hunters speared cattle to survive, which resulted in the station-owners demanding police protection (N. Amadio, & Kimber, 1988).

⁹ A racist or derogatory term

When my grandmother lived in Willshire Street in the 1960s through to the 1990s, there were Aboriginal families that shared the street with her. At that time I did not know the story of Constable Willshire who the street was named after, nor did I know about Raggatt, a pastoralist who our street was named after. Kimber¹⁰ (N. Amadio & Kimber, 1988) tells how some station owners had cordial relationships with the local people, while others like Raggatt shot Warlpiri people near Central Mount Wedge. I now wonder if the Aboriginal families who lived in those streets knew these stories and if they did, how they felt about their hometown naming streets after people who had murdered many of their Aboriginal ancestors.

Alice Springs 1960s – 1970s

When David Ross, the Director of the Northern Territory Central Land Council, spoke at the 'Indigenous Peoples, Racism and the United Nations' conference in 2001, he told of a saying the children in Alice Springs used, that went, 'If you're white, you're right. If you're brown, stick around. If you're black – down the back' (Ross, 2001, p. 153). While I do not remember that saying I would have to agree with Ross that this was a general sentiment of the town when I was growing up in the 1970s, and accordingly this saying permeated the stories of my experiences in that period.

Stories, though, are not merely told to entertain, scare, or pass on cultural knowledge, they may also have a persuasive function, and

more generally, they may contribute to the reproduction of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, ideologies, norm, or values of a group or society as a whole.

Similarly, stories may be used to criticize, attack, or ridicule people. (van Dijk, 1993, p. 125)

Stories about minorities, van Dijk (1993) explains, generally function as complaints by majority group members or as expressions of negative experiences or prejudices about minorities. He goes on to clarify that these stories are a major discourse genre for the reproduction of culture and society. Unfortunately, for the same reasons, stories are also essential in the maintenance and legitimisation of dominant power and ideologies, and consequently in the reproduction of racism (van Dijk, 1993, p. 127).

¹⁰ Richard Kimber (N. Amadio & Kimber, 1988) obtained this information from an account given by D Tjapaltjarri. As a local historian Kimber kept private unpublished journals from 1970-1987. Much of his published writing refers to these unpublished journals where he recorded knowledge gained through his time spent with Central Australian and Western Desert Aborigines.

Further, Lippman's (1973, cited in E. Bourke, 2003) studies of race relations in Australia report that generally Australians hold negative attitudes toward Aborigines. So when Ross pointed out the saying 'if you're black down the back' that children used in Alice Springs, he was probably referring to Aborigines who had not assimilated and seemed lost between two worlds. These people were generally regarded with aversion. Negative stories of their alcohol abuse and crime were a part of the everyday system of racism that did not try to understand these people's losses. So my stories from growing up in the Northern Territory were formed in complicated social and historical contexts. I have gained great respect from having many opportunities to hear from and acquire some understanding from Aboriginal peers and family friends and their way of thinking. But I was also influenced through lack of understanding of the effects of settlement/ invasion, by the negative stories of the minority culture that perpetuated the legitimacy of the dominant culture. Albrecht (2008), a missionary from the Alice Springs area, explains cultural traditions of the local Arrernte people that were generally not understood by non-Aboriginal people.

Notes from a reluctant missionary

Paster Albrecht, as I knew him as a child, was an acquaintance of my parents¹¹. Paul Albrecht (2008) refers to himself as a reluctant missionary and shares his thoughts about social change and Aboriginal people, knowledge that so many non-Aboriginal Territorians did not understand. He was born at Hermannsburg in central Australia where his father was a missionary and superintendent. He learned to speak the local language *Arrarnta Altorinya* (Western Arrernte) fluently, as well as German and English. Then like his father, Paul became a minister. His work included the translation of the New Testament, and large sections of the Old Testament, into Western Arrernte (Albrecht, 2008).

Albrecht (2008, p. 33) gives a brief summary of the traditional central Australian nomadic society who survived by hunting and collecting what nature could provide.

Since the hunting and gathering of food, especially in the more arid parts of Australia, was often at best a precarious and uncertain means of survival, the group evolved certain norms, which aided survival and at the same time

¹¹ Both Paster Albrecht and my father (John Amadio) had received Churchill Fellowships, albeit at different times, and both being Territorians it was a common communication point. They were also members of the Alice Springs Hospital Ethics committee.

provided a measure of economic security. One of these norms made it mandatory for members who stood in a certain relationship to each other to share their food. This meant, for example that if an individual was successful in the hunt when the others were not, all would share in the spoil. Because of its obvious survival value, not only was this norm strongly inculcated into new recruits, but it also carried heavy sanctions. On numerous occasions I have witnessed mothers inculcating children with this norm, even before they could talk. I have also had Aborigines tell me how they could not refuse food to a relation for fear of being ostracised.

With the coming of Europeans, these hunters and gatherers lost most of their food gathering areas, as well as being forced to learn different and strange social and economic skills to fit into society. The Aboriginal fringe dwellers that lived in camps around Alice Springs were people who were forced, but were not able to make this change to an entirely new social structure. Other Aboriginal people did adapt and find a place in the new social environment yet still supported those that could not.

Albrecht (2008, p. 34) describes the present context:

The new environment and the need to adapt to it; 'working' for a living etc., this partial structure has become dysfunctional. It makes it possible for those who do not want to work to live off their relatives. This in turn means that many workers who wish to increase their standard of living cannot. It also removes economic pressures from youth who should be entering the labour market.

Albrecht (2008, p. 34) continues to explain how the loss of traditional culture made it difficult for many Aboriginal people to adjust to living in the town environment:

The dysfunction of this partial structure can be directly traced to the 'loss' of another partial structure, which in the past checked the kind of exploitation which is now taking place. This norm made it mandatory for everybody – men, women and children – to work at collecting food.

Many members of the society are unhappy and frustrated with this situation. But, although they complain about it, they take no action to bring about change. Why? Because this partial structure is dysfunctional in relation to its sub-system (adaptive), and yet it is still functional in relation to other parts of the system.

While Albrecht's paper gives far more detail than this summary, these extracts give an understanding that explains why local non-Aboriginal people of the Alice Springs area did not generally understand about the so called functional Aboriginal families and dysfunctional people. It has also been important to include this discussion as it highlights how there was a general lack of understanding by the dominant culture,

who then felt they had a right to perpetuate a negative view of many of the local Aboriginal people.

Early years of mixed messages

As a mature aged student on a reflective journey, when I look back over the first twenty years of my life I feel, probably like many of my peers, that I was influenced by many mixed messages. I was fortunate in that I grew up in a loving caring family. I was given a good grounding in the ethics of respecting fellow humans and the environment. The non-Aboriginal people of Alice Springs could be both very much accepting and racist toward the local Aboriginal people. The laws of the Northern Territory and the Australian Government perpetuated mixed messages through an assimilation policy (Hemming, 2003) that did not cater to the needs of the Aboriginal population. These people had suffered many injustices due to the invasion of their country yet there was little understanding of this. So as a young woman when I left Alice Springs on my Triumph motorbike to make my own way in a different part of Australia, I took with me a variety of experiences from living in the Northern Territory, but the most vital lesson was to be open to new knowledge.

On completing secondary school I had attended a college to learn basic training in clerical skills. This enabled me to find work but this was only a means to earn a living. During my travel on the north coast of New South Wales I had several casual jobs, which included one-on-one support for children with special needs at a few preschools. I had finally found an area of interest in my working life. It was also during this time that I met my partner Craig and we ended up buying land in the area where my current preschool is situated. Not long after we had settled in the area, an assistant's job was advertised at the preschool, which I eagerly applied for and was employed. This was the start of my working career that I have grown so passionate about.

After working at the preschool for several years I took leave to drive back to Alice Springs with two family members for a family gathering. From my home in New South Wales to Alice Springs it is a three-day drive¹². At about 5pm on the third day

¹² Over 3,000 kilometres.

we were about 200 kilometres from town and the sun was beginning to set. We were travelling through low rolling hills, and in the distance I could see the emerging McDonald Ranges. As the sun slowly sank in the western sky its rays were turning the mountain ranges into brilliant reds and purples. As we drove everyone in the car was quiet. I looked out at those mountains that I had not seen for a few years and I could feel my body tingling. The hair on the back of my neck stood stiff and I felt a wave of emotion flood my body. I knew how special this country was and felt a sense of coming home.

As a twenty five year old, I arrive at the preschool

As the butcherbirds and magpies sing, my thoughts go back twenty-five years to my first day's work as an assistant at our rural preschool on the bank of the river. I had arrived to be greeted by the Aboriginal assistant Muriel, as the Aboriginal Director was busy dealing with other matters. Muriel, with whom I then worked for ten years until she left the preschool to work in another area caring for the children in her community, was to become a mentor, teacher and a dear, life-long friend. Muriel had no formal tertiary qualifications when I met her, but she did have much local knowledge of her community. Of all the knowledge I have gained over the past twenty-five years in early childhood education, both formal and informal, it is Muriel who I must first and foremost thank for her shared wisdom. Muriel is a great role model, she is caring, understanding, patient, and has a great sense of humour. Muriel was my first instructor, showing me how to be an early childhood teacher within her community. A major part of the knowledge I have gained about the community and children I have worked with is knowledge that Muriel has opened my eyes too. Gonzalez and Moll (2002) call these local funds of knowledge, which will be discussed in detail in the coming chapters.

The preschool's history goes back a few years before I joined the team. A local Aboriginal man had been employed to start and run a preschool in the local area. During the following years two non-Aboriginal trained teachers were employed, with Muriel as an assistant. When the second non-Aboriginal teacher resigned to start a family, a young Aboriginal woman was employed as director. It was at this time in

1986 that I joined the team. Two years later in 1988 the Aboriginal Director left us to travel. I then became Director and continued to work with Muriel.

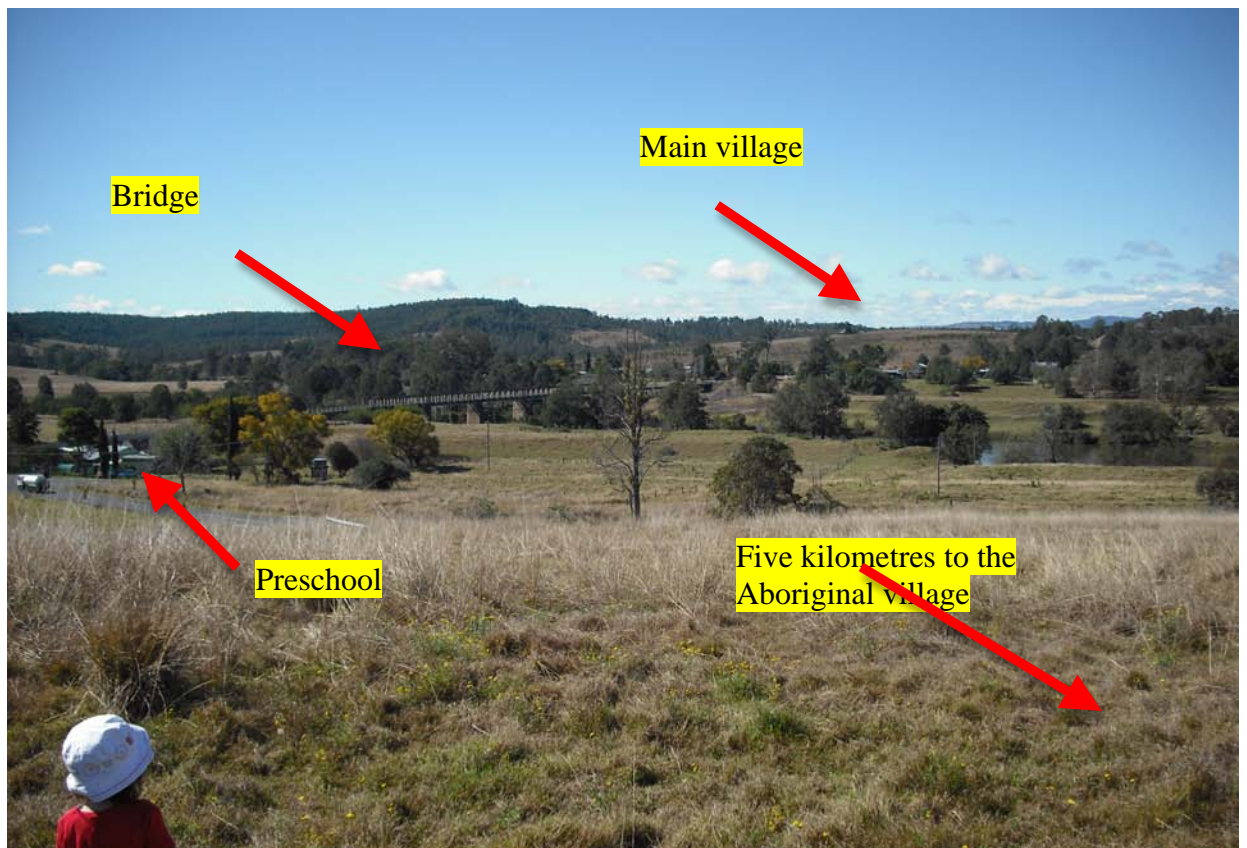
I was director in name, but very much guided by Muriel in all community matters. Five years later in 1993, Muriel's sister Angie joined the team. Over the next ten years Angie, then I, started to undertake training and gained our Diplomas, then Bachelors in Teaching early childhood education. This was a time we supported each other in our professional training. We had many discussions about child development and the development of the children attending the centre. It was a time when both a professional and personal friendship grew. As for leadership, it was a time when we both had turns at holding the title of Director of the centre, but the reality was that we worked as a team and generally shared the job. Finally we mutually decided to make it official and became joint directors. This has been our position at the preschool since 2005.

Our space in the community

An explanation of our location, our space in the community, will give context to the story of our preschool (see figures 1.1 & 1.2). The preschool is not situated in the town, or in the Aboriginal village, but it does have its own place between the two, on the banks of the river. It may well be considered that, like many small country towns where preschool education is thought of as women's business, it has been marginalized (Power, 2002). That is, marginalized in both the geographic sense, where we are situated, and also in the social sense. The social sense being that in mainstream education, the learning that happens through play in preschools is still not widely recognised as an important part of a child's education.

However the positioning and marginalization of our centre may have been a blessing in disguise as it has given us a sense of freedom to create our own place. Our preschool caters to the diverse subculture of children from the local Aboriginal community's families, farming families, alternative life style families, and also those families that live in two local villages. The preschool does not belong to any one group, but it does belong to everyone (K. Amadio, Brooks, Collins, & Power, 2007). It is a place that provides a space of coming together.

Figure 1.2: Our space in the community



Chapter 2

Journey to the preschool

The drive to our centre takes me along a dirt road winding down from the hills to meet the bitumen. The road then follows the river much of the way in to where the preschool is situated. As I drive through this magnificent country I ponder philosophy that relate to me at this time in my life. Like all experiences my relationship with my Aboriginal teaching partner has so much history and philosophy behind it, and this needs to be acknowledged.

Walking the unknown

Four Arrows (2008, p. 1) begins his book with a quote from Bryce Courtenay's (1992) novel, *Tandia*. I have also read and enjoyed Courtenay's writing so I cite him to begin this chapter:

So, please dear boy, not so many notations in your essay on the thoughts of men long dead. Profundity is seldom achieved by misquoting the opinions of those who cannot return to defend themselves. It is an unfortunate habit cultivated by the more modest minds at Oxford who can only impress their peers by building on a bulwark of old ideas. It disguises, of course, the absence of any new ones of their own. By all means, use the quotes of the dead to clear the known ground, and then dare to walk the wildest unknown path. In this way we can look forward to some intellectual progress.

Can I follow the advice offered in this quote and dare to walk the wildest unknown in my writing? I hope so. The existentialists, and Indigenous philosophers have shown me an interesting viewpoint that has captured my attention on this path I walk.

Creating an ethical methodology

I have not strayed too far from the norm with my presentation, and I feel that with this thesis alone I am not meeting a personal standard of spiritual integrity to my Aboriginal colleagues. As a researcher working with Aboriginal people I have completed a National Ethics Application Form (NEAF), which asks 'what are the expected benefits (if any) will this research have for participants?' (Australian Government, 2004). My answer to this point was that I would be formally acknowledging our genuine partnership, the partnership with my Aboriginal colleagues, and our role as leaders in our community. I do acknowledge this is an important contribution to the academic world.

The research and writing of this thesis has become an integral part of my life and my personal spiritual journey, however, in my writing I am in a continuous dilemma because I know that the decidedly academic writing becomes a form of colonialism that will exclude many from my community from reading it. Like Four Arrows (2008, p. 5) I acknowledge the alternative Indigenous ways of knowing, research, and representations, as they have originated from:

Indigenous principles about the sacredness of space and place; the purpose of research to benefit the community; and the spiritual awareness that everything is connected; and that knowledge must incorporate the mysterious.

My research focuses on both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants. Like Four Arrows I also feel that everything is connected and my journey in writing this thesis has touched all aspects of my life. Yet, without providing a culturally accessible manuscript to my community I feel I lessen the value of this academic thesis. I know I will have to address this through an alternative approach. This dilemma is a key underlying quandary to this chapter's discussion of philosophy and methodology.

The thoughts of philosophers I will explore below have contributed to, and assist with the explanation of the journey of writing. They also have influenced the direction taken in choosing a methodology, so I introduce those philosophers.

Why do this human research? A philosophy

there is no external position of certainty, no universal understanding that is beyond history and society. (Foucault cited in Rabinow, 1984, p. 4)

Introducing philosophy

Some scholars may argue that existentialism is a historic relic, yet as it is associated with thoughts and themes of personal growth it is still a significant field of philosophy (M. A. Fox, 2009). Further, as M. A. Fox (2009) points out the more current philosophers, who come under the contemporary movements of thought such as post-structuralism and postmodernism, initially made use of many of the influential existentialist thinkers. An explanation of existentialism given by M. A. Fox (2009, p. 20) states it is, in a way, 'an ongoing argument for respecting personal dignity in oneself and others'.

With this argument in mind, I have also gone back to some of the existentialists to gain thoughts and themes that may contribute to my personal growth, as well as to support the dignity and respect for all who are part of this story. The philosophy of the French existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir provide thoughts on ethics. Arne Naess (1989) writing on ecophilosophy offers a view that bears a resemblance to that of Indigenous Elders. An Eastern point of view is included with a summary of Hoff's (1982) explanation of the Taoism philosophy through the Western world's beloved bear Winnie-the-Pooh. The beliefs and values of some Indigenous Elders add to these philosophies from the East and West.

Jean-Paul Sartre 1905-1980

Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself

Man will only attain existence when he is what he purposes to be (Sartre, 1973, p. 28)

Jean-Paul Sartre (1973) classified himself as an existential atheist, which meant he believed that existence comes before essence, or that we must begin from the subjective. Sartre goes on to explain that an atheistic existentialist believes that if God does not exist, then there is at least one being whose existence comes before essence, 'a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality' (Sartre, 1973, p. 27). This means that humans first of all exist, then encounter themselves, and finally rise up in the world and define themselves. Thus humans begin as nothing, they will not be anything until later, and then they will be what they make of themselves. There is no God, no human nature, man simply is, but he is what he wills and as he conceives himself after already existing (Sartre, 1973, p. 28).

Humans will not just exist like plant or animal life, Sartre (1973) explains, they will only attain existence when they are what they purpose to be, and they will be responsible for what they are. He goes on to explain that being responsible for what humans are is a responsibility for all humans. Sartre (1973, p. 28) states, 'In fashioning myself I fashion man'. Sartre then goes on to say that the existential atheists have been accused of saying that because God does not exist; this then leaves them open to a moral freedom where everything would be permitted. Based on the accusations against the existential atheist that if God (the Western Christian god) did

not exist, then everything may be permitted, yet would this mean anarchy or just different cultural structures?

If we look at the moral culture of the Australian Aboriginal, we can definitely say that everything is not permitted. This very old civilization, that may go back 40,000 years (B. Edwards, 2003), has very strict morals and codes of conduct. These people believe the Dreaming ancestors provided, and still provide, a strict model for life. The Dreaming ancestors had established a blueprint for the daily routines of economics, social, political, cultural, laws and ritual activities (B. Edwards, 2003). I would then argue, that the Australian Aboriginal when first encountering them-selves used their ideology of The Dreaming to fashion them-selves.

As an atheist I have found that Sartre's philosophy provides an argument that allows me to acknowledge the authenticity of the Aboriginal ideology of The Dreaming. His argument also allows me to acknowledge that those humans who do not believe in a god may still be spiritual, and have morals and codes of conduct. This is something I have always felt. Sartre and de Beauvoir have presented philosophies that support my feelings.

Simone de Beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir described the human condition as 'ambiguity', as we may be a physical part of nature, yet we have the power of the mind that may enable us to go beyond the material world (M. A. Fox, 2009). She felt that in consciousness we may venture anywhere, think of alternative courses of action, imagine and dream of the future. So while we may be capable of 'transcendence', everyone 'escapes from his natural condition without, however, freeing himself from it' (M. A. Fox, 2009, p. 234). This then becomes the ambiguity of being human. We may rise above being mere objects and life-forms through our action of consciousness, yet we do not cease being vulnerable members of the natural order. Yet while de Beauvoir uses the term ambiguity for the human condition, when we read the words of the Elders below, their view is not of an uncertainty, but of certainty. Martin (2008b) calls it relatedness, which she says is part of the epistemology of Indigenous Elders, which will be discussed further in the next section.

Even though de Beauvoir may have felt that life could be a ‘tragic ambiguity’, she was still optimistic in that she felt it was up to our-selves to make life meaningful and worthwhile (M. A. Fox, 2009). De Beauvoir goes on to discuss a Godless universe that does not become undisciplined but may instead develop into universal ethical principles, which she elaborates as follows:

Freedom is the source from which all significations and all values spring. It is the original conditions of all justifications of existence. The man who seeks to justify his life must want freedom itself absolutely and above everything else. At the same time that it requires the realization of concrete ends, of particular projects, it requires itself universally ... To will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision ... Just as my own freedom is always in the process of being renewed by me, so it is with others. And in order to nurture freedom, there must be an environment favourable to this project ... freedom can only be understood properly as a joint project. (2000, cited in M. A. Fox, 2009, pp. 239-240)

From de Beauvoir’s philosophy I feel that I gain an explanation of freedom and morals, that is, to gain my own freedom I must want freedom for my fellow humans. It is a constant process that I must work at. I must be aware of myself, which must include an awareness of the status that my whiteness may bestow. I must ensure that I contribute to an environment that promotes an ethical freedom to the children, families and community of our preschool.

Arne Naess

Naess (1989) applies the philosophical questions that involve nature and ourselves, which he calls ecosophy. He advises that deep ecosophy is emerging as a new way in understanding the balance and harmony between individuals, communities and all of nature. Naess (1989, p. 18) states that:

It can potentially satisfy our deepest yearnings: faith and trust in our most basic intuitions, courage to take direct action, joyous confidence to dance with the sensual harmonies discovered through sporting playful intercourse with the rhythms of our own bodies, the rhythms of flowing water, and the overall processes of life on Earth.

I feel Naess builds on de Beauvoir’s idea of an ethical freedom. Perhaps Indigenous writers such as Lawlor (1991), Martin (2008b) and Nelson (2008) would say he discusses relatedness and that it is not a new way of understanding the balance and harmony of Self and nature, as Indigenous peoples have always had this understanding.

For example, Adamson (2008, p. 34) quotes the famous Chief Seattle (n.d.) who states:

What happens to the earth, happens to the children of the earth. Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

It would seem that Naess's (1989) ecosophy provides an explanation which could be very much based on feelings of Indigenous peoples and as Adamson (2008) points out, modern science is just beginning to catch up with ancient wisdom.

Naess (1989) discusses self-realisation and informs us that it can never be reached, as it would require the realisation of all. Yet he says there is a way to move toward the Self, a direction we can say yes to ethically. He reminds us that 'we cannot exist separate from them', that is, others and nature. 'If we try, our Self-realising is blocked. Thus we cannot destroy them if we are to exist fully... In love one loses part of one's identity by gaining a greater identity' (Naess, 1989, p. 9). In summing up Naess so that Taoism and the epistemologies of Elders may be introduced I leave you with his simple but profound statement: 'if one really expands oneself to include other people and species and nature itself altruism becomes unnecessary' (Naess, 1989, p. 9).

Taoism – from the Wisdom of Pooh

Hoff (1982) explains the ancient principles of Taoism through A.A. Milne's (1926, p. 1) characters from the 'Hundred Aker Wood'. We have Eeyore who frets, Tigger who bounces, Owl who pontificates, Rabbit who is very busy, Piglet who demonstrates the virtue of the small and Pooh who just is (Hoff 1982). In life we may take on the characteristics of these characters, yet it is Pooh who we need to model ourselves on. Pooh who does not think he has a very big brain, though it is he that usually saves the day through observation and caring. This is because Pooh uses the principles of Taoism.

Hoff (1982, p. 194) explains that Taoism is a way of living through caring and compassion, and being in harmony with the Way of the Universe. Taoist key principles are 'Natural Simplicity, Effortless Action, Spontaneity, and Compassion' (Hoff, 1982, p. 195). He states the need for cooperation through the awareness that

comes from reducing interference from the ego, so that the Universal Way can flow through us unimpeded. “Taoism is happy, gentle, childlike, and serene – like its favourite symbol, that of flowing water’ (Hoff, 1982, p. 195). There is so much more to Taoism and some people make it a life time study, I have only touched on a very small element. Part of the attraction of the Taoist philosophy is the thought of living in harmony with the universe, and how we may be assisted in this through returning to the simple joys of childhood wonder.

If we are smart, Hoff (1982, p. 167) states, ‘we will choose the way of Pooh. As if from far away, it calls to us with the voice of a child’s mind’. Hoff (1982, p. 164) states that we can go to the enchanted place of Pooh’s at the top of the forest at any time.

It’s not far away; It’s not hard to find. Just take the path to Nothing, and go Nowhere until you reach it. Because the Enchanted Place is right where you are, and if you’re Friendly With Bears, you can find it.

The principles of Taoism, like Naess’s (1989) ecosophy, are linked to this research, as they are ways that remind me of the joy that may be found in childhood, of the need to live in harmony with yourself, others and the environment, and that we are able to create our own enchanted place. This is an ideal point to now make an introduction to the epistemologies of Indigenous Elders.

Epistemologies and Indigenous Elders

I am because we are, we are, therefore I am.

African proverb (Tisdell 2003, p. 86)

I have used Sartre, de Beauvoir, Naess and Taoism as a starting point for a philosophy as they provide strong argument to support epistemologies of Indigenous peoples; that is, their ways of knowing. Ladson-Billing (2000) points out that epistemology is more than a way of knowing; it is a system of knowing. She then states that we should not trivialize these differences in knowing, as we may be subjecting Indigenous peoples’ knowledge into the folklore category, rather than giving it academic credibility.

Australia’s history has left us with a legacy that includes white Australian ideals of colonialism and postcolonialism, Aboriginalism, race and racism. Within these ideals are the issues of power and language, which are examined extensively through out

this thesis. In keeping with my ideals of equitable balance in the power of language I include the philosophy of some Aboriginal people of Australia. Their ancient philosophy is embedded in the country; it is part of its makeup. Thus the stories of the Elders have a major part to play in the theory and philosophy of this story.

Aboriginal epistemology is not a process of simply citing prominent Elders, and though I have done this, I acknowledge the many forms in which their knowledge, and their way of knowing have been passed on. Bill Neidjie (2002, p. 32) of the Buntij Clan, Kakadu National Park, states:

Our story is in the land.
It is written in those sacred places.
My children will look after those places,
That's the law.

Adamson (2008, p. 34-35) reminds us that tribal people 'worship the sacredness of creation as a way of life, not as a philosophy or religion'. Thus it must be noted that Aboriginal knowledge has been kept alive through story telling, art works, songs, dance and sacred sites and ceremonies, all of equal importance (A. Fox, 2002).

When Martin (2008b) addresses ways of knowing, and world-views, she acknowledges the words and beliefs of her Elders, family and countrymen. This resulted in both an academic text and a painting that together addresses this issue. Martin (2008b, p. 75) points out that Aboriginal world views are embedded in relatedness, that is to the 'Creators and Ancestors, the Spirits and other Entities'. She then goes on to state that relatedness will reveal 'itself in its most simple and natural, but powerful form'. A comprehensive example of relatedness is given when Elder Max Dulumunmum Harrison from the Yuin Nation, reminds all the leaders of the world that we all breathe the same air, and we all drink the same water, so we all need to heal ourselves spiritually so that the planet may heal itself. His message of spiritual healing is as simple as bushwalking, watching the waters, listening to the wind, hearing the birds sing, watching the antics of the animals, and watching the birth of a flower. 'If we heal ourselves, then we won't have to destroy the planet, because we will be part of it' (M. D. Harrison, 2003, p. 8). Other Elders have similar stories that show their connection to the land, as the following narrative explains.

Elders Laklak Marika and Bunthami (1) Yunupingu (2003, p. 41) give their version of relatedness:

While we are gathering dhan'pala (mud Mussels) we are teaching the young ones the right food to collect, what season to collect, educating about the wild fruits, looking at seasons for foods by looking at plants. 'See that plant, that tells us we got good honey season coming up'. Nature telling stories, and we're connected to these natural stories. We don't write it down and give to the kids; we teach through talking, telling and showing. That's Yolngu way.

Marika and Yunupingu (2003) highlight their connection to their land and also how that connection is passed on to the next generation. The Indigenous Elders I have cited make clear their relatedness to their country. Their words indicate so much more than an explanation, relatedness is their complete way of life.

In summing up a philosophy or epistemology, in chapter one I have shared anecdotes that contributed to who I am. As a result of searching for a greater awareness of knowing, I argued the importance of including the words of Elders, as they are as relevant to my personal philosophy and the philosophy of this research, as those of Sartre, de Beauvoir's, Naess, and Taoism. They all give meaning to knowing. As a researcher I acknowledge that I am 'I', yet I am still part of 'us' in this life project. This ambiguity is a feature of de Beauviour's writing (M.A. Fox, 2009). To continue on the theme of 'us' and a life project, the philosophy of phenomenology also needs to be added to the discussion before the methodology used may be addressed.

The influence of phenomenology

I started chapter one with the words 'as I wake up I lay still listening to the birds as they sing their greetings to the new day'. But are the birds singing to greet the day, or are they calling out to their kind, communicating needs, information, gossip, or simply joy? Before going to sleep I had read a chapter from van Manen's (2002) 'Writing in the Dark'. His chapter on 'writing' has made me think more deeply about writing of birds greeting the new day. Those words that I had written before reading van Manen now seem so flowery and superficial. I could have simply deleted them from the beginning of chapter one, and made them disappear, but I have left them in because I feel they become an important introduction for not only helping me to understanding the challenges and influences of narrative writing, but also for you, the reader, to appreciate that challenge.

So, going back to the start of chapter one, perhaps on reflection I could have written the first line a little differently. My revised version goes: - as I lay still in the warmth and comfort of my bed there is the faintest of glows that starts to fade the darkness of the room. I listen to the different birds making their unique sounds, and feel contentment, a perfect peacefulness for a few moment before the rush of the day's thoughts intrude.

With my revision done I now need to continue the flow of words. I like to walk in the early morning, as this is a good time to think about my writing. I walk out the gate of our house yard into the paddock. There are a group of wallabies grazing under the massive old gum tree. A young joey has ventured out of its mother's pouch but is not going too far from her. They hear me walking in their direction and stop and look up. The joey scrambles back into its mother's pouch. The adult wallabies have grown accustomed to my presence. They watch me as I walk past. They will keep a bit of distance between us but will not hop away.

As I walk I watch the wallabies and smile at the antics of the joey. My head is full of wonderful thoughts, scenes, memories, emotions, all that will contribute to a brilliant narrative with so much depth and meaning. Feelings that will explain our story, convey our essence of place, space, time, of early childhood education for our Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. The air is still pleasantly cool on my face; my walk takes me past majestic gums, new saplings, and open pasture. The gravel crunches under my feet with each step. I hear the birds, the beautiful song of the magpie, a cheeky willy-wag-tail chatters as it hops along the grass a little way ahead of me. I am high on life, all my senses are providing so much information, and I feel confident in my thoughts of writing a meaningful story.

I return from my walk, pour myself a glass of rainwater and sit at my desk to write. I have all those wonderful thoughts, feelings and memories that filled my head as I walked. I can tell my story. I turn on the computer and look at what I have written to date. I start to type describing some of those thoughts that had filled my head, a few words appear on the screen, but the flow quickly slows to a trickle then stops. The words I write are not conveying what I want to say. They don't seem right, they seem to destroy the essence of my story rather than convey it. The words stop, and I look

out my window. I can see the noisy-miners hopping about and feeding in the pale yellow and maroon flowers of the grevillea bushes. They seem to be having a fine time, chattering and feeding. I watch them and wonder why I cannot put into words all the great bits and pieces of emotions and thoughts that had been going through my head as I had been walking. I turn to van Manen (2002, pp. 239-240) for an explanation:

In daily life, when I speak or write the names of my children, I call their presence into being as it were. And this is true also of language in general. When I call someone a “friend” then I call into being a certain relational quality of friendship that pertains between this person and myself. However, when I phenomenologically write this word ‘friend’ then a strange thing happens. The word “friend” now gazes back at me, reminding me that it is only a word. As soon as I wrote or pronounced this word the meaning that I aimed to bring into presence has already dropped away, absented itself. And I am reminded of Hegel who once wrote that in naming the things of his world, Adam actually annihilated them. In the act of naming we cannot help but kill the things that we name. And so, while trying to become sensitive to the subtleties and complexities of our lived life, writers of phenomenological texts, may turn themselves unwittingly into butchers – killers of life. A sobering realization.

This reasoning from van Manen (2002) describes the challenges the phenomenological writer faces.

Like van Manen, George Benson also finds word can become inadequate as he sings ‘We tried to talk it over but the words got in the way’ (Russell, 1976). While George Benson was singing a love song, his words ring true for many types of relationships. Words do get in the way. Relationships may work on a look of understanding; a feathered touch to the arm, silence, or a laugh, all this with depth of meaning, yet not a word has been exchanged. Others have also found difficulty in writing a traditional thesis, perhaps because words do not always explain, so they have turned to alternative forms that include performed pieces, creative arts that include traditional Indigenous art forms, poetry, other multi-media forms, and even fictional narratives (Four Arrows, 2008). Robin Cox (2008, p. 108) wrote herself a poem at the outset of her dissertation to help ensure the trust and relevance of her intuitive knowing:

I am
We are,
Hermeneutically circling,
Questioning the existence of a stopping place

Intuitively understanding that below the binary,
Underneath the grasping certainty,
Lies mystery, not mastery.

Looking back,
At the first stab
In this defrocking of discourse
My questions were assimilated and contained
My performance,
Standing perfectly still.

Circling.
Once again,
On the pilgrimage of curiosity,
This story, unfolding, explicating, inscribed,
Still struggles within the nature of its telling,
Strives to transgress
Its flat, fixed life in text.

Enigmatic
Double agent,
Reason is once again in motion, in clumsy dance of radical faith, bewilderment
As I swear allegiance to the servant of my intuition.
I offer this poetry,
Laughing as I go around.

I have chosen to cite Cox's poem as I feel she portrays so much that I feel as I write; the circling, the self-questioning, the uncertainty and the mystery of writing. Then the continued circling, the pilgrimage, the struggle and the writing that becomes flat and fixed when really we continue to grow and understand. I feel I can relate to the enigma of being a double agent, that of an academic who often feels fraudulent, and my everyday self the early childhood educator that is real. So much circling, I too must laugh to keep sane.

Phenomenology as discussed by van Manen and Four Arrows is a philosophy that has influenced the writing of this research. My challenge is to be able to write the words needed, and to do so without "butchering" my story. I need to find the right way to tell my yarn. To write a story that is so much more than words, and not destroy it, this will test me as an auto-ethnographic narrator and phenomenological writer. A critical example is that of my first sentence in chapter one about the birds greeting the new day. I did not know what the birds were doing. I made an assumption. From this

example I will be reminded of the need to be constantly vigilant with my writing about the teaching and leadership relationship of this research.

Jamie Moran (Swason, Moran, Honan, 2008), a Native American, describes phenomenology as illuminating something, or throwing light on a vast array of subjects, or as M.A. Fox (2009) suggests, so we know it better. Monan (Swason, Moran, Honan, 2008), also says it is more an attitude or perspective than a method. It is fluid and subtle, not rule-bound. It is about consciousness, meaning, experience and action. It is relational, a conversation on many levels at once, spoken and unspoken, explicit and implicit. It is a balance between internal and external, as there are always two ways, back and forth, give and take. Research may not embrace 'logical conclusions', but be a struggle with complexity. Finally he advises that with phenomenological research the subject is 'not so neat, precise, and accurate, or in control' (Swason, Moran, Honan, 2008, pp. 90-91). The argument that phenomenology is not neat, precise, or accurate is supported by van Manen (2002, p. 238) when he states:

The phenomenologist does not present the reader with a conclusive argument or with a determinate set of ideas, essences, or insights. Instead he or she aims to be allusive by orienting the reader reflectively to the region of lived experience where the phenomenon dwells in recognizable form. More strongly put, the reader must become possessed by the allusive power of text - taken, touched, overcome by the addressive effect of its reflective engagement with lived experience.

Thus, as van Manen (2002, p. 237) points out, the phenomenological enquiry is never complete; it is open in the sense of its interpretive availability. Further, he advises that the text should never be read merely for its surface message. Wonder is also part of this form of enquiry.

To explain wonder van Manen (2002, p. 5) tell us that it is:

that moment of being when one is overcome by awe or perplexity - such as when something familiar has turned profoundly unfamiliar, when our gaze has been drawn by the gaze of something that stares back at us.

van Manen (2002) goes on to explain that phenomenology is not only the starting point in wonder of the familiar, but it must also induce wonder. As I think of three women from two cultures providing a place and space for early childhood education it is so familiar yet I wonder at it. Why does it work? Will others wonder at it, will my

words illuminate our story, and will the reader gain more than just the surface message of the story told? From wonder we may find wisdom, but as Mathew King, a Lakota medicine man, said in an existential-phenomenological voice: 'wisdom is not what we think, and wisdom is what we do' (Swason, Moran, Honan, 2008, p. 93). Therefore I ask you, the reader, to find the wonder of our (Angie, Muriel and my-self) phenomenon, to find the essence within the stories and yarns I will share with you, to enjoy it and to discover the depth and wisdom in what we have been doing.

The philosophy of phenomenology has had an extensive influence as this research draws on the lived experience, the inner experience (Denzin, 1989). The place I am working from is explained by van Manen's (1997, p. 8) statement that 'a real understanding of phenomenology can only be accomplished by actively doing it'. It draws on the intersubjective knowing; that is, shared personal experiences gained from having participated. From this participation an understanding and interpretation of a particular phenomenon may be formed. This is opposed to the objective knowing where one stands on the outside of the experience and assumes an understanding of it (Denzin, 1989).

As this study involved three women from two different cultures it is important that it be based on intersubjective knowing. In her book *Talkin'up to the White Woman; Indigenous women and Feminism*, Moreton-Robinson (2000) argues that white feminists have generally operated from an objective view point and not understood Aboriginal women's needs and feelings. However I would also argue that open and caring long-term relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women can lead to the point where an understanding of each other's needs and feelings may be attained. That is, as much as any two people making a conscious effort in any friendship may gain an understanding of each other.

My research supports the argument of a genuine intersubjective knowing, between us as Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal women. My narrative is of women who have worked together, shared feelings and understood the needs of the children from their community. It is of women who have shared a profession, ideals, tears, travel, meals, laughter and a friendship. It is of two Aboriginal women who trusted me with

many of their stories. The story of this relationship is the argument that an authentic intersubjective knowing may exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women.

There is much that needs to be examined in this relationship between the Aboriginal women from this narrative and myself that is extremely significant, and as such must be addressed.

Spiritual essence

Spirituality is indissolubly linked with culture, language and identity and it is an emotional topic. Spirituality is never neutral. It is revealed in beliefs, values and the ultimate meaning that is given to life. (Bone, 2007, p. 1)

Angie, Muriel and I acknowledge our families' gifts of unconditional love that have contributed to our spirituality. This may have contributed to me being open to the modelled teaching style that has been made available to me by members of the Bundjalung people. Also their experience of family love may have made them open to accepting me and to be a part of the education of their children. There is the quiet dignity and sharing of knowledge that was modelled by Muriel my first colleague and mentor, and then Angie my current teaching partner. Also there is the knowledge gained from Elders that I have associated with. Perhaps these people have also noted those who may be worthy of being given some knowledge in working with their people.

When van Manen (1997, p. 5) discusses phenomenological research, he advises that we want to know the world profoundly; we 'want to know the world in which we live as human beings'. He goes on to say that as 'we become fully part of it', or 'to become the world', this is what phenomenologists call undividable connection to the world and the principle of "intentionality". This is when research is about caring, and love becomes part of the essence of being. van Manen (1997, pp. 5-6) states that 'if our love is strong enough, we not only learn much about life, we also will come face to face with its mystery'. Love is very much part of the spiritual essence of all the people in this story. It has been through love that Angie and I have learned much about our children (the children we teach) and their development.

Based on her research Tisdell (2003) lists seven assumptions about the nature of spirituality in relation to education. She states that spirituality is not the same as religion, though for some people it may be interrelated. In the context of this research when spiritual essence is discussed it is not related to religion, it is about being aware and honouring the wholeness, the interconnectedness (Tisdell, 2003) and the relatedness of all things (Martin, 2008b). I feel it is part of the Taoist philosophy as explained by Hoff (1982, p. 132):

In order to take control of our lives and accomplish something of lasting value, sooner or later we need to learn to Believe. We don't need to shift our responsibilities onto the shoulders of some deified Spiritual Superman, or sit around and wait for Fate to come knocking at the door. We simply need to believe in the power that's within us, and use it. When we do that, and stop imitating others and competing against them, things begin to work for us.

I believe in our leadership relationship. I believe in the power that is within us as a team and that we use it. We work together in taking control of our preschool so that we may create and provide a relational space for the children and ourselves. But, I am jumping ahead of myself; to understand our relational space you still have much to read. For now Tisdell's (2003) assumptions about the nature of spirituality is being discussed.

Tisdell (2003, p. 28) also states that 'spirituality is fundamentally about meaning-making', and 'is always present (though often unacknowledged) in the learning environment'. Spirituality, she continues, is about how we construct knowledge, and this may be an unconscious and symbolic process that is, 'often made more concrete in art forms such as music, art image, symbol, and ritual which are manifested culturally' (Tisdell, 2003, p. 28). She declares that spiritual development represents authentic development and most often happens by surprise. I feel Tisdell gives a well-formed surmise that adds to the understanding of an ineffable idea.

To complete this discourse on spiritual essence this quote explains essence:

The term "essence" derives from the Greek *ousia*, which means the inner essential nature of a thing, the true being of a thing. The Latin *essential*, from *esse* means "to be." Essence is that what makes a thing what it is (and without which it would not be what it is); that what makes a thing what it is rather than it being or becoming something else (van Manen, 1997, p. 177).

van Manen (1997, p. 10) states that phenomenological research is the study of essences:

The essence of a phenomenon is a universal which can be described through a study of the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestations of the essence of that phenomenon. In other words, phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience.

The essence then, is to tell our story in a way that describes to the reader the inner meaning or nature of the how and why of our lived experience as collaborative leaders.

This discussion on spiritual essence has drawn on the work of Martin (2008a), Hoff (1982), Tisdell (2003) and van Manen (1997), all of whom provide an insight into a concept that may have so many different meanings to humanity. In summing up spiritual essence with the help of the above mentioned, the concept includes love; connection to family and country; wholeness and relatedness; is always present in the learning environment; being in harmony with yourself, your fellow humans and the environment. This is part of my story, their story, and is so relevant to our story.

Research question

My research question asked what is the essence or nature of my experience, as a non-Aboriginal teacher who has been part of a collaborative leadership partnership with an Aboriginal teacher? In examining this I was guided by van Manen's (1997, p. 10) statement: 'The essence or nature of an experience has been adequately described in language if the description reawakens or shows us the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper meaning'. Taking these ideas into consideration my question needs to be extended to include: How have we reached a relational space as a collaborative leadership team? Why have we been able to encourage each other's personal growth, as well as support the children and community of our preschool? Are there lessons for other early childhood educators from this narrative? Will those lessons give a full and deeper meaning to our joint leadership role?

To answer these questions a major challenge for me has been the choice of a methodology that permitted me to write in an accepted academic manner, as well as honouring the spiritual essence of my story. van Manen (1997) explains that a

research method must take into consideration the question and how the question is perceived; this then becomes the starting point, not the method as such. He goes on to suggest that with human science, the choice of method should reflect more than mere whim or fashion, but rather the method should maintain a certain harmony with the depth of interest that makes one an educator in the first place (van Manen, 1997).

Using the concept of Richardson's (2000) mixed genres, and including both phenomenological and auto-ethnographic approaches based on the lived experience, an intersubjective knowledge of this relationship is ultimately gained, and the questions were addressed.

Mixed methodologies

While investigating methodologies, I have found value in Richardson's (2000, p. 934) idea of mixed genres. She uses the metaphor of a crystal and explains its qualities as a combination of symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. She also notes that crystals can grow, change, and are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves. Richardson (2000, p. 934) says 'What we see depends upon our angle of repose'.

The diagram in Figure 2.1, of my research methodology, uses Richardson's multidimensionality approach as its framework. The top arrow names the influence of phenomenology and this has already been discussed. The phenomenology arrow points to the next arrow that includes auto-ethnography, narrative and yarning, all methodologies that have been part of the development of this thesis. The methodology arrow points to the represented crystal that shows the different characters that participate in the story. The remaining three arrows; feminist poststructural, Indigenist research/relatedness, and post modern emergence, point into my crystal. Each of these names an approach that has also influenced how I have looked at this research and will be explained further.

Richardson (2000) uses the metaphor of a crystal to look through as we examine our research. I have put my research within the crystal so that not only do I look at it from different angles; I also consider the different angles within. My crystal as seen in

Figure 2.1: My story, their story, our story

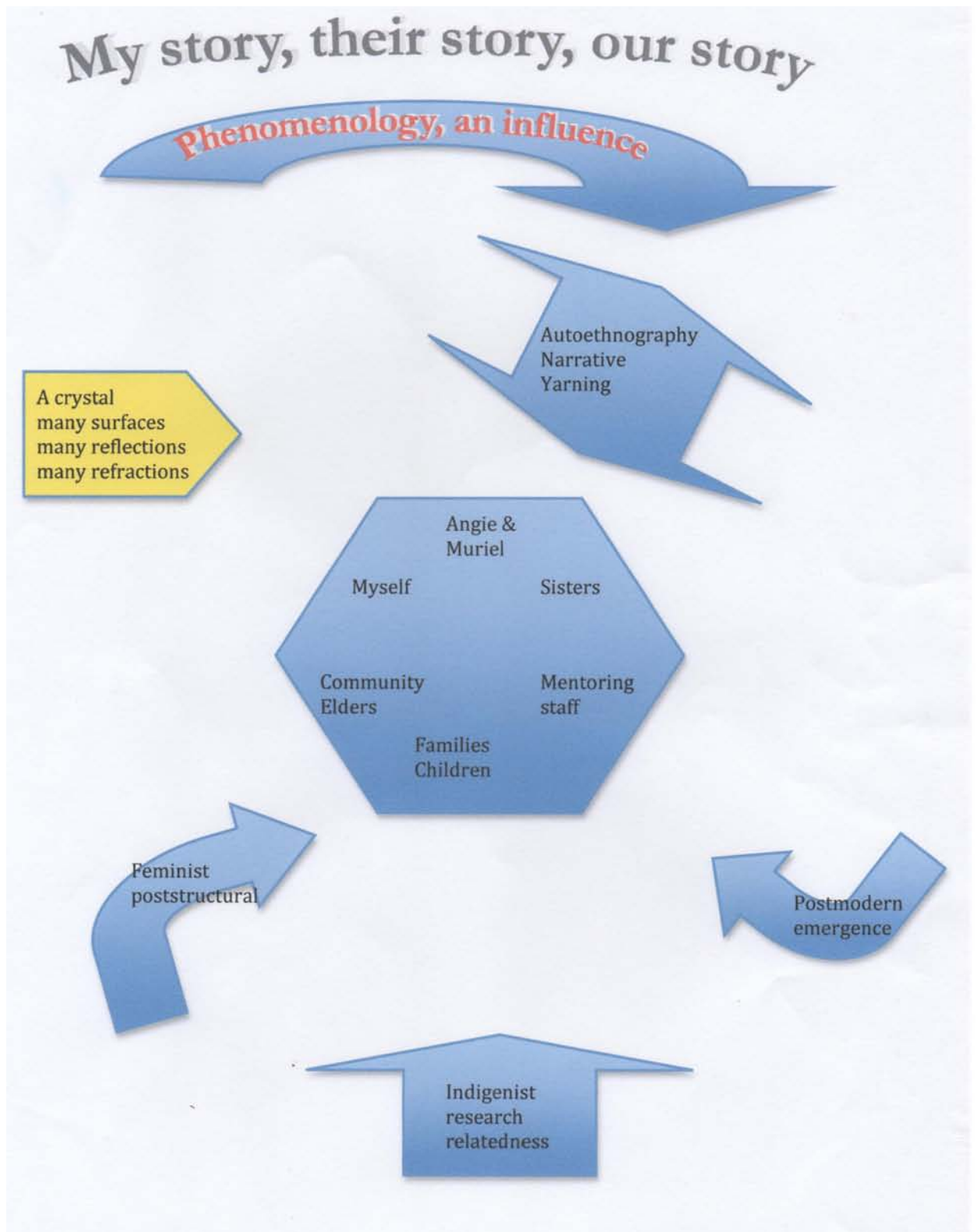


Figure 2.1, includes different members of the community so that I may capture the multidimensionalities of the whole: the whole being the combination of my story, their story, which make our story. Also extending the metaphor of a crystal is crystal

healing. One meaning of ‘crystal healing’ is the ‘use of pieces of crystal that are supposed to promote health and increase well-being’ (Rooney, 2001, p. 346). This metaphor of a multidimensional crystal that may be part of promoting well-being is one that sits well with me. I hope that living and writing this story will contribute to the well-being of my community.

Auto-Ethnography/narrative and the white feminist

Before addressing auto-ethnography and Indigenous research methodologies it is important to note that Indigenous Australians are among the most observed groups of people on the planet (Huggins, 1998; Martin, 2008b; McConaghy, 2000). As McConaghy (2000, p. 26) explains there is now a ‘huge archive of textual representations of ‘Aboriginality’’. This information has generally been recorded as objective studies, that is, it ‘exists outside of both the specific historical moments of production and the particular relationship between the observer and observed’ (McConaghy, 2000, p. 26). These Aboriginalist texts have contributed to forms of Aboriginalism, that is an objectification of Indigenous people that had been made possible only as a result of colonial privilege (McConaghy, 2000).

To avoid contributing to Aboriginalism, and ongoing colonial objectification, McConaghy (2000, p. 116) suggests that to be a successful researcher/writer it is better to frame the topic around ‘real’ and important themes’, where the writer has ‘been there’, someone who is knowledgeable, who has ‘borne witness’. My story, and our story, has come from being located within it, a subjective account, and an auto-ethnographic representation.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) explain that auto-ethnographic research is constantly evolving and so a precise definition is rather elusive, though as a generic term it includes methods such as narrative and self-story. Similarly, Tedlock (2000, p. 455) tells us that ethnography is a blurred genre of inquiry that may ‘produce historically, politically, and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of human lives’. Denzin (1989) lists auto-ethnography in the family of terms that combine to shape biographical methods. He goes on to explain that this is when a first person account is written about the study of a ‘culture, group, or person in question (Denzin, 1989, p. 34).

Auto-ethnography may be an evolving method, yet it relates to research about people going about their everyday activities (Mukherji & Albon, 2009). Written styles of auto-ethnography, Hayona (1979) points out, are those that are a descriptive holistic picture rather than being problem orientated. He goes on to explain that auto-ethnography is not a specific research technique, method or theory, though it does influence those areas as they are employed in the fieldwork. Tedlock (2000, p. 455) explains the nature of field work:

The ongoing nature of fieldwork connects important personal experiences with an area of knowledge; as a result, it is located between the interiority of autobiography and the exteriority of cultural analysis.

My fieldwork is my life work, so I am located as an auto-ethnographer, as well as being an cultural analyst. This thesis is my first hand account of a research study with my Bundjalung colleagues, the culture of the space we have created at our preschool, and of myself.

Blume and De Reus (2009) explain auto-ethnography as a method of feminist inquiry and this may help me to deal with the predicament of being situated within the research, yet also being from a different cultural background. Three feminist goals that Blume & De Reus (2009, online) describe as a unique and meaningful way to better understand our racialized selves in auto-ethnographic research, are:

- a) exploring our own White ethnicities as a project of self-discovery,
- b) resisting the dominant discourse of White privilege, and
- c) analysing the dialectical tensions inherent in the social construction of whiteness.

Through my lived experience, which has become the basis of my research, I have gained an understanding of my own whiteness. The process of writing my/our story has highlighted the need to analyse my role as a member of the dominant white privileged society. In the course of examining my whiteness I have been awakened to the white noise that is a social construction created from the discourse of the generally privileged dominant peoples. White noise is a phenomenon that is part of our society and will be discussed further in chapter four, but, in addressing our whiteness, auto-ethnography may provide a unique and meaningful way for non-Aboriginal scholars to better understand, and share that understanding of our racialised selves (Blume & De Reus 2009; Ellis & Bocher 2000; Pompper 2010).

In 2000 Moreton-Robinson wrote of white feminist writers who have not understood their racialised selves. She stated:

White Australian feminists have been, and continue to be, complicit in the exercising of power in their relations with Indigenous women. As beneficiaries of colonisation, white women have been able to challenge and remake themselves as white women through the state and other institutions. The complicity of feminism in the colonial project has not been erased by all white feminists, but the middle-class subject position white woman remains invisible, unmarked and unnamed in the work of such feminists. The exercising of white race privilege is not interrogated as being problematic, nor is it understood as part of the power that whiteness confers; instead it is normalised within feminist texts and practice (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p. 123).

I can state that I was guilty of not understanding my position when starting my working relationship with the Aboriginal women at the preschool. I had to learn of, and recognise my subject position as a white woman, and these were lessons that have taken several years to learn. There are ongoing incidents that ensure these lessons are not forgotten. During my years at the centre my whiteness has never been pointed out or discussed. Rather, through being in different situations I have seen or understood my position as a white middle class female. Perhaps if I had been a different person I may never have learned from those situations. Many of the stories told in this thesis are part of my journey in gaining this knowledge of the different social position between my teaching partner and myself.

I have come from a different social place than my Aboriginal colleagues, as Moreton-Robinson sums up by stating:

White women come to feminism with already formed subjectivities that are linked to different histories, discourses, privileges, power and oppression. They are socially situated subjects who are implicated and enmeshed in power relations where whiteness remains invisible, natural, normal and unmarked (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p. 125).

Non-Aboriginal women often do remain ignorant of the power and privileges of their whiteness. Yet, I would argue that non-Aboriginals can find a place where subjective knowledge may exist. In this study there are five local Aboriginal women who call me sister and I them. This research presents the narrative of a place in early childhood education where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women have come together as socially situated subjects.

In chapter one I endeavoured to reflect on my early years in a way that included addressing my whiteness. The methodologies of auto-ethnography and narratives have been useful tools to examine this issue. Yet, as I research myself and my colleagues we still live in a society that uses common phrases such as ‘white knight’ and ‘black sheep’ that perpetuate the normalisation of racialised categories (Hambel, 2005). So even in superficial communication whiteness has become embedded in the underlying, often invisible fabric of Western society. In order for those of us in the field of education to promote social justice and equality, we must critically examine and challenge whiteness in all of its expressions (Hambel, 2005).

Teachers may take up the challenge of addressing their position of power through the strategy of learning through ethnographic fieldwork (Gonzalez & Moll, 2002). This type of fieldwork, Gonzalez and Moll (2002) explain, will assist with avoiding tired stereotypes about cultural practices. This area of learning is bound up within larger contextual historical, political, and ideological frameworks that require a greater level of professionalisation of teachers. That is, a need for time to gain deeper understanding through identifying and incorporating local funds of knowledge such as from the local Indigenous community (Gonzalez & Moll, 2002). As this learning of local funds of knowledge has been part of my life in my community I can confidently say that I have been a practicing ethnographic fieldworker for many years, even though I am only now writing about the significance of it.

Tedlock (2000) reminds us that ethnographers’ lives are embedded within their life experiences in such a way that all interactions involve moral choices. In selecting a research methodology I have been faced with a moral choice. As noted earlier I have needed to acknowledge my privileged position as a member of the dominant culture, who writes about a journey with Aboriginal people who have lived under a colonial society’s rules. In the end I have borrowed from several methodologies to ensure I retained my integrity and ethic of care for these people. For example when collecting data I used the methodology of yarning, as will be discussed later, as that was acknowledged as the only way acceptable to my co-participants. Yarning may even have its own place as a complete methodology, yet that would not be up to me to develop. Yarning belongs to Aboriginal people, and I acknowledge them as the

creators of this form of data collection. Also it is important to look to other Indigenous methodologies for guidance.

Indigenous research methodology

Karen Martin (2008b) explains her Indigenous research methodology, which is represented through her artwork, and her discussion honours the spirituality of Aboriginal people. While I have gained much from her dissertation, as a non-Aboriginal researcher, I feel there is only so much I can respectfully reference from her text. By this I mean that part of her writing explains her personal 'Indigenist Research Methodology', which is correct for her as a Noonuccal woman of Quandamooah (Martin, 2008b, pp. 19-20). However, I feel it may be disrespectful for me to attempt to use her methodology in total. On the other hand I will be referring to Martin's work extensively as she opens the door academically and legitimises my need to add the words of the Elders of Aboriginal Australia.

Martin (2008b) and Four Arrows (2008) offer answers to the challenge of how to capture in my writing the recognition of ancient knowledge, that being of the Bundjalung ancestors who have contributed to the shaping of both the Bundjalung teachers and myself. Martin's writing on 'relatedness theory' (2008b) provides a basis for my academic writing that honours both the Bundjalung people and the spiritual aspect of this thesis. Also there is the knowledge that I have gained through my life journey of reading and interest in the world's Indigenous people and their philosophies. This ancient knowledge is available if a person so chooses to use it and the aim of my thesis is to tell a current story that may inspire teachers of its value.

Yarning

'We say yarning'. Professionals say it's building community capacity,' stated Lyn, a non-Aboriginal director of a kindergarten that was the site of Imtoul, Kameniar and Bradley's (2009, p. 27) research.

'Yarnin' is a common word used in the local Aboriginal community. 'Yarnin' is an Aboriginal-English term that indicates informal but meaningful conversation' (Imtoul et al., 2009, p. 27). As Angie points out, yarning is an important part of our day; it is when we share stories and information about the community and ourselves.

It is how we communicate and plan our preschool day. It is a part of our comfortable relationship. All the transcribed collaborative data gathered for this research has been collected through yarning sessions. The yarning sessions have no formal starting or finishing point. We start talking and taping begins. Stories are told and when enough has been said for the day I am told it is time for a cup of tea and something to eat. No more will be done that day; it will have to wait for another day for the yarn to continue.

Martin (2008b, p. 95) describes her research inquiry method, as 'fishing for information', which required her complete immersion that was more than physical, intellectual and social, but also historical and spiritual. She suggests that to remain respectful to Aboriginal participants the researcher must remain patient and wait for information that may come as stories, parallel observations, or comments or a change of topic. To ask direct questions may be considered intrusive and disrespectful. Direct questions 'are not part of the epistemological process of Aboriginal knowledge acquisition' states Martin (2008b, p. 95). Silence, she counsels, is a strong signal to back off, otherwise you run the risk of your participant walking out.

During one of my recorded yarning sessions I made the mistake of asking a direct question to the wrong person, at the wrong time, in relation to Aboriginal learning styles. The response I got was an annoyed 'What do you mean?' I gave a quick explanation and glossed over it, as I knew I had asked a direct question that was not appropriate for that person at that time. So even though I feel I have a close relationship with my colleagues, I still had to remain vigilant in respecting our yarning sessions.

Power (2004) discussed how yarning became an effective and non-exploitative research method in her cross-cultural research, as a white researcher in an Aboriginal early childhood centre. She notes that where traditional qualitative research methods such as formal interviews or surveys may fail, yarning as a form of inquiry worked within the dynamics of that centre (Power, 2004). Yarning is a way of keeping everyone on an equal footing, as it is not about an academic interview. It is important to note the power of just yarning, that is, using informal conversation with Aboriginal people (Power, 2004). Angie has given me clear instructions that recording or making

notes from our yarning sessions will be the appropriate and only acceptable research method used to gather data for this research.

As a member of our preschool community, and sisters group I am an insider. I am also very aware that I become an outsider when I become a researcher and academic. Smith (1999) explains the dual position of being both an insider and outsider at the same time. She indicated that as a Maori woman she was therefore a member of her community that she was studying, but as an Indigenist researcher she became an outsider because of her Western academic education, because she worked across clan, tribal, linguistic, age and gender boundaries. As an outsider or researcher, Smith (1999) explained that there was an inextricable link to European imperialism and colonialism.

Smith (1999) explains that the word 'research' does not have a good reputation in the Indigenous world's vocabulary. This was affirmed to me while I was recording one of our yarning sessions. Muriel told me of people in the past who have come into the community to record their culture and participants had been paid off with a bottle of wine. Muriel said: *This white man what's his name *** something, he came into our community and got stories from the old people, all he done was buy them a bottle of wine and smokes for granny ***, she told him everything then he put out a book, I think he died.*

Yarning may put us on an equal footing, yet, in the very act of writing in a scholarly manner, even if it is in the interest and pursuit of knowledge, there is a risk of association with colonial objectification (McConaghy, 2000; Smith, 1999). Any insistence in using Western science frameworks to construct Aboriginal knowledge and apply this to Aboriginal knowledge research is essentially impaired, explains Martin (2008, p. 56), because it is inherently colonial. Yarning is acknowledged as a legitimate Aboriginal research methodology that has been utilised here, to help avoid colonialism when gathering data for this research.

Postmodern emergence

Margaret Somerville's (2008) methodology, which she temporarily labelled postmodern emergence, has also influenced my thinking. She noted that she felt that

in educational research generally, and in the available pedagogical processes for research students in particular, there appeared to be a closing down rather than an opening up of possibility of generating new knowledge; that being the knowledge with which they are so deeply entwined. She also noted that with her own research she had found it necessary to continue to evolve radical alternative methodologies as the only way to respond to the postcolonial questions and research conditions she finds herself. I also find that my research will be subject to dealing with postcolonial questions. Somerville (2008) suggests the theory of postmodern emergence emphasises the irrational, messy and embodied process of becoming-other to one's self in research. That is, that in the process of research we will come to inhabit and know the world differently than we did before. My self-reflections and yarns with my teaching partner have helped me to record and know a very different world.

In summing up the mixed methodology used in this research, I have been influenced and inspired by many writers in the genres of phenomenology, auto-ethnography, narrative, Indigenest research, and yarning. Other influences came from feminist poststructuralism and post modern emergence. The writers I have drawn on have allowed me to take the liberty to express my personal dilemmas and triumphs in writing this story.

Chapter 3

Arriving at the preschool: The first cup of tea and yarning

*Whether you are a white person or a black person,
Caring and sharing is what it is all about-me and you
Together-and that's the beauty part of it.
Della Walker (Coutts 1989, p. ii)*

I arrive at our preschool twenty minutes before our official starting time. I am a morning person, and so is Angie, she is already there and the urn is turned on. Soon it has boiled and we make a cup of tea and take it outside to sit and yarn for a while before we prepare for the day. We share stories from the news. Sometimes I am a very political animal, and can get quite animated, showing disgust at the actions of our politicians. The last major part of our political history has been dominated by the Howard years that have given us much to be dismayed about. Though, on February 12, 2008 we were both proud to be Australians as Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said sorry to Aboriginals who had been taken from their families. Soon one of us will make a joke of it (usually Angie) and we will laugh then perhaps share anecdotes from our personal lives.

The first cup of tea

Over the years that Angie and I have worked together we have developed a routine that sits well with both of us. A friendship has also grown with our developing routine. My preschool life has taught me many lessons, and by learning to turn down the 'white noise' I have been able to take on board local knowledge that has been made available. I know my teaching partner Angie has always had to accommodate and adapt to a Western way of life. For myself, being in situations when as a non-Aboriginal person I am in the minority (or the only one), has given me an opportunity to get a taste of this Wahluwal community's way of life.

These early morning yarns over a cup of tea have been a space that has made room for our relationship to grow. It has become a time where personal stories could be shared. It was a time for finding out each other's life story, and beliefs. Through this time of yarning our friendship grew. For me it was a good time to listen and learn,

but also share my values. As our friendship grew stronger it also became a time I could ask questions about how I had, or should handle particular cultural situations.

Their story

Introducing Angie and Muriel

This chapter is dedicated to portraying Angie's and Muriel's perspectives. They share some insights into their early lives as members of the Wahlubal people, which is an important part of this story. Their story is included to help to avoid what McConaghy (2000) has warned of, as adding to Aboriginalism, that representation where 'Aboriginality' is an object of study that exists outside of context. Therefore, writers must be aware of and have a concern with the legacy and contemporary expression of 'Aboriginalism' as in many ways it is complicit with colonialism. This chapter is part of a story that needs to be told to give context to my Aboriginal colleagues who have played major roles in providing a space for early childhood education of our two cultural groups.

I cannot introduce Angie with out including Muriel as she is also a major person in both our lives. Muriel and Angie are sisters with a very close relationship. I had met Muriel first, when I started working at the preschool. Muriel had already been working there as an assistant for two years. She made sure that all the children from the Aboriginal village came to preschool. She would pick the children up in her car; they would all squeeze into the back seat, which was gradually destroyed as many little feet climbed in and out each day. This was a time before children had to be in seatbelts or car seats. Muriel was not paid to bring the children to preschool, nor to take them home each day. No one from the community ever offered her any financial support; she just did it for the children.

When I started as a second assistant Muriel was my teacher, and she became a friend and mentor who taught me so much about the community. She was a kind and patient person, even as I reflected and felt I had made mistakes, or could have handled things better in my dealings with the children and community. She never actually told me I was wrong, but she let me know in subtle ways, and it was up to me to watch her as

she was a great role model. But that is for a future discussion; firstly we need to hear some of their story.

Muriel and Angie are of the Wahlubal tribe that is part of the Bundjalung nation, and from Jubullam community. These two sisters are extremely close and have been a major influence on my journey in the Tabulam community. They have offered me friendship and each in their own way have taught me much about the children and Jubullam community. As I have spent many years with these women I can confirm that they live very much by the philosophy of their family. This was put into words by their second mother, Ma Walker, who I have quoted at the opening of this chapter: ‘Whether you are a white person or a black person, caring and sharing is what it is all about – me and you together – and that’s the beauty part of it’ (Walker, 1989, quoted in Coutts, 1989, p. ii).

Family

Muriel is the older sister and has lived most of her life at the Jubullam village. Angie, some years younger, spent the early years of her life at the Jubullam village (which in those days was known as the Tabulam mission or Tabulam Reserve) and in the neighbouring town of Bonalbo. As I tell their story I will use italics for the actual words that they use so as to convey their feelings. Within the text that cites both Muriel and Angie’s conversations with me, are Bundjalung words that are a part of their everyday language. These words are also in italics with a meaning written as a footnote. As the Bundjalung language is an oral language I have taken Muriel and Angie’s advice on the spelling of all Bundjalung words and meanings¹³.

Muriel and Angie lived with their mother, father, brother and other children their parents cared for. Muriel recalls: *We would have had hard times I can remember right until I was nine, my dad was just the loveliest man so gentle so caring, he worked and he was just the ideal father never hurt us never drank just a few beers never hit mum.* Muriel goes on: *When dad died I had daddy’s family, mummy’s family so much*

¹³ While the preschool does have a copy of a Bundjalung Dictionary, in remaining respectful to my colleagues who are members of the Bundjalung nation, I have used their spelling of words in preference to the dictionary.

support, they treated me like a sister, even today ***¹⁴ is more like a brother than cousin. Family looked after us right up until we were our own person.

When Muriel recalls how she learned about her culture her earliest memories include that of her pop: *I learned from my grandfather, my pop was blind and to this day I regret what I done, like he use to try and sit me down me and my cousin the eldest of Ma Walker's family, he tried to sit us down and talk to us in the lingo, because he was blind we thought we were smart and use to crawl off (laugh) he knew – jarn¹⁵ – and to this day I could really hit myself ... but I was young them I did not know how important it was.* Angie: *So you crawled away.* Muriel: *Yes we crawled away (laugh).*

But, Muriel did learn about her culture as she was surrounded by it. Muriel tells about bush tucker: *I learned no one taught me I learned that was my culture with the kangaroo the snake – snake – my mother, we had to eat anything, widarbal¹⁶, tripe, it was just instinct from an early age, I had binging¹⁷ jubal¹⁸ I had all that I ate everything, it was natural for me to eat it. Well I must have had no choice to eat that snake too (laugh).* *I was with the old people, not being forced to eat any thing it was just there on the table.* Muriel then goes on to name her old aunties, her mother, and uncles; all these people were teachers of her culture. They all showed her different parts. Then as the older sister she helped pass it on to her younger brother and sister Angie. During one of our yarning sessions, Muriel voiced her concern that the people from her generation were the last to learn a lot of their culture that they had learned through watching and listening to the old people. She feels many young people today are not interested in learning their culture.

Muriel talks about how bush food and sharing was a big part of her culture when growing up. Muriel: *With the food, when they used to go out hunting, the men came back with all these things, they shared, same with the fish.* She then goes on to tell how many young men do not follow the old ways of sharing. Muriel: *Four or five boys caught sixty binging they did not share they put them in the freezer, I love them I*

¹⁴ *** persons name to remain anonymous

¹⁵ Word suggesting sympathy.

¹⁶ Intestine

¹⁷ Short neck turtles that live in the river and is a favourite traditional food in this area

¹⁸ Witchetty grubs

could eat ten binging, they gave me five out of the freezer I took them home, I put them in the oven I ate one I could not eat any more because they came from the freezer they took all the goodness out. Angie: Same as kangaroo, kangaroo I like fresh. Muriel: They have never been taught about sharing part, and you don't take that much, not from one spot, you take some and go to another spot, you don't keep going back to the same place you leave some. Muriel goes on to describe another incident: look at *** he went before the storm to catch them binging everyone was so angry with them, *** should have known, just because you have black skin does not mean you know about culture, only some of us up home now know.

Muriel also tells that there are some places you are not allowed to take bush food from. She tells of one part of the river: *Black fellows have special places, like fishing there are places you can't fish, it's sacred place (talking of one particular area) its full of snakes you can't go there, them boys was fishing there, all them snakes was coming up and when they came back to camp they told ***, she¹⁹ asked *** about that place and was told those boys are not to go there that's sacred, you don't go there.*

Mission life

Muriel started her schooling at the mission, as Aboriginal children were not allowed into town to the public school. Her schooling years were a time of learning about white Australian history. Muriel recalls: *We learned about Van Diemen's land, Captain Cook, Burke and Wills, Blacksland and Wentworth.* When asked about Aboriginal history Muriel replied: *We never learned any Aboriginal history, only when we talked to the old people, how they were taken away, and killed up there at Pagan's Flat, never learned nothing at school.* As we talked I also recalled how my school had been similar in what was taught. I had also learned about white explorers and it was not until much later in life and studying at university that I read about Aboriginal children being taken from their families and Aboriginal massacres.

At that young age Muriel did not understand the politics of the day and how it affected her people. She talks of lovely memories of her childhood. Muriel: *When we*

¹⁹ An Aboriginal woman who is not from this area, but she is married to a local Bundjalung man

went to school we had ascorbic acid, that vitamin tablet, the teacher gave all the kids then, we loved the taste of them, then we had the little milk, honestly I enjoyed my childhood. We used to have this thick emulsion on our heads for nits; I wanted it like the other kids even if I had no nits. Then Mummy used to give us cod liver oil I loved it. We had it a spoon-full every day; to this day I don't have sores or boils. We never had lollies and soft drinks. If you had a cut it healed, I never had one boil not like these kids today they get a lot of boils. Mum used to come home from shopping only fruit, no lollies.

Muriel recalls her school days at the mission: *At the mission school there was an orchard, and at lunch I use to run home and have eggs, we had fresh eggs, and they use to have lunch at the school, but I went home for mine. Angie: She cried to mum and dad to have a baldy head²⁰. Muriel: Yeh cause everyone else had baldy heads and I cried so my mum started here (points to top centre of her head) with the razor so I could not cry to put it back, and my dad did not want my mum to cut it but I cried that much that dad said well cut her hair (laugh). Angie tells how she has an old photograph of Muriel with her head shaved like the other children. Muriel: Shame. Angie: You in that long tunic. Muriel: Shame don't you dare show it (we all laugh).*

Muriel remembers running across to the manager's house to have worm tablets, then some Epson salts: *We chased it down with sweet tea. Angie, being a bit younger, remembers having to walk over to the old house that was where rations were distributed. They walked to the other side of the mission, for their fortnightly rations. In side were big aluminium bins that you pulled out to get the food such as apples, flour, sugar, and also lard fat. This shop was also where the children went to get polio tablets and other medication such as: big brown ones, we knew they were for worms (laugh) Yuk.*

Angie says: *It was good back in those days, and I must say the oldies never use to drink everyday and when they did it was in their own home, private. At the mission there was like a competition who had the best garden, the best vegetable garden. You should have seen the gardens they were beautiful. She felt there was more respect for*

²⁰ Some of the children had their heads shaved as they had head lice.

the older people than there is today. *Like Muriel always said, if I did something wrong they (the adults) would smack me and when go home I would get another smack* (laugh). Angie said: *It is different out there now if you smack a child the mum will threaten to put the police on you.*

C. Bourke and B. Edwards (2003, p. 115) discuss the raising, care and discipline of children within an Aboriginal community. They note that generally there is the feeling that the children belong to everybody, and are the responsibility of everybody. Children may move between their relatives, and this is a convenient and acceptable practice. This also provides the children with the opportunity to learn many aspects of life including traditional ways of life (C. Bourke & B. Edwards, 2003). From Muriel and Angie's stories this was generally true for them.

Angie remembers going to relations' houses at the 'mission': *You could go to your auntie's place, your uncles, you know you got something to eat.* She also remembers children coming to her house. She talks of one child in particular who would come to be cared for when his parents were drinking. **** he , used to live with us a lot, it use to be ok when they weren't drinking but then he used to run down home when they drank and use to get up in the trapdoor in the roof, my brother used to get up there with him, they were hiding from ***'s dad.*

There were two prominent women in Angie and Muriel's life, the first being their mother and the second is Aunty Della/ Ma Walker (their mother's sister-in-law).

Their mother, Adelaide, tells how she met Della:

When I first met Della she was only a teenager. She used to live across the Rocky River and I used to live on the Clarence River. We'd meet halfway and play on the road and in the corn paddock. Then we'd go down the river and play there till it was time to come home. Della had to walk across the river back over to the Rocky to where she was staying and we'd all go back to our place till again the next day it'd be like that. We didn't even know what her name was. We used to call her 'mate'. We didn't know her name was Della till a couple of days after. She got used to us then. That's where she met my brother William. (Recollections by Adelaide, quoted in Coutts, 1998, p. 44)

Aunty Della took on the role of second mother to Angie and her siblings, which is often a typical responsibility of Aboriginal sisters. C. Bourke and B. Edwards (2003, p. 104) explain the basic principle of kinship system in traditional Aboriginal societies

as the ‘equivalence of same-sex siblings’. This principle means that people who are of the same sex and belong to the same sibling line are viewed as essentially the same. So we see two sisters with both being mothers to any child either one bears, and the same applies to brothers. Therefore the children view not only the biological mother as mother, but this also applies to the mother’s sister (C. Bourke & B. Edwards, 2003). Angie’s mother Adelaide also took on this role of being a second mother to Della’s thirteen children, and while in this case Adelaide and Della were sister-in-laws, the same principles of kinship laws applied.

The same kinship system applied to the sisters or brother’s children, they are considered sisters and brothers rather than cousins (C. Bourke & B. Edwards, 2003). Muriel and Angie therefore have a large extended family when Della’s thirteen children are considered the same as siblings. Angie has no children of her own, but she is still called Mummy or Nan by her sister’s and brother’s children and their children.

Changes

Adelaide’s husband (Angie and Muriel’s father) died, so Adelaide moved to Bonalbo to be close to her brother and Della. As Adelaide explains:

Well, Della means a lot to me. She helped me, although she had her own children to rear, she helped me with mine when my first husband died. I had four children then and no-one to turn to. There was only Della and my brother to help me ... Della was the only one to comfort me. She was always there to give me a helping hand.

(Recollections by Adelaide, quoted in Coutts, 1998, p. 46).

The death of their father caused changes in Muriel and Angie’s education. Muriel had been able to attend the local primary school in the latter part of her primary school education, while Angie did one year at the mission school and then attended the local primary school for the rest of her primary education. When their father died their mother followed her brother who had moved to Bonalbo (a town 30 kilometres away). Muriel did one year of high school then left. Muriel: *My mum could not afford for me to stay at school. I remember I got my tunic from the Smith family in Sydney, it was green my mum had to take it to the dry cleaners and get it dyed blue, then shoes, they*

were little high heels had to knock the heels off so I could wear them to school otherwise I went bare footed (laugh) let people cry when they read this (laugh).

The two families lived in houses side by side. It was at this time that Adelaide met and married Della's brother John. There were many happy times, such as big Christmas parties.

Angie recalls; *it was more of a community thing like at Christmas time when we had a big party in that old hall, all the mums were there all helping to make the sandwiches and setting the tables up. Everyone was there helping not today you got the same old people, only certain one, it has changed a lot.*

Della also tells of the good times such as Christmas:

At Christmas time we'd have a party on the reserve. Every child used to get a present. Course the present those days were very cheap, not like today. Us mothers enjoyed ourselves because we knew it was just getting together having a party with our kiddies. To see their little faces light up, how their little hearts were overjoyed when they'd see the table spread with all those lollies and biscuits and cakes and sandwiches. Everything we used to have, there was soft drink and ice-cream, everything for every body (Coutts, 1998, p. 59)

As Della tells this part of the story she notes that there were good times and sad times. The sad time was when tragedy struck again. This time Della's husband William (Angie and Muriel's uncle) died. He had been working at the asbestos mine at Baryugal. Della had just had her thirteenth baby earlier in the year that her husband died. At this time it was Adelaide who supported and helped Della (Coutts, 1989, p. 58). Muriel also recalls this time, she tells how she helped care for two of Della's children. She says those children did not understand but she and her mother understood Della's grief and never judged her. Muriel says; *Family with black people, one big family, nobody sees anyone being by them selves it was just one big family.*

Two mothers sharing culture

These two women, their mother Adelaide and second mother Della, passed on to Angie and Muriel most of the cultural knowledge they learned as a child. Aunty Della would tell Angie over and over the traditional story of the Clarence River, *how it*

started from up here, at Muli Muli all the way down here, and there is that thing in the river at the mouth of the Clarence where the river goes into the sea.

A traditional story as told by Della Walker

How the old woman, the old Dirrangun, how bad she was to her Balugan, a nice handsome young man. She was a wicked woman and very cruel. She even planted (hid) the water away from this Balugan so she could have it all for herself. She covered the waterhole with bladey grass and bark. Now when the Balugan started to get thirsty, he noticed there was no drinking water about and he suspected his old mother-in-law had stolen it for herself.

He set off with his two hunting dogs to find the water. The dogs scared a big guruman (Kangaroo) and ran off after it. When Balugan called his dogs back he saw that they had water dripping from the hair on their mouths. He followed the dogs until they led him to the waterhole. Then he started to clear it, pushing the bladey grass and bark away. He was all worked up and savage, so he stuck his bilar (spear) in the mountain releasing all the water.

The old woman was trying to block the water. The Balugan called out to her, 'You must be punished for your selfishness old woman, let the water you store wash you away from this place'. The water gushed out of the hills, and streams started to flow over the rocks. Dirrangun was swept away but she fought bravely against the river. She spread her legs against the current but the water swept on to become creeks. The old woman was washed right down to Yamba. The Balugan turned her into a budjegar (fig tree). If you row down to Yamba you might still see the old Dirrangun waving her branches as you pass by (Walker, quoted in Coutts, 1989, pp. 78-79).

Like Muriel, Angie learned where she could fish, swim and go, and where she was not allowed to go. Angie: *Yeah she told us that story over and over, and a lot of things like not to swim over here and not to go fishing there, leave before it gets dark, but I know where they are.* Angie: *I was the driver mummy and Della showed me all the fishing spots.* Angie's mother also reminded her where not to fish as she said; *there is a big jedabeen²¹ over there like a big eel and sometimes when I do go fishing over there my line it's like something big is on there so I will move to another spot.* Muriel: *I went fishing with mum once I nearly got drowned, mum pulled me by the hair out of the water, I never went fishing again.* Recently the two sisters did go fishing together and Muriel's daughter said to Angie²²: *Ma what Mummy going fishing with you she don't go any other time.* Muriel: *I did go but I get impatient when the fish won't bite.*

Like Muriel, finding bush tucker is a normal part of Angie's life. As a young child she talks about how she followed her older brother. *I use to follow him I don't know if*

²¹ Eel

²² Muriel's daughter calls both Muriel and Angie Mummy.

I got on his nerves (laugh). Yeah and even the oldies taught me when they went fishing, showed me how to use the line, how to look for binging without goggles²³, and went for jubal, they show what to look for and which trees. When the children caught turtles they would often eat them straight away. If we got binging we made a fire at the river and cook it there. I was brought up with lots of caring and sharing, that's lost today.

Current times

Muriel and Angie's mother and grandparents had lived at Turtle Point on the Clarence River before being moved to the then mission on the Rocky River. A 'Back to Turtle Point Day' had been held in 2009 and Muriel shared a special memory of the day.

Muriel: There was this back to Turtle Point day, we was sitting down under this tree, just a couple of us whose grandparents and parents come from there. We was sitting yarning and we could see these two or one, one a big fellow goodamin²⁴ coming he jumped and came to the trees there, then he jumped and he came right there stood right in front of us, he looked at us he looked at all of us, and he kept going. It was our old grandfather and 'yeh you right you come from here'. My hair stood up, the way he stopped and looked at us then kept going. We right we belong here.

Muriel and Angie are saddened by the loss of so much of their culture. Muriel: *I know the genuine people who know culture and the gamin²⁵ ones who did not want anything to do with culture, now all of a sudden because there is big money involved they want to be an Elder, they should be proud of our culture not just because money is there.*

Muriel has been invited to be part of the local Elders group, but resists, even though she has been recognised as a major contributor to her community and culture. Martin (2008b) gives us some insight into the process of people becoming Elders within a community.

Martin (2008b, p. 74) explains how within relatedness Aboriginal Elder's Law is about wisdom gained not because of old age, and it is also about a number of ongoing

²³ Swimming goggles to see under water

²⁴ kangaroo

²⁵ pretend

conditions and tasks that are recognised by others. Marten (2008b, p. 74) then goes on to quote an Ngugi Quandamooopah Elder, Bob Anderson who explains:

Age does not denote Eldership. There are no application forms posted when a certain age is reached. People are observed and their activities noted in much the same fashion as when children are undergoing their transition to maturity. Later in life when it is felt that their minds are receptive to understanding their role in adult society, they will be invited to become a member of the Elder group not an Elder in their own individual right but for what they can contribute to society as a group.

Being a respected Elder in the community is not about being older, it is about earning that position.

With their permission, Muriel and Angie have given an insight into their life and culture. Their stories enable the reader to gain an understanding of the women who played such a major part in forming the preschool philosophy. The major theme that continually ran through not only our yarnning sessions, but also my life experiences with these women has been their cultural upbringing that included caring and sharing. This was what allowed me to learn and be part of this work team and group of sisters.

Sisters

This story would not be complete with out mentioning our 'sisters' group, so I now need to introduce Lynne and Barbara. These two non-Aboriginal women started working at the Aboriginal village with the Aboriginal youth who had dropped out of high-school. Their program included basic literacy and numeracy and was conducted in a space in the Land Council Office. When Lynne and Barbara were asked to run this program they agonised with the prospect that they may be setting up a segregated alternative school system, yet the general education system at that time was not meeting those children's needs so it turned out to be a worthwhile plan.

Lynne and Barbara tell their story: *The first term was horrible; we were almost ready to throw it in. We had decided that we would see the year out and then scrap the program. We thought we were too old to put up with this rubbish; we would go home Friday night exhausted and wonder if it was worth it. Then suddenly one day, must have been about three months after we had started, it was like we had a different group of people. It was like they had put us through a test and we had passed, so now*

*they were ready to learn. I don't know what the test was but as ***²⁶ said, who else would be stupid enough to come out and teach us.*

By the second half of the year we had the kids competing to complete their work so they could go on the bus to the dentist. The kids would say to each other, you have not done your work you can't go on the bus to the dentist.

The principal of the local high school commented to Lynne and Barbara that he owed them an apology. He said he had thought that this program would not work. He noted that the children attending the program had larger portfolios than they had ever achieved at school. Lynne and Barbara had provided an environment where the children did not feel that shame of being in the minority and so they achieved better results. I have only touched on this program, when it is really worthy of its own research study as it played a most valuable role in the education of teenagers who had dropped out of school. Lynne and Barbara have been recognised by the Department of Education and received the 2004 Award for Excellence Service to Public Education and Training. They have also been recognised by the community when they received the 2009 Australia Day Award of Indigenous Champions of the Year, from the local Richmond Valley Council. This is only a brief introduction of Lynne and Barbara yet they are very well respected members of the community, but more importantly they are our 'sisters'.

During the start up time of this program Lynne and Barbara would often drop into the preschool, or stop and see Muriel at the Family First Program. It was a time old friendships became firmer as we all worked hard to support the children and youth from the Aboriginal village. Lynne and Barbara called themselves the 'dickhead club' and quickly Muriel, Angie and myself were included as members. We felt we worked so hard yet there were many times we felt like we were banging our heads against a brick wall. It was humour and each other that helped us survive. One day Muriel suggested we get dressed up and go out to dinner in town. A date was set and the 'sisters' group had their first night out.

²⁶ One of the female youth participants

After having such a fun night out we decided to make it a regular event. Some of the other women from the Aboriginal village and the Aboriginal Education Assistant from the primary school joined us. In Figure 3.1 a photograph is shown which was taken when the sisters went out to dinner to celebrate Lynne's birthday. So women came and went but our core group of Muriel, Angie, Lynne, Barbara and I have stayed together supporting each other, and we still go out to dinner or meet at each other's home to share a meal and many laughs.

3.1 Sisters group:



Back row: *Barbara, Angie, Carmel, Barbara and Judy.*

Front left: *myself, Muriel, Lynne,*

Humour is an important part of working with Aboriginal people. When I posed the question to my 'sisters' about why we worked well with the community, the consensus was that apart from really caring about the people we have a good sense of humour. That is, even though each of us takes our work position seriously, we were able to laugh at ourselves, our frustrations, and of course with the people. The people in the community know we (the non-Aboriginal women of the sisters group) are genuine. We have been part of the scene for many years now, and they enjoy sharing humorous stories, or hearing our stories. There are many instances when we laugh

together. On writing about humour Ngarritjan-Kessarlis (1994) gives a reminder of its importance, not only in the classroom but also with the community. She points out that humour can be used to release tension and to provide a more relaxed atmosphere. Ngarritjan-Kessarlis (1994, p. 121) states 'the important thing to remember when using humour with Aboriginal people is to laugh with people, not at them,' which is a core principle the sister group applies.

Recently while working out at the Aboriginal village, a young man said to Lynne: 'You and Barbara are not like seagulls, those white people who fly in drop their sh*t and fly out'. Over the years the people from the community see many non-Aboriginal people come into the community as part of their job. These people may be from education, health, youth services, or law agencies, and generally they never stay long enough to build a relationship with the community. The projects that do assist the Aboriginal community are those that are guided by people who are prepared to really listen to what the community needs, and then to prove they are genuine through being there long enough to build a relationship with people.

Comparing our early years

In chapter one I introduced myself, in this chapter I have introduced Muriel and Angie. With the use of the comparison environmental tool from Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (Berk, 2003) a contrast of our early years may be noted. The first layer of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system notes the complexities of the surrounding environment in the microsystem (Berk, 2003). This is the inner most layer which has the most direct affect on a child. When evaluating both our stories, one of the similarities that we both acknowledge is the unconditional love and support from family, extended family and friends.

The next level of the ecological system is the mesosystem, and this comprises of relationships among two or more settings within the microsystem. These settings are a system of microsystems that overlay the child's microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Muriel and Angie lived in an environment where not only their immediate family cared for them, but also extended family and neighbours who also lived on the mission. The mission manager and his wife form part of their microsystem and

mesosystem. Their mesosystem was extended when they started school. The neighbourhood I lived in was made up of many different microsystems and I attended a kindergarten before going to school (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Significant changes may be noted when assessing the exosystem; this refers to the social setting. Even though this system does not contain children, we children were affected by formal organisations such as our parent's workplace, health care and social services (Berk, 2003). I grew up in a house in a street where the laws of the country gave my parents rights that were not extended to Muriel and Angie's parents. My parents had consent to purchase land and the choice to build a house for their family. My father worked in town, my mother shopped at the local stores and we children went to the school in which my parents chose to enrol us. In comparison, Muriel and Angie lived in a house allocated to their family by the mission manager on the (then) mission owned land. The mission manager's wife inspected their family home once a week, and did so without the permission of the families who lived there. Their father worked on the mission, while their mother went to the mission store for her fortnightly allocation of rations. The family also hunted and collected their traditional bush tucker.

The outermost level of Bronfenbrenner's system is that of the macrosystem which consists of cultural values, laws, customs and resources; and even though we all come from one country, one political and one law system; because of the colour of our skin and our cultural back-ground, there were differences. One major noted difference was that I was born a citizen of this country, while Muriel only became one as a teenager and Angie as an eight year old child.

Bronfenbrenner (Berk 2003) explains that people's lives and the environment are never static. There are forces that affect children that are ever changing. This temporal dimension of change is the chronosystem. Changes that we all went through were the birth of siblings, and starting school. Major changes in chronosystem for Muriel and Angie was the death of their father and moving off the mission to a small neighbouring town.

Those early years of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s were a time that the education system taught children a very white version on Australian history. That is one similar experience that all Australian children had in their formal education. A difference for Muriel was that in her first years of schooling she was only allowed to attend the mission school with other Aboriginal students, while in the Northern Territory I remember going to a public school with Aboriginal children.

We are now ready to begin our preschool day

The main characters have been introduced; it is now time to move on to “our” story. Our thoughts and feelings about the children of our community go well beyond preschool age. Many past students as well as current children (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) attending the preschool call us Aunty. With that comes a responsibility, and we take it seriously. We have seen so many bright, unique, beautiful children start their first formal education at our preschool and we want the best for each and every one of them.

Our tea mugs are empty and it is time to go back inside. As we set up the room for the day we discuss our current group of children. We talk about their interest and needs and we share ideas as to how we will meet them. We accept each other’s different perspective and settle into openly creating our place in early childhood education.

Interlude

A snapshot of preschool life



Figure 3.2: Snapshot of Preschool Life

The life of a rural preschool teacher sees the need of skills to tackle a wide range of jobs at the preschool: from dealing with snakes to general maintenance. As our preschool is not in the local village we do not have access to town water, this means that in long dry spells we often run out. In this photo I am holding a hose that is pumping water from our local rural fire brigade truck into our tank.

Chapter 4

The preschool day begins

*Talk softly, Listen Well.
Bundjalung Elder, Charles Moran (2004).*

It is time to collect the children from the local Aboriginal village five kilometres away. I go to get the bus out of the shed; it is my turn to drive this week, though we never stick to a strict schedule. As a mainstream preschool we do not get funding to provide a bus service to the children at the Aboriginal village. A successful application for a grant through the Commonwealth Government some years ago, enabled us to purchase a nineteen-seater bus. Running costs then had to be factored into our budget, which we supplemented by hiring the bus out to the local schools for excursions, and to other non-profit groups. Our bus became a valuable addition to our community. Because of our limited resources when we purchased the bus, Angie and I acquired our bus licences and became the drivers. While this was an extra to our already full workload, it has also had many benefits aside from getting the children into the preschool. The bus became a vital part of our connection with the Aboriginal community.

When we reach the village the first child we stop to pick up has a young sibling waiting with her. We yarn to the parent; we make time for an informal chat about how their child is going and also to advise them about events that may be happening at the preschool in the near future. Even though we send out newsletters these occasions are to ensure parents know what is happening. Yarning each morning and afternoon with the parents is an important yet natural strategy to keeping in contact with our families. We know that some parents struggle with their literacy skills so yarning to them keeps them in touch with preschool life without causing them any shame.

As we yarn to a parent the younger sibling of the child we are picking up wriggles and squirms trying to get onto the bus. We offer to take the young child for a ride around the village and then drop him off after we have collected all the preschool children. This gives the younger child the opportunity to have a ride on the bus and get to know me, the white teacher, a little better in his environment. The bus run is a

major part of building rapport with these families in their own environment without us (particularly me) actually entering their homes. We can yarn, joke and keep in contact with them in an atmosphere that is safe and no shame need be felt through having a non-Aboriginal person coming into their home.

The bus run

The bus run is an important part of our day; as the above story indicates this is a time when we may share information through yarning, with the parents and carers of the child attending our preschool. Imtoul, Kameniar and Bradley (2009, p. 27) state that 'one of the ways hospitality is established and maintained is through the rich cultural practice of yarning'. Their research at a multiracial centre found that the staff offered their families this unconditional hospitality. This strategy Imtoul et al (2009) found, was successful in a town where racial and ethnic tensions were high and many families struggled with social/emotional/ economic challenges.

When parents and family members found that they could yarn to teaching staff and were accepted unconditionally, they felt not only that this centre would care for their children, but that they were also welcome without judgement. We have also found that through yarning, staff may offer families unconditional hospitality. This is when things may be discussed in a frank way without shame to anyone. An example is when we have been given instructions to drop off a child in the afternoon, with a particular relative. When dropping the child off, if the relative is not there, or if the environment does not appear to be safe, we find another suitable relative or carer. This is then discussed with the parent when we see them next. This is done through yarning in a matter of fact way so that shaming is avoided.

Yarning usually happens when the bus stops to pick up the child. We then do not need to cause potential shame by visiting parents and carers in their home. This does not mean to say that I do not go into the homes of the families at the Aboriginal village, it just means I have waited until the people have got to know me, and me them. Through following Angie's lead, and the development of long term relationships with families, I have gained an understanding of the community. I know whose homes I can enter and who would feel more comfortable with meeting me outside their home.

The bus ride is mostly a happy time when many of the children share their news. The children jump onto the bus excitedly talking about things that are important in their lives. Their dad may have gone for bush tucker; they may have had an outing to the river, football, or they may talk about the arrival of new family members. It is also a time when we may discuss the day's program with the children. It is a time when the program may be altered if the children raise a new interest that is important to them. This is a significant time that contributes to the children's feeling of ownership and belonging to the preschool.

Introducing *Gwyine*²⁷ magic

Muriel and Angie's mother had the totem of a *gwyine*, and this animal is also their totem. The preschool's emblem (see figure 4.1) is a child with a possum sitting on his head and one near his foot. There is also a small child and a *budubee*²⁸, sitting nearby looking on. Over the years we have had a possum living in the roof of the preschool, or in the big peppercorn tree in the yard. One pupil-free day Angie and I had been cleaning up our storeroom. During the morning when we took a break for a cup of tea we found a possum sitting at the front door to our preschool. The possum sat at the door and calmly watched us for over ten minutes before moving on. For those of you who are from an early childhood background or have children there is a good chance you have read 'Possum Magic' by Mem Fox (1983), and have already noted the link between the popular children's book and the heading of this section. As you can see the possum has a special link to our preschool and now I need to introduce the magic part.

When researching the literature, there was little information to be found in the area of shared leadership between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in early childhood education, so our story becomes unique. So what is our magic? The simple answer is relational space. The explanation is far more involved. To date I have introduced the characters and our individual stories, but before relational space can be explored, further background information on Aboriginal education will give a more holistic picture.

²⁷ possum
²⁸ koala

*Figure 4.1: The preschool emblem*²⁹



Western education and Aboriginal People

Prior to the 1970s there was much written about the Australian Aboriginal people in anthropology, though little was written in mainstream Australian history. It was the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner in 1968, who noted this absence and called it “The great Australian Silence” (cited in Hemming, 2003, pp. 18-19). The 1960s and 1970s was a time of political activism with academics taking a different approach to writing Aboriginal history that included the viewpoint of Aboriginal people. Although it was not until 1988, when the Aboriginal people and their supporters publicly challenged

²⁹ The preschool logo was produced as a batik flag in about 1984-85 by Ted Torrens.

the 'official' version of Australia's past, that we started to see different versions of history and literature (Hemming, 2003).

The 1960s were also the time when the influential *cultural deficit* and *deprivations* theories in regard to Indigenous education, arrived in Australia. These theories suggested that the under-achievement of minority group children was explained by the disadvantaged or deprived nature of their homes and communities. That is, those homes and communities were lacking in stimulation and thus the children were not benefitting from schooling to the same extent as children from enriched homes (Groome, 2003). These theories influenced such groups as the Van Leer Foundation to create programs that had far reaching intervention into the lives of the children and their families. While the programs were welcome, they still worked on an assimilationist assumption with little recognition of the cultural background of the children (Groome, 2003).

It was also during this period of the 1960s that change became imminent as Aboriginal people began to enrol in teacher training courses. During the 1970s and 1980s, educators in Australia began to realise the magnitude of the disaster of the previous eras of government policy that included 'protection' and then 'assimilation'. From this emerged the distinct field of Aboriginal education, which led to vast amounts of research being published (Groome, 2003, p.176).

As we narrow the field down to early childhood education it would seem that much new literature emerged after the final report to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Johnston, 1991). This report lists amongst its recommendations the need for Aboriginal children, parents and carers to be involved in preschool programs as a major part of educating for the future (Johnston, 1991). Commissioner Elliott Johnston (1991) also noted the failure of education to mention cultural differences in all areas of Australian life, including the education system. From the time of Johnston's 1991 final report, a noticeably vast amount of research began to emerge in publications about early childhood education for Aboriginal children.

Aboriginal education

In response to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 'Making a Difference: A Guide to the Education-related Recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody' was published by the Board of Studies NSW (1997). This publication was produced for teachers and as Linda Burney (1997, p. 8) stated in the foreword, it:

will indeed make a difference here, as it will provide teachers with the knowledge and resources to begin addressing the inequities in the classrooms that in turn lead to greater social inequities and over representation of Aboriginal people in custody.

This booklet provides a brief overview of issues that should be noted by teachers working with Aboriginal children.

Even though this Board of Studies NSW publication is now fourteen years old, much of the information is still relevant today. The first section notes the importance of history and states that many non-Aboriginal Australians have a limited understanding of Aboriginal history due to the official versions having omitted an Aboriginal perspective. This omission, the Board of Studies NSW (1997) publication advises, has contributed to many non-Aboriginal people having a limited understanding of the legacies this has left for Aboriginal people. Official versions of history are starting to show a broader account, and this is particularly important to Aboriginal people who lived through that era. While there is a considerable amount of literature now available pertaining to Aboriginal education, I will focus mainly on that which relates to early childhood education.

Leadership

Thirteen years ago Jackie Huggins (1998, p. 33) wrote that white women were still not prepared to step outside their culturally determined framework or forgo their privileged positions as part of the dominant culture. On a similar theme nine years later, Colbung, Glover, Rau, and Ritchie (2007) wrote 'Indigenous Peoples and Perspectives in Early Childhood Education', one of the few pieces of literature that discusses Indigenous leadership partnerships. Colbung et al (2007, p. 144) challenge members from the dominant culture to recognise and relinquish the powerful status that is attached to their positions as professional leaders in education. They go on to

discuss how colonial institutions do not structurally represent partnership with Indigenous peoples, though they do point out that some organisations such as teachers' unions have begun moving in this direction.

Two other studies that provide insight into Aboriginal leadership in early childhood education in NSW are those of Power (2002) and H. Edwards (2003). Power's (2002) research explores the subject positions of Aboriginal leaders in early childhood education through fieldwork at an Aboriginal early childhood site, where she investigates the concept of a contact zone. She states that she feels:

early childhood education is one site where there is a complicated dance between ideas from the dominant cultures of education including various constructions of the care-giving and educational roles of women, construction of children and families. In an Aboriginal controlled early childhood centre the whole mix is complicated again by the power relations of racial politics (Power, 2002, p. 327).

Like Power (2002) I also feel that I am sometimes involved in a complicated dance between the ideas from my culture that happens to be the dominant culture, and that of Aboriginal women and their educational roles as teachers in the early childhood environment. My dance seems to be that of mediator, in that I have grown to understand the local Aboriginal perspective, yet I know that we must meet Community Services regulations imposed by government.

H. Edwards's (2003) conducted an action research study of an Aboriginal preschool participating in the *Quality Improvement and Accreditation System* [QIAS]. H. Edwards (2003) describes and discusses an Aboriginal director's leadership issues in a specific situation, that being the journey of the centre going through the QIAS. From H. Edwards' (2003) unique position as researcher, friend, assistant and mentor, she offers a perspective into leadership issues in a specific situation. These perspectives are useful in that they have a quality that addresses issues from someone who is not a long-term member of that preschool community. This allows her to describe the Aboriginal director's leadership issues, both as an observer, one step removed, as well as a very much personal inside view from within the preschool setting. My research complements both Power's (2002) and H. Edwards's (2003) writing by adding the

dimension of Aboriginal co-leadership in early childhood education from an insider's perspective.

Contact zone

Pratt (1992) informs us that she manufactured the term 'contact zone' to describe the space of colonial encounters, the space in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations. She also notes that these relationships may involve conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict. A space that was often characterised as a 'highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like in colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived' (Pratt, 1992, p. 4). While Pratt (1992) writes of how a contact zone is used to describe a space of inequity, Christians (2000) however, reminds us that there are multiple spaces that exist as ongoing constructions of everyday life within social and political entities. My research tells a story of Aboriginal women who have experienced contact zones. In chapter three when I introduced Muriel and Angie their story began in their early years when they lived on the mission that would generally be considered a contact zone between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. I have included my journey in gaining an understanding that an inequity could exist if the white noise had not been noted and turned down. This research then looks at our created space.

From contact zone, Pratt (1992) advises of the phenomenon of transculturation. She explains that ethnographers have used this term to describe how marginalized groups will select and invent from materials transmitted to them by the dominant culture. Pratt (1992) informs us that while the subjugated people cannot control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying degrees what, how much, and how it will be used, and absorbed into their own culture. Throughout my research I have witnessed this transculturation phenomenon, such as how I have been placed with-in the local Aboriginal community, and this is discussed further on in this story.

Twenty-five years ago when I walked into the preschool to start my first day as a childcare assistant, Muriel met me. She showed me the centre, introduced me to the

Aboriginal Director, and told me about the children. From that very first day, Muriel showed me kindness, understanding and patience. I feel most fortunate to have been accepted so readily. Yet on the other hand, with hindsight, if I had started with a closed mind clouded by white noise, rather than an open one that was willing to truly listen and learn, our friendship may never have developed.

In those early years I learned much about the children and the community from Muriel. She was a great role model. When the Director resigned to move on, the committee asked Muriel first if she would like to take on the position. Muriel said no, so I was asked if I would take on the job of director. Before accepting I talked to Muriel. First I needed to be assured she did not want the job, and second, I needed to know if I had her support if I accepted the job. Muriel gave me her approval, and commented that I would be better at dealing with all those government departments. This was my first hint at the invisible power of my whiteness. It would seem that because I was from the dominant culture, I would not only have more credibility but also the confidence to deal with this position, even though I was an untrained teacher at that time.

As director of the centre, I was still very reliant on Muriel in gaining a working relationship with the Aboriginal community. This was her community; she knew her people, and I would have been a very foolish person to have not worked with her. So even though I had the title of director, and dealt with the government departments, the centre was run very much as a team. When Dubrin, Dalglish and Miller (2006) discuss the cognitive traits of effective leaders they mention insight, as being a deep understanding of what is needed, and requiring considerable intuitive common sense. This insight needs to be about people and situations and involves making wise choices in selecting the right people for key assignments. You may be thinking that I am crediting myself with an intuitive common sense, and to a degree I am, but I am also crediting Muriel as a leader of her community in being insightful with her choice in grooming me to assist her in the work needed in her community. Later when Angie joined our team she seemed to listen to many of her sister's judgements before making decisions that related to caring for her community.

As much as I would like to think of Muriel, Angie and myself as purely dedicated teachers, there is so much more depth to it. As explained in chapters one and three, we all come from very different cultures, histories and a socially unequal society, even though we come from Australia. As Moreton-Robinson (2000) reminds those who may wish to feel a sisterhood with Aboriginal women, that while white feminists may not have as much power as white men, they do hold a higher socioeconomic position than Aboriginal women. She goes on to state that the ‘differences in socioeconomic position means that the life chances, opportunities and experiences of Indigenous women will differ from those of white middle-class feminists’ (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p. 159). Having introduced the characters of this narrative in earlier chapters, as well as addressing my whiteness, a context to our contact zone has been established. But our relationship has grown from those early days, and that is part of this story. In the following chapter I discuss in-depth the next step in this relationship that Barrera and Corso (2003) call 3rd space, but before that point may be reached I still need to address what Moreton-Robinson’s (2000) points out as the socioeconomic position of my whiteness, through looking at the phenomenon of white noise.

White noise

While reading of feminist poststructuralist methodologies, I came across Kate McCoy and the phrase ‘White Noise’, a concept I have noted several times already. McCoy (2000) wrote of ‘white noise’ as a problem of epidemic proportion in politics, popular media and education with reference to discourse representing cultural difference. White noise falls in the realm of institutional racism, a structure and process that becomes taken-for-granted with the consequence being a maintained racial inequity that is largely undetected by the dominant peoples (Hollinsworth, 1998). The use of the metaphor of white noise seems most appropriate when we look at cultural differences, as perhaps the capitalist world generally finds Indigenous peoples’ needs to preserve culture, heritage, and land to be a distraction and a threat to productivity and wealth growth. J.H. Cox (2006) takes the sound of white noise from the static that remains on television after broadcasting ends and gives it the meaning of ‘the oppressive noise of white mass-produced cultures, the loud demand to conform to the

invader's cultural belief system or be destroyed'. Adamson (2008, p. 33), a Cherokee woman, explains:

What made traditional economies so radically different and so very fundamentally dangerous to western economies were the traditional principles of prosperity of creation versus scarcity of resources, of sharing and distribution versus accumulation and greed. Of kinship usage rights versus individual exclusive ownership rights. And of sustainability versus growth.

The Indigenous writers, J.H. Cox (2006) and Adamson (2008), both explain how Western economies have oppressed traditional Indigenous economies in the name of Western prosperity, and this is what they refer to as white noise.

Max Dulumunmun Harrison (2003), an Elder from the Yuin Nation, is an Australian Aboriginal leader who may also be frustrated by the white noise of capitalism and its need to safeguard productivity. M.D. Harrison (2003) talks of the human parasites that are causing the destruction of our planet. He reminds us that we may heal ourselves through reconnecting to nature by walking in the bush and listening, feeling, hearing, seeing and connecting to our surroundings. This message is not a unique message in today's world, and when white noise is noted and turned down then there is much that we may learn from the culture of Indigenous people.

Tisdell (2003) reminds us that although culture is never static and is always changing, the dominant culture in North America with the greatest economic and public decision-making is still the wealthy, white, heterosexual, able-bodied male, of Christian background. The same may also be said of those in Australia, that being those with the greatest economic and public decision-making powers come from a similar group³⁰. Consequently, this group are generally able to perpetuate the white noise epidemic, albeit with some accountability being forced upon them by political pressure.

Rosemary Neill's (2002) book 'White Out: How politics is killing black Australia' also offers insight to the problem of white noise. Although she does not explain the 'white out' part of the title of the book, it is very much self-explanatory as she strongly questions why Aboriginal Australians live two decades less than non-

³⁰ In a newspaper article on March 8th 2011, the Australian Governor General called for a quota for females on company boards. She stated that in 2010 only 3% of women held executive positions of Australia's top 200 companies (Wright, 2011).

Aboriginal Australians. From her research, Neill gives many examples that scream of the white noise epidemic. I have chosen to quote a small section on her book that represents the major theme:

comments made by a senior police officer, then Northern Territory Police Commissioner, Mick Palmer... He told the conference that the vast majority of rapes and assaults committed against Aboriginal women were not reported to police, and that the wider community, including women's activists, considered the issue 'too hot to handle' or 'just the Aboriginal way'. Palmer was then a 30 year veteran of Top End policing. As a detective he was involved in many homicides involving indigenous offenders and victims. He believed that when an indigenous woman was assaulted, 'there is nowhere near the same sense of outrage in the community as there is when there is violence against European women'. Indeed, society's ongoing lack of concern about indigenous violence underscores an ugly truth: that the life of an indigenous woman is still accorded a lesser value than that of a white woman. (Neill, 2002, p. 87)

Neill (2002) goes on to highlight the plight of Aboriginal women and children, yet because they are Aboriginal offenders and victims, politics finds this a far too difficult situation and thus it is generally easier not to see a vast majority of these victims.

Payne (1990) discusses the violence against Aboriginal women and explains how a group from the Northern Territory were saying that they are being subjected to three types of law: 'white man's laws, traditional laws and bull shit law'. She explains the latter as:

being used to describe a distortion of traditional law used as a justification for assault and rape of women (it's Aboriginal law you don't interfere), or for spending all the family income on alcohol and sharing it with his cousins, justifying the action as an expression of cultural identity and as fulfilling familial obligations.

As both Neill (2002) and Payne (1990) point out there are many cases where the white noise of politics has made it difficult for Aboriginal women and children to be protected.

For Aboriginal Australians the white noise epidemic started in 1770 with the arrival of Cook and then the declared *terra nullius*' (Hemming, 2003, p. 24). At that time there was no acknowledgement of the protests of the Aboriginal people as invaders came and settled on their land. The British did not appreciate the Aboriginal peoples' connections with the land, and thought their seemingly aimless nomadic life meant the land was not occupied. Aboriginal connection to the land did not fit with the

European model of land ownership, therefore England declared itself the sovereign or ruler of Australia and applied its own laws (Bourke & Cox, 2003; Hemming, 2003). Thus, as has been noted by researchers, the construction of whiteness in Westernised society came about through European colonisation (Hambel, 2005), and so we see the beginning of Australia's 'white noise' epidemic.

A brief history of white noise and education

Aboriginal history is Australian history – it belongs to us all.

Pat Anderson, Aboriginal Education officer, Australian Teacher's Federation
(Board of Studies NSW, 1997, p.13).

When discussing Australian history and colonisation I will use the two terms commonly used by non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal writers, these being settlement and invasion. From the 1850s to 1960s Aboriginal schooling came about with the extensive establishment of Aboriginal missions and reserves. Since Aboriginal people had been dispossessed from their land, life on missions and reserves became a way of systematic disempowerment. A person could not live on a reserve or mission without permission, they could not leave or return without permission, or have a relative live with them without permission, or work except under supervision. On reserves and missions the supervisors had all the power (Board of Studies NSW, 1997; Groome, 2003). This was known as the 'protection Era', and the education system became another area of control over these people's lives.

'The Missionaries saw their task as being to provide opportunities for Indigenous people, especially the young to become "useful" in society' (Groome, 2003, p. 171). Unfortunately the idea of 'useful' consisted of an education that included basic literacy and numeracy, farm and trade training for the boys and domestic training for the girls. The teachers employed at the missions were frequently untrained and incompetent, and most enforced the outlawing of the children's mother tongue with harsh punishment of its use (Groome, 2003). Some Aboriginal children had attended public schools prior to 1900, but in the 1900s following requests from the white community, Aboriginal children were excluded from these schools (Bird, 1999).

The government policy, known as the 'Assimilation Era' began in 1936. This policy assumed that Indigenous culture and way of life were without value (Bird, 1999).

After semi official massacres and killing of Aboriginal people in the 1920s, led by police officers and locals, public opinion from overseas and local capital cities sought accountability from the Federal government. From this forced public judgement and the influence of mission bodies, the notion of assimilation or absorption of ‘capable and suitable’ Aboriginal people was introduced to ‘help’ them (Hollinsworth, 1998).

Due to several factors a new era emerged during the 1970s and 1980s in Aboriginal education. A defining factor was the 1967 referendum when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were recognised as citizens, and long held attitudes began to change (Groome, 2003). Other influences were the passing of control of reserves and missions to local community members, and the Department of Education beginning to take responsibility for the schools.

As we move to a more recent history the epidemic has lessened only slightly. In our lifetime, we (my Aboriginal teaching partners and I) have come from a period in history where Aboriginal Australians were not even recognised as people of this country. Even though we were all children when the 1967 referendum changed the status of Aboriginal people, it is a part of Australian history that we grew up in. It was part of our childhood even if we did not understand what was happening. Yet as an adult many personal experiences have opened my senses to that generally invisible place of white noise and the following story was a lesson in seeing that place.

A lesson in understanding white noise

Many years ago I had a profound lesson in seeing something through the eyes of someone else, of re-seeing something in a very different light. This was an experience that allowed me to see something through the eyes of someone from a different culture than that of my own. I did not, and still do not presume to understand how the other person felt. This experience was just a glimpse of what someone from another culture may have felt. I also think it was a lesson in understanding how white noise can easily drown out what is happening around us.

Celtic Country: An experience that became a lesson on seeing something through the eyes of another.

I had travelled past the sign seen in Figure 4.2, many times as I returned from TAFE (Technical and Further Education) residentials in Armidale. I had looked at the sign

with interest; it is spectacular as it stands proudly on massive stone pillars on the rise of a hill as you enter the town of Glen Innes. I may have vaguely thought about it as I drove past, I may have thought ‘Why is this Celtic country? ‘Was it because it was settled by Celts?’ Then my thoughts probably would have returned to the classes I had attended at TAFE.

Figure 4.2: Celtic Country.



On one particular trip returning from a TAFE residential, I was sharing a ride with a fellow student who had also become a friend. We had shared personal stories, stories about work experiences and had many discussions about our shared passion of early childhood education. As we approached Glen Innes the sign came into view. This time the sign took on a much stronger meaning to me as I sat beside my friend and fellow student, Gail Mabo. Gail had told me stories of her early family life. She was a proud woman who had made her own way in the world of contemporary dance in

Australia, but was also still very much the daughter of Edward Koiki Mabo. She was proud of her father's fight against the Australian government for the right to own his inherited land. Gail had loaned me her personal copy of 'Edward Koiki Mabo: His life and struggle for land rights', written by Noel Loos and Koiki Mabo (1996), which I had read. I had also seen the documentary on her father that had been shown on ABC television, and had wept as I watched my friend Gail cry at her father's funeral.

Gail's father, Edward Koiki Mabo was born a Meriam man from the remote Murray Island in the Torres Strait. Koiki grew up mastering two cultures, his own and what the Islanders called 'the white man way of life' (Loos & Mabo, 1996). At a lunch meeting some time between 1972 and 1975 Koiki told Loos about his landholdings on Murray Island. It was then that Koiki learned with shock that the Torres Strait Islands were crown land, designated as 'Aboriginal Reserve'. This was the beginning of Koiki's ten-year struggle for recognition of native title (Loos & Mabo, 1996).

Land rights were only part of Koiki's achievements; another was his establishment, with his friend Burnum Burnum, of a Black Community School in Townsville. This school survived for twelve years in the face of inadequate funding and some active opposition from officers in the Queensland Education Department. The school promoted parental and community involvement as well as the teaching of Torres Strait Islander culture and language (Loos & Mabo, 1996).

As I looked at that sign 'Celtic Country' on this particular trip, it took on a much stronger meaning. Here I was, sitting in the enclosed space of the car with my friend, and woman from the Torres Strait Island culture, looking out at our country. I was sitting with a friend whose father had helped establish a school to provide educational rights for his family and people. A woman whose father had struggled for ten years to gain legal land rights to land that had been passed down in his family for many generations: a father who had died five months before the High Court had finally ruled in his favour. This ruling in the *Mabo and Others v. the State of Queensland (no.2) (1992)* had destroyed the legal doctrine of *terra nullius* by which Australia had been colonised (Loos & Mabo, 1996, p. xxvi). This sign in this context provided me with an overwhelming sense of my whiteness, and what it represented. It was so much more than a massive stone sign; it was a symbol that represented something.

This moment also gave me a sense of looking at this sign through different eyes. Gail said in her normal speaking voice ‘I wonder what the local black fellas think of that?’ She said nothing else, as we drove past looking at that spectacular stone sign. ‘Yes’ I thought, and for the first time I really wondered if at that moment I was given an insight into what the traditional owners of this area might think and feel about this sign.

You may rightly point out that there are many places in Australia that have English or non-Aboriginal names. We have cities, towns, mountains, rivers and lakes that have been named with non-Aboriginal names. What stands out on this sign is that it names ‘country’. The Australian Law Reform Commission 1998 (W. Edwards, 1998, p. 214) statement on the links of Aboriginal people to country, provide some insight:

One instance of the union between the physical and spiritual is the relationship of the Aboriginal with land. A spiritual linkage existed between a person and a specific site or part of the country by virtue of his birth or sometimes his conception.

Further, anthropologists such as Stanner (1998) wrote of the extremely complex context of the Dreaming, the law and country. When mentioning the Dreaming the reader must learn to ‘think black’ and not impose a Western category of understanding. The Dreaming is many things: ‘It was, and is, everywhen [sic]’, it is stories, law, spirit-site and totem, and all related to country (Stanner, 1998, p. 228).

There are numerous literary examples of how Aboriginal Australians relate their culture to country, but I have chosen only two. One is an Elder’s point of view, from the country near where I come from and the other is from an Elder where I now live. Bob Randall is one of the traditional owners of Uluru. This is his country and the naming right of it has been given back to the owners. It was where he was born. He was one of the stolen generation. When Randall discusses The Dreaming he says those of us who are non-Aboriginal may liken it to an intuitive awareness, where for him it is ‘to feel out situations, to read people, and to talk to country’. He goes on to say that when he was taken from his people and country as a child it ‘was like a spiritual death’. He says that Aboriginals are not like white people who think of themselves, primarily, as individuals, he says we are always family, connected to country (Randall, 2003).

The second Elder, Charles Moran discusses The Dreamtime stories of his country. As he writes he tells the stories of major events of his people, history, and names places with both Bundjalung and their current Western names, but he still refers to this area as Bundjalung country.

When we take into account the complexity of Aboriginal Australians' relationships to country we may get a sense of understanding why the Celtic sign may have caused Gail to make her comment. It is not just about naming a place, it is about naming country. I knew the significance of country immediately Gail commented on the sign, but until that moment I had not really thought about the sign or its significance. When Martin (2008a, p. 61) discusses Aboriginal worldviews she reminds us, 'Relatedness is experienced and known according to the Ancestors of an Aboriginal group, and then to country'.

An aim of this story when told with the depth of 'relatedness' is to give the reader a greater, more profound understanding of my lesson. That being the lesson of greater awareness of Aboriginal relatedness that I had not been able to understand due to my senses being dulled by white noise. By looking at this story with relatedness, across a context that takes into account the conditions that Martin (2008b) lists as physical, spiritual, political, geographical, intellectual, emotional, social, historical, sensory, instinctive and intuitive, a story of consequence may be related. This is just one incident of many that made me look at everyday life situations from the point of view of an Aboriginal person. I wonder how many non-Aboriginal people drive past that sign, look with interest at the large rocks and think about the land as Celtic heritage. Do they think about the Aboriginal custodians and how they may feel about that sign? The Celtic people have a very old heritage, but in Australia it is very new, while Aboriginal heritage is over 40,000 years.

This story was of a powerful moment for me, and I tell it in the hope that you may gain an understanding of how many colonisers and their descendents have come to accept and perhaps not recognise the quiet institutionalised racism that surrounds them. While the moment from my story had so much meaning to me because of the context of the situation, I wish to acknowledge that you, the reader, will make your own interpretation, generated from your own experience of this story. Game and

Metcalf (1996, p. 68) explain the power and limitations of story telling when they state:

Sociologists who recognise their storytelling are more likely to understand that narratives limit the production of meaning even as they enable it. This recognition is not an admission of failure but a more accurate, full and open account. Rather than vainly denying the living power of stories, such sociologists are putting stories in their place.

The point of this story is to highlight how easy it is to slip into institutional racism without realising. Through being open to the context of a situation through the use of 'relatedness theory', we have the opportunity to perceive things in a new light.

Having someone beside you, someone you have empathy with, perhaps a vague understanding of where they have come from, who has a strong history of fighting for their rights, someone whose presence may help you turn down the white noise and really see what is happening for others, this may then become a framework to see another point of view. Of course you must have that sense of their history and empathy, as the moment may slip by and you will never know and still be stuck in the rut of institutional racism, unofficial and unnoticed.

Two post-scripts

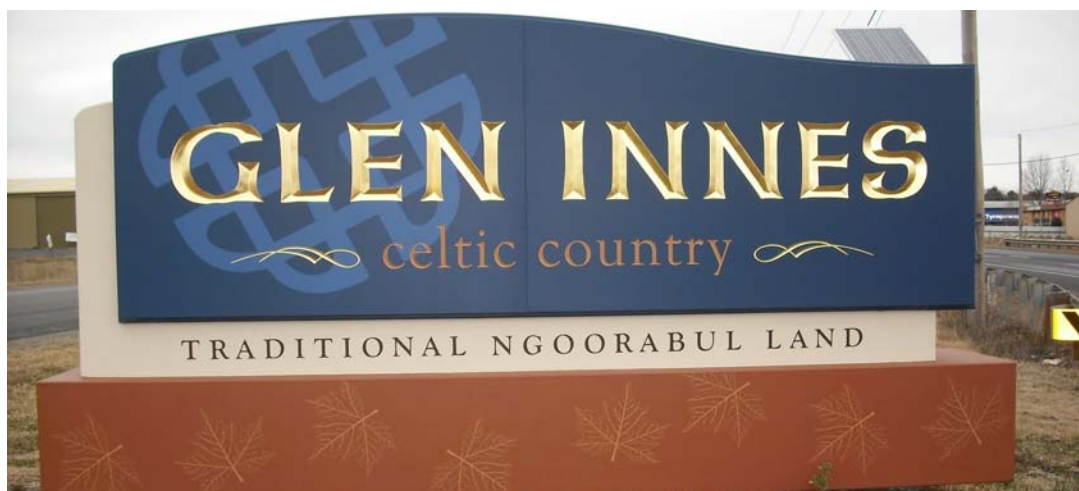
There are two postscripts to this story, the first is from another woman who also has a story from this 'Celtic country', and also believes in the importance of early childhood education. I have told this story about a moment in Gail's and my life, because it was important to me. We are women who believe in the importance of early childhood education and have devoted time and effort to studying this field. Ellen Gallagher is another woman who also believes in the importance of early childhood education for Aboriginal children and has a story to tell from this so-called Celtic country. Her story is about her research into Aboriginal participation in early childhood services in the Glen Innes, Severn and Tenterfield local government areas. Her finding in her 2006 report 'Lets start talking for the little fellas' (Gallagher, 2007) showed that in Glen Innes 34% of Aboriginal children attended an early childhood service the year before going to school compared to 80% of non-Aboriginal children. Our centre at Tabulam, which is on the boundary of this same local government area, has a very different attendance rate for Aboriginal children. In 2006 we had over 85% of Aboriginal children in the local area attending our preschool. But, Gallagher's

report is another story and how can we ever know if there is any relationship to my story and thoughts on institutional racism?

The second post-script comes from after I presented a paper based on this ‘Celtic Country’ story at the second Australian Narrative Conference in 2009. Sitting in the front row was Lorina Barker,³¹ a Wangkumara and Muruwari woman and academic. After my presentation Lorina spoke to me, and said that she was glad I had told my story, as it was important for non-Aboriginal people to recognise institutional racism in its many forms. She went on to say that there are many instances of different forms of discrimination in an Aboriginal person’s life that mostly go unnoticed by even well meaning non-Aboriginal Australians. Feedback from several non-Aboriginal academics also suggested that this story had given them an opportunity to see a form of institutional racism that they had not noticed before.

In conclusion to this story, in 2009 additional signs were added to the southern and northern entrances to the town of Glen Innes (see figure 4.3), that gives recognition of the area as traditional Ngoorabul land.

Figure 4.3: Traditional Ngoorabul Land.



White noise for Angie and Muriel

A glaring example of white noise is how the majority of non-Aboriginal people act when entering our preschool. These people see my whiteness as the symbol of power in our environment. If new non-Aboriginal families, bureaucrats, sales people,

³¹ Lorina Barker has given me permission to use her name.

tradespeople, or many other visitors enter our preschool, they will almost always come to me, after walking past Angie. We share the role of Director, yet there is the automatic assumption that the non-Aboriginal person has the position of power. I find this situation uncomfortable, and while I can ensure that these people are introduced to my Aboriginal colleague and point out that she is a teacher and co-director of the centre these assumptions continue to happen.

Two further brief examples of white noise in Angie and Muriel's life, that had I not been told about I would never have suspected. The first concerns our petty cash system. In our centre like most we have a petty cash system for the purchase of small items. Often receipts may get mislaid so a voucher is written out. I have no qualms writing out a voucher for petty cash money if I have lost a receipt. On the other hand Angie goes into great detail to explain what the item was and what may have happened to the receipt. Once, when she had done this several times and I had just advised her to write out a petty cash voucher, she voiced her apprehension. She said that maybe the accountant or committee would not believe her because she was black. Knowing the accountant, I knew she would believe Angie. It was Angie's general perception, which had become ingrained, that generally white people would not trust Aboriginal people with money.

Now many may feel that this story is just an unjust Aboriginal perception, but there are still enough incidents to keep these perceptions alive. Another example is when Muriel went to Sydney recently. After Muriel left us she worked for Department of Community Services (DoCS), and she had to travel to Sydney on work business. DoCS had given her vouchers for taxis while away working, but Muriel had arranged for a relative to pick her up from the airport and drop her at her required meetings. She had arranged these rides because she knew from experience that no taxi driver in Sydney was going to stop for her, even if she was a well-dressed Aboriginal woman.

I recall one night the sisters group had gone out to dinner. I was sitting at the table with my back to the majority of the people in the restaurant. I was facing Muriel and at one point she asked in a very annoyed tone, 'Haven't those white people ever seen a black person eating at a restaurant before?' She was feeling uncomfortable, as some of the other customers had been staring at our group. These stories give brief

examples of situations that many Aboriginal people live with every day and are a real part of their lives. Every time I hear such a story I feel shocked to think that these situations still exist in Australia, yet they do and unless your skin is brown they can slip by unnoticed. The following story shows how even with the best intentions white noise can cloud judgment.

It is not about teaching; it is about learning

Recently Angie said to me ‘imagine you are an Aboriginal woman and a white person tries to teach you Bundjalung, your own language’. This is a story of a non-Aboriginal teacher. This person was part of an education program to involve parents in the school. The teacher had asked permission to teach the local dialect from one of the Elders but we do not know any details. The teacher tried to teach a class of adult Aboriginal women their local Language. A few older women got up and left in silence, the younger women stayed but turned off and never went back to the class. When these women got back to their village this incident was shared with others. They voiced their anger to each other but nothing was said at the school.

Giving this teacher the benefit of the doubt, she may have had the best of intentions in this instance. The teacher was probably not aiming at being disrespectful, I think she did not understand or get it. The one and only time I met this teacher was at an opening of a local cultural site, and she proceeded to tell me about the local Bundjalung people, some local language and its meaning. This was knowledge that I had learned from my Aboriginal colleagues and I usually leave it to them to share with other non-Aboriginal people. I also noticed that the normally friendly Aboriginal people avoided this person.

The point of this story is that all the good intentions in the world will not work if you do not truly try to understand the community and people you will be working with. It is not about teaching; it is about learning. It is about getting past your own agenda, no matter how noble that may be. Smith (1999) talks about twenty-five different research projects, where Indigenous people needed to take back control of their own destinies, through the survival of people, cultures and language. She lists *protecting*, and this is concerned with protecting peoples, communities, languages, customs and beliefs, art and ideas. So while it is important to protect the local language it is also important

that non-Aboriginal teachers also be aware of local customs and beliefs. The local language belongs to the community and should be taught by community members.

The NSW Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Sector Advisory Group's (ATSIECSAG, 2002, p. 22) *Aboriginal Preschool Years: Teaching and Learning Our Way* handbook states:

It is essential that Aboriginal people control the development and implementation of Aboriginal language programs. Teachers should observe relevant protocols and seek the involvement and permission of the local Community before attempting to incorporate Aboriginal languages into early childhood programs in any way.

In a similar way Michael Jarrett (ATCIECSAG, 2002, p. 19) points out:

At Bowraville we are learning our language. Our children learn language, first from home, then from pre-school. They take it to school and then they continue to learn at our language centre.

We non-Aboriginal teachers must encourage and promote use of language. We may use the local Aboriginal dialect but it is not ours to teach. When you listen to the community's wishes then you may move on from the colonial inequity of contact zone.

How may we combat white noise?

Hollinsworth (1998, p. 71) writes of whiteness as a problem, and advises that 'increasingly many 'whites' who work with minority communities are told to fix the system or themselves, rather than keep trying to help or change their 'clients''.

Frankenberg (1993, p. 242) reminds us that 'whiteness changes over time and space and is in no way a transhistorical essence'. She goes on to explain that it is a complexly constructed product that includes both the past and the present, as well as being local, regional, national and global. So taking into consideration all these variations, we as individuals must examine our own time and place.

When we examine our own time and place it is necessary to be aware of white noise, whiteness, critical race theory, institutional racism, or whatever term you may use, as it is an important part of power relations in life, education and also research. So how can I continue to be aware of the white noise that is so much part of my life that I often do not notice or hear? Also, as a phenomenological or narrative writer, how do I

write without making assumptions that the reader will get the full understanding, the essence of my stories that highlight this occurrence?

Figure 4.4: The Working Vocabulary of Paradigms of Inquiry

	<u>Multivariate</u>	<u>Interpretive</u>	<u>Historical</u>
Micro level	Behavior	Symbols	Events
Macro level	Structure (system)	Culture (interactions)	Totality (context)
Known through	<u>Data</u>	<u>Observation</u>	<u>Evidence</u>
Source	Behavior	Field notes	Text
Unit of analysis	Variables	Interactions	Events
Result	Explanation	Insight, understanding	Narrative account
Observer	Neutral	Participant	Spectator
Core metaphor	Cause	Meaning	Process
Method	Correlated measures	Ethnography, discourse analysis	Historio- graphy
Generic research question	What factors explain an outcome?	How are meanings constructed in interaction and in social worlds?	What lead to events?

(Alford, 1998, p. 51)

Alford (1998, p. 51) presented the diagram shown in Figure 4.4 as an insight into a vocabulary that may assist with paradigms with this inquiry. The process of any inquiry is made up of many approaches and layers. Alford's diagram reminds the researcher of aspects of those approaches and layers.

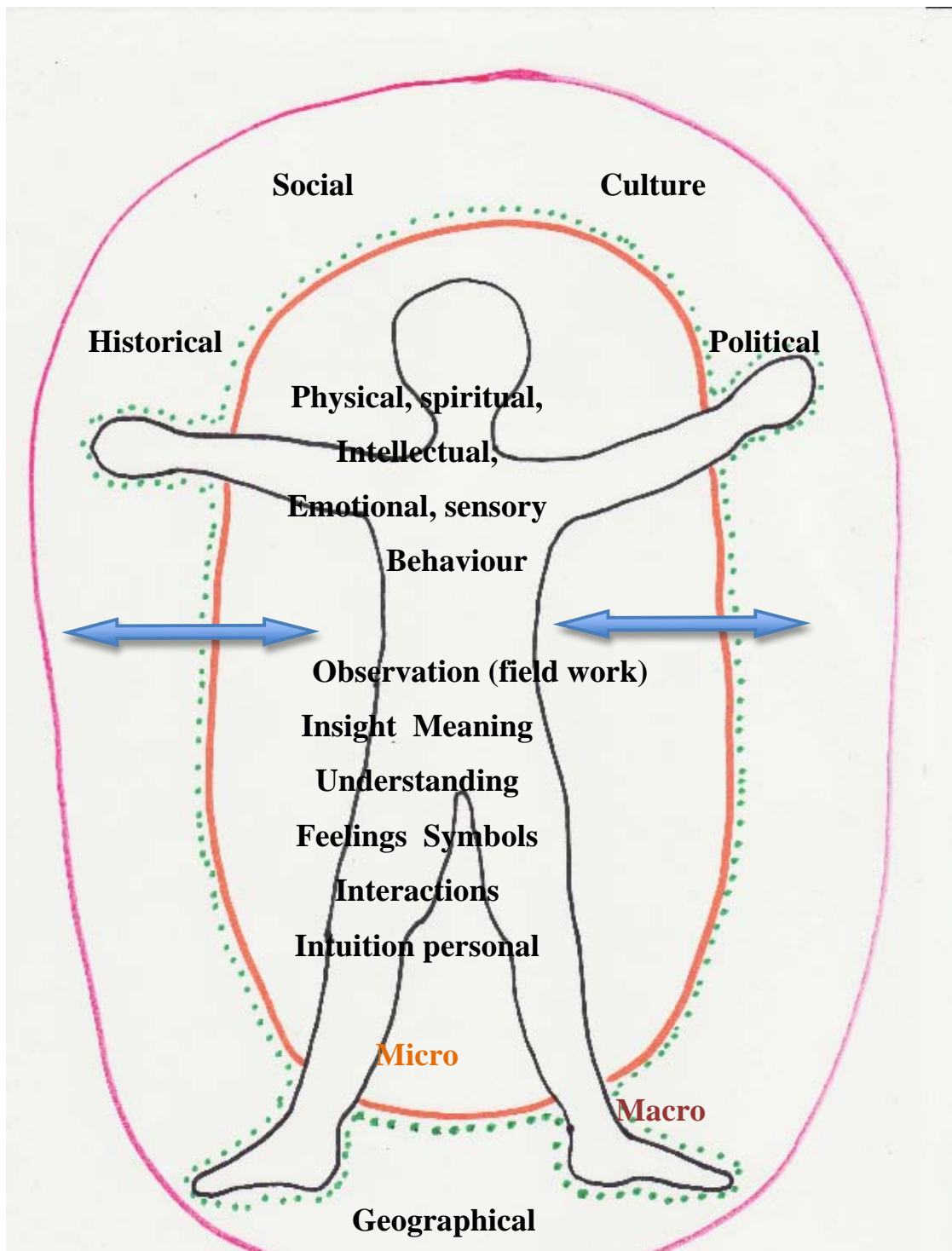
Drawing on aspects of Alford's (1998) table, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (Berk 2003) and Martin's (2008a; 2008b) writing of relatedness theory, I felt that I could adapt it to assist me to understand the assumptions I may make, and also to help me be more sensitive to the white noise that is so much a part of the Western world. I

began to create my own diagram using some of Alford's working vocabulary. His three headings, Multivariate, Interpretive and Historical, reminded me of three approaches to examining myself and this story. I have incorporated those three approaches into the idea of a micro and macro level. On the Micro level Alford uses words such as behaviour, symbols and events, all of which assisted me in creating a list of thoughts to complete the centre of the outline of the person (see figure 4.5). As you move from the micro field out to the macro level I have found that both Martin's (2008a) writing on relatedness theory, and Alford's (1998) table, contribute to the identification of areas that need addressing.

A copy of my final drawing as seen in Figure 4.5, has been pinned to my notice board to assist me with my thinking and writing. I have placed myself in the Micro layer, and given myself a list of notions that may assist me to be aware of, and sensitive to my colleagues, children, families, and community. This list is also there to remind me not to make assumptions in any area of the macro field. This diagram also highlights Martin's (2008a; 2008b) relatedness theory, which she explains as what occurs across context and is maintained within conditions. Martin (2008a; 2008b) defines relatedness as connectedness, a relation between people, things, country or events. She gives the example that relatedness is expressed when Aboriginal people identify themselves as rainforest people, desert people, freshwater or saltwater people. It is expressed in the statement 'the land is our mother' (Martin, 2008a, p. 61). I acknowledge her list of conditions and have placed them within the micro and macro field.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems (Berk, 2003) theory discusses how a child's development or understanding is affected by a complex system of relationships influenced by the multiple levels of the surrounding environment. He names the innermost level the microsystem, where the environment has the most direct affect on the person. The words in the centre of the human in the micro field are there to remind me of ways that I may remain connected and respectful to both my Aboriginal colleagues and myself. The macrosystem is the outer most layer, and has an indirect effect on the person, albeit this still has a significant influence (Berk, 2003).

Figure 4.5: My reminders



As I move from the micro layer out into the macro layer I have again drawn from Martin's (2008b) 'Indigenist Research theory'. She represented this theory as a piece of art-work that was culturally appropriate to her. Martin (2008b) felt that a vital component of her theory and represented art work was a need for a filter. She describes its main role as one of protecting and sustaining 'relatedness' at the macro

and micro level. I have also added a filter that is represented by the continuous line of dots around my self-representation and the micro system. When Martin (2008b) explains relatedness theory she includes much more depth than this quick overview. I acknowledge her filter and its important role in relationships between and within cultures.

The reason I feel the filter is necessary is that as a non-Aboriginal person I need to remain respectful, there will be times when some aspects of stories may need to be omitted from the telling as they are not mine to tell, or not meant to be known in certain situations. The filter is there to slow down the micro information so that knowledge that is shared is done so with as much context as possible that includes a historical, geographical, cultural, social and a political version from an Aboriginal perspective. When context is added to the information it may avoid Aboriginalism, or object study, as discussed earlier.

This filter is also used to maintain respect for the knowledge and stories Aboriginal people have shared so willingly. It is not there to make a story incomplete but to retain the rights of people who may be part of the story. The filter should also act with a two-way purpose. When you look at a story (event) the filter is used to take in information from the Macro layer. That is to look at the story in relation to history, that being not only a Western version, but also an Aboriginal version. The story must also be acknowledged with inclusion of culture, place and the social structure system. 'My Reminder' diagram is displayed in my writing area as a prompt to keep my life and writing genuine.

In summing up white noise, it can include many aspects of society, and may have a subtle through to an immense affect on different facets of minority peoples' lives. It is related to capitalism and institutional racism that can be something that is invisible to many non-Aboriginal Australia, or it may be something that people may choose not to see. White noise becomes oppressive when non-Aboriginal people do not address their whiteness. Frankenberg (1993, p. 6) sums up white noise when she states:

a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and, moreover, are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of dominance. Naming "whiteness" displaces it from the unmarked status that is itself an effect of its dominance. Among the effects on white people both of

race privilege and of the dominance of whiteness are their seeming normativity, their structured invisibility.

In Australia it began with settlement/ invasion and is still very much part of today's society, and it is the responsibility of non-Aboriginal Australians to recognise this situation.

Interlude

Awards

32



Excellence in teaching award

In 2005 we, Angie and myself received recognition for our work in early childhood education from the National Excellence in Teaching Awards. Bundjalung Elder Poppy Harry presented us with the award for 'Outstanding initiative and participation in strengthening relations with its local community for purposes that go beyond the curriculum'. Our preschool children had also done a group drawing showing themselves, and this was also presented to us.

In 2006 we both received an Australia Day achievement award from our local West of the Range Australia Day Association.

³² This photograph was taken by Alex *** and was published in the: *Koori Mail*, Wednesday November 30, (2005, p. 14) under the title 'Teachers worried by funding freeze'. The *Richmond River Express Examiner*, Wednesday November 16, also printed their photograph under the title "Excellence in teaching" (Bateman, 2005, p.8).

Chapter 5

Our day

This is the day that some of the men from the Aboriginal village can get the truck to bring us a new load of fill for the sand pit, so the program is ignored and we go outside to help. This is what the children will do, and it would not be wise or useful to try to do anything else. The time spent with the men is a great learning opportunity for the children. The men will talk to the children, tell them things, ask them questions, and have a joke and a laugh with them. When the sand has been unloaded the men stop for a cold drink of water. Today there is one young man who had learned dance and to play the didgeridoo from an experienced uncle. This young man who was known as uncle to the children got a didgeridoo down from the Aboriginal cultural display in our foyer area. He took the didgeridoo outside to the veranda and began to play it. All the children and teachers quickly gathered around to listen. After a while he had a break and many of the children asked for a turn. Uncle helped the children by showing them how to blow to make a noise.

The didgeridoo is traditionally an instrument only played by Aboriginal males, so the female teachers do not get it down from its display. Some of the young girls asked for a turn at blowing the didgeridoo and were given a go. Our local Elder had advised us that all the children may have a turn at trying the didgeridoo, and that as the girls get older they will come to learn that it is not an instrument for females to use.

Not only did this Uncle play the didgeridoo and assist the children to have a turn, he also included other aspect of his culture. He demonstrated a few dance steps, such as how to act out the kangaroo and goanna. He also used the Bundjalung language as he explained traditional information about the animals. This type of impromptu experience of Bundjalung culture has happened many times over the years and is always welcome. As a non-Aboriginal teacher it is important to be flexible enough to delay any planned activity and to wholly embrace these vital cultural experiences that have been made available.

Bridges to funds of knowledge

An effective teaching strategy is to build on student's strengths and what they bring into the formal educational environment. This is particularly important when working in Aboriginal communities. Gonzalez and Moll (2002) suggest that an even more effective pedagogical strategy would be linked to local histories and community context, which means having an understanding of your students' lived experience. This cannot be gained simply through reading books; this is knowledge that is achieved through knowing the community your children come from. This may be gained from joining the community and the parents in out of school experiences, and thereby building bridges to local funds of knowledge (Gonzalez & Moll, 2002). To build a bridge to local funds of knowledge Gonzalez and Moll (2002) advocate that teachers go out into their communities as ethnographic researchers, as learners, seeking to understand the ways in which the people make sense of their everyday life. Teachers should not only go to gain knowledge, they also go into the community to build relationships of trust with the families. Knowledge of local culture is respected and is considered academically validated as social capital.

Using Gonzales and Moll's (2002) description, I began my role as an ethnographic researcher twenty-five years ago when I started at our preschool, albeit not really understanding the significance of it. With Muriel and then Angie, I went out into the community to learn about the local funds of knowledge. When I first started at the centre we ran a playgroup for two hours under a tree at the Aboriginal village. This playgroup was for all the children under school age. It was a safe place for children to come to and leave when they had had enough. It was a place where they could get to know me, the non-Aboriginal teacher. It was a place where parents could safely observe me and eventually get to know me. It was also a place where I could learn about the children and the people of this community.

Another strategy we use to ensure that all Aboriginal children of preschool age are enrolled at the preschool is to go out to the Aboriginal village to visit every family. This is done at the start of each preschool year on our first pupil free day. We always allow a few hours to drive out to the Aboriginal village and visit each family with children. At this time parents may be assisted with completing new enrolment forms.

Through yarning they are also advised of the time the bus will pick up and drop off children, days of operation and general information about the preschool. This ensures that all parents know about the preschool. It is also a time to meet new families that may have moved into the village. The bus run, as discussed in chapter four, is used to continue the relationship with families. Yet learning about the funds of knowledge of the children and their families includes so much more; it must also embrace their community.

N. Harrison (2008, p. 7) points out that most teachers in New South Wales, Western Australia, and Queensland spend very little time with Aboriginal people outside school hours. He goes on to say that it is important to make the effort to spend some time with Aboriginal people outside work, as it makes your relationship completely different with the children and the parents. From my own experience I have found this to be an important part of being a teacher in our community.

During the rugby football season, going to watch the local Bundjalung 'Turtle Divers' football team play became an enjoyable afternoon outing that both my partner and I chose to do. As we had moved to this area to make it our home, the Turtle Divers became the team we supported. These weekend outings provide a social opportunity to yarn and joke with parents and children in a casual manner. The local football becomes a common area of interest that I was able to share further in later discussions with the children in the preschool environment.

While going to the football is one way of getting to know the community, there are many other occasions when I visit the Aboriginal village outside preschool hours. One such event was attending the ordination of a local Aboriginal Elder into the church. This was a special time and I was pleased to be able to attend to not only show respect, but to be present on such an auspicious occasion. There are also many sad times over the years when I attend funerals to join the Aboriginal community in grieving at the loss of one of its members. My understanding of the local funds of knowledge has been gained through many years of being involved in a variety of community events.

Community

I recall an odd comment from a few years ago. A member of the local non-Aboriginal community asked about our roles as teachers at the preschool. This person asked did Angie care for the Aboriginal children while I cared for the non-Aboriginal children. My reply was that we both cared for all the children. Even though this comment was made some time ago it has stuck in my mind and I have had ample opportunity to reflect on it; and I wonder if that is how some members of the non-Aboriginal community think.

On the other hand, I have had a different response from the Aboriginal community. As the Aboriginal community got to know me, and saw that I was accepted by the Aboriginal teachers, so I was given the title of Aunty, and thus a responsibility for their children. Parents or carers would tell their children I was Aunty Karren and I would look after them with Aunty Mary (Muriel) and Aunty Angie. They called me Aunty, thus modelling to their children who I was. Bourke and B. Edwards (2003) state that while many contemporary Aboriginal families have moved or live away from their traditional home lands, and thus may not follow traditional kinship laws, kinship terms and courtesy titles are frequently used. They write that many people are referred to as aunty, uncle, sister, brother or cousin when there may be no blood relationship.

Bourke and B. Edwards (2003) also note that Aboriginal people have a different cultural view of childcare, where the raising, caring, and disciplining of children is often extended to the wider Aboriginal community. Often the feeling is that the children belong to everyone and if there is a gathering of children they are the responsibility of all. So I acknowledge that when parents and family members give me the title of aunty, they are including me in their community as a person responsible for the children.

There have also been other ways that I have been able to participate as a supporting member of the community. After Muriel left the pre-school to run the Family First Program at the Aboriginal village I was still able to be of assistance to her. At one stage she asked me to help her apply for funding for a shade sail for the area where the program was run. She came with her ideas, and I was able to help her fill in the

application, and get the necessary quotes to do the work. We also put together a formal letter that acknowledged the need for this shade area, and then Muriel collected signatures from every family at the village. This application was successful and the Children's centre at the Aboriginal village now has shade sails.

Members of the community are very well aware of the power of a reference from a white teacher; they have an astute understanding of white noise (even if they do not name it as such) and how it works. On numerous occasions I have been asked to write a reference for mothers moving into town and wanting to rent. Other references have been written for court appearances. On one occasion Angie asked me to help her write a reference for an older local Aboriginal man who had been caught on many occasions driving without a licence. This man was illiterate, so had never had a driver's licence, even though he was a competent driver. He was now facing a prison term. I asked Angie a few questions, and as I also knew the man we felt it was unfair that he should go to jail for a driving offence. We wrote in the reference that this man was a safe responsible driver, who was a valuable member of the community as he often drove families into the local village to collect supplies, as there was no bus service available. Angie signed the reference and gave it to the person concerned. He asked her if she could read it to him so he would know what was in it. Angie read the reference and at the end when she looked up the man had tears in his eyes. He did go to jail for a few months, but the reference was important to him because it said that he was a valuable member of the community.

So while I have been able to support the Aboriginal community, they have also supported my learning. N. Harrison (2008) argues that Aboriginal people are your best teachers, and I whole-heartedly agree. Twenty-five years ago when I started to work in this community, I began to learn about it, and perhaps I was fortunate in the fact that I was the only non-Aboriginal worker, so I needed to follow the lead of my Aboriginal colleagues.

Andreas Langes (2008, quoted in N. Harrison, 2008, p. 51) presents seven points he feels are important in Aboriginal education, as they are relevant to learning about the community the children come from:

1. Assume nothing – do not go into the community trying to impose your values and experiences on others.
2. Listen to those around you – learn from the staff and locals.
3. Get to know the Aboriginal Education Assistant and other support people. They are the key to the community, its needs and its ethos. They will provide the mechanisms and local knowledge, Make sure they are part of any unit of work from the initial planning stage to helping to implementation and assessment of it. Learn from them- they have so much to give and share.
4. Get to know local community members.
5. Adapt your lessons to suit the local conditions.
6. Involve the community in the learning process. If they feel uncomfortable with meeting at school, go and meet them in their familiar surroundings.
7. Remember your learning does not stop once you start teaching. The process continues and the local Indigenous community has so much to offer.

These seven points are well worth noting and all are points that I have grown to understand in my life, work, and now research in this community. They are also points that are discussed throughout this thesis, and have been part of my journey in learning about the community I work with.

Two stories of acceptance

I would like to share a short but very meaningful story that highlights my degree of acceptance within the community, but before I can tell it, I also need to tell of the preceding event. A few years ago an Aboriginal child who attended our preschool died of a Meningococcal infection. This was a very sad, confusing and scary time for all the staff and the families of the children attending the Preschool. As Meningococcal infection is a reportable disease, the preschool received a visit from the local community health professionals, first to vaccinate all the children and staff who had been in contact with the child, and secondly to explain risks and symptoms. All the parents had come into the centre to get treatment for their children. After the children had been treated, Angie took them outside to play while the health professionals spoke to the adults.

The parents were given information and the opportunity to ask questions of the health professionals. All the Aboriginal parents sat close together in one area, while the non-Aboriginal parents sat together in a separate area, with the health professionals standing out front. This was the first time I had seen this divide at the preschool, as

generally most people mix. The Aboriginal mothers sat close remaining mostly silent as they shared their grief. Most were related to the child. The non-Aboriginal mothers listened and questioned the health workers, their anxiety most apparent. I stood between the two groups feeling the sorrow and anxiety and perhaps an imagined tension between them. I was also grieving, and anxious for the safety of all the children, yet in this instance I was not part of any of the three groups. It was a most intense time that left me feeling shaken and way out of my depth.

The grandmother of the deceased child asked the staff at the preschool to contribute a eulogy, and asked if I would read it at the funeral. We, the staff, wrote a piece to add to the eulogy, but I knew physically and emotionally I just could not get up to read it, so another Aunty read it. While many people from the community (including non-Aboriginal parents, some with their children) went to the funeral, I was the only non-Aboriginal person who went out to the Aboriginal village for the wake. After hugging the mother and grandmothers I stood quietly off to one side, but was very surprised by the number of aunties who came up and hugged me and acknowledged my shared grief. The actions of these women indicated that I had gained a role as aunty and thus a level of acceptance within this community.

This second incident also shows my level of acceptance within the community. Many of the Aboriginal children who attended the preschool in the past still call me Aunty. Often, when in the street of our main town I will hear the call of "Hello Aunty Karren" from young adults. Recently I took two young mothers who were on the preschool committee to Armidale for a workshop on the importance of management committees. One of the young women was Aboriginal and a past student from the preschool. As we had to travel so far we shared a motel room after the workshop. As soon as we got into the room the young Aboriginal women asked to use the phone to call home. I could overhear her conversation with her mother at home, and when her mother asked where she was, the young women replied: 'I'm at the motel with Aunty Karren'.

Communication, language and creating 3rd space

To date this chapter has addressed the need to play a role in the community, now I will explore the lessons I have learned in understanding how to work with Aboriginal children. Even though I will discuss many aspects of working with Aboriginal children, it is also part of the story of working with Muriel and Angie. It is a component of the whole journey; it is about us as unique individuals creating our space; that is, the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers working with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children, their families, and the diverse wider community.

Language development

From birth, parents, families and communities are part of teaching babies the language or languages of their community. This is the foundation for literacy. The baby's demands and needs must be met, and it would seem that the human brain is wired to acquire the oral language of its culture (Neuman & Roskos, 1993). A parent's natural instinct appears to be to communicate with their infant. Therefore, as families go about living their lives, they communicate with each other and their infants who are generally watching and learning (Neuman & Roskos, 1993). Vygotsky (Bodrova & Leong, 1996) believed that this learning to communicate through listening, remembering, thinking and communicating is a product of the child's culture. This culture or social context is a product of phylogeny, a human's history, and the person's individual history or ontogeny (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). Therefore we can see the most important roles that families and their culture play in teaching and shaping the child as an active learner.

As infants acquire the language of their culture, Neuman and Roskos (1993) name three properties they learn; first, that certain sounds or words are consistently associated with particular people, objects and events. They become aware of their language's stability. Second, as a contrast, children begin to learn the versatility of language. It can be spoken or written in many forms or codes, and types of sign language. The third property that children learn is the predictability of language. This is where certain situations or events provide the cues as to what language will apply in that context. A simple example would be the difference of language used in church to

that used at a football game. Children learn language scripts for certain occasions, through participating in life with their families and community (Neuman & Roskos, 1993).

As these young children learn about language, they will also be learning about literacy. Children will also be learning literacy from family and familiar adults in the context of every day events. Language and literacy will be modelled through everyday activities such as reading a television program, newspaper or magazine, a compact disc cover, or recognising the word and symbols of fast food outlets.

It is important that first we understand how infants acquire language and literacy through family and community. Second, it is just as important to have an understanding of the language, culture and community of these children so we may develop good communication or skilled dialogue. As young children start their first formal years of education and begin to attend preschool, they need to be reassured that they belong in this environment, and how we communicate with children from diverse cultural heritages will contribute to that sense of belonging.

Through spending time with families from our community, as well as watching and listening to Aboriginal colleagues, I have gained knowledge of how they interact with their young children. I have learned the subject matter as well as the types of questions or comments that are appropriate to these children. This means that I am able to have meaningful conversations with Aboriginal children from day one of their attendance at preschool. This is about ensuring the children gain a sense of belonging, that they are understood, and also that they understand the adults in this new environment.

Anchored understanding of diversity

In chapter four I discussed ‘contact zone’, the place where two cultures meet and intersect. To equally meet each culture’s rights and needs, a 3rd space must be created. Barrera and Corso (2003, p. 51) describe the term ‘3rd Space’ as ‘the larger perspectives that can simultaneously encompass two or more apparently dichotomous perspectives and mine their strengths and resources’. They discuss the need to achieve

skilled dialogue as a must, to gaining a 3rd space. Barrera and Corso (2003, p. 50)

advise that skilled dialogue is made up of two components:

1. The need to place general cultural knowledge into concrete and compassionate context.
2. The need to focus on the complementary nature of differences and develop creative and inclusive choices that honor the persons exhibiting those differences.

Barrera and Corso (2003) explain that to understand these two components it is necessary that one have an anchored understanding of diversity as opposed to one that is not fixed, unanchored. Such an unanchored understanding is about knowing diversity through an external or public source of knowledge, for example information read in a book. We may liken this to a person who has read widely about children's behaviour in the early years, yet has never had any practical experience in this area. Thus the person has knowledge about the subject in an unanchored way.

An anchored understanding of diversity is achieved through personal interactions, participation in communities and hands on experiences, which have been gained when one has suspended judgement (Barrera & Corso, 2003). My journey in gaining an anchored understanding of the diversity of my colleagues has not been a quick trip and there has been a need to honestly address various areas of our relationship. It has been, and continues to be a journey of life experiences that addresses issues, such as comprehension of my whiteness and also white noise, through to participation with community as discussed above. From anchored understanding of diverse cultures we may enter into skilled dialogue.

Skilled dialogue

To maintain skilled dialogue in any relationship there must be respect as well as an understanding of a people's language and culture. When Aboriginal children come into our preschool they generally speak Aboriginal English, and Bundjalung in various degrees, and have a good general understanding of Standard Australian English. Preschool is an opportunity to provide these children with an education away from their home and Aboriginal community, though it does not exclude family and community as good communication is maintained. I understand this is an important role and is part of my responsibility to the community to maintain effective

non-judgemental communication. Eades (1995) states that teachers who are unaware of Aboriginal English may tend to stereotype Aboriginal children's language as 'bad English' and in need of correction. Therefore I see my responsibility as maintaining a skilled dialogue, and to be non-judgmental of my teaching partners, parents, community and children's language, and to gain an understanding of it.

Language is part of belonging, being, and becoming, the title of Australia's national curriculum, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). The first two learning outcomes listed in the EYLF state that 'children have a strong sense of identity', and 'children are connected with and contribute to their world' (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010, p. 5). From these two learning outcomes we can see how language, culture, family and community contribute to the power of the child's learning. Just over a decade ago, though still relevant today, Hill, Comber, Loudon, Rivalland, and Reid (1998, p. 29) pointed out that to improve the formal education environment, we must examine the culture of power. 'The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those that have power', therefore those that do not belong to the Anglo-Australia middle class, may be functioning outside this power if those in education are not acutely aware of and rectify this situation.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Sector Advisory Group's *Aboriginal Preschool Years: Teaching and Learning Our Way* (ATSIECSAG, 2002) handbook for teachers, offers advice on language and culture to non-Aboriginal teachers working in Aboriginal early childhood education. The handbook suggests the educator examine their own beliefs, values and attitudes, as this will largely shape their approach to literacy teaching and learning. I would say that I was very fortunate in that during my early experiences in working in early childhood education I was surrounded by, and influenced by Bundjalung women. These women were a positive influence on my beliefs, values and attitudes in regard to this chosen field of education and in accepting the use of a child's home language at preschool.

When I began my career as an assistant to the Aboriginal Director I was privileged in that this was an opportunity to learn how to communicate with these children. I found these Aboriginal people did not tell me what to do, or how to communicate, but they

were role models and demonstrated appropriate communication methods. It then became my responsibility to turn down the white noise and learn from what my Aboriginal colleagues modelled. It was also my responsibility to maintain a skilled dialogue, through checking with colleagues, to ensure that appropriate language with the correct meaning was used with both the children and the community. The point is, that it is the non-Aboriginal teacher's responsibility to be aware of their whiteness that may include any biases or stereotypical generalizations, and closely listen and share learning with Aboriginal colleagues.

Aboriginal English

Barrera and Corso (2003) argue that one of a child's core needs in assisting with their development is to have their family's cultural beliefs and values mirrored by adults in the child's early learning environment. If this does not happen to a sufficient degree they may become confused and shame may result, often with associated delays or disruptions in learning and development. Having one's cultural identity and language acknowledged, mirrored and validated in the environment outside the home is part of maintaining a healthy self-image. The success or failure of an early learning environment will depend on the degree to which practitioners are sensitive to the child's cultural needs (Barrera & Corso, 2003).

Aboriginal English is a part of the culture of families and children who attend our preschool and as Eades (1995, p. 18) states:

Using Aboriginal English is making a statement about identity. Valuing a child's use of Aboriginal English tells them that you value them, their Aboriginality and their history.

When communicating with the children I find that I often repeat Standard English phrases in Aboriginal English to make sure the children understand what I am saying. This may happen during general discussions or at story time. When reading a story I will first read the text, and then I will retell the gist of the story using a mix of Aboriginal English and Bundjalung words. This is one way to assist the younger children in understanding and enjoying the many different languages of stories. There are also times when a very young Aboriginal child may initiate a conversation in Aboriginal English and I will respond in Aboriginal English. Other non-Aboriginal teachers in the education system have also found using Aboriginal English to be a

natural way of affirming the importance of what the child has to say (ATSIECSAG, 2002).

As teachers, when we recognise and respect the use of Aboriginal English we are not only being good communicators, but we are also showing these children that we value what they have to say. N. Harrison (2008) discusses the unequal power relationship between Aboriginal English and Standard English that has been perpetuated through the privilege of the latter as the key producer of identity in the classroom. On the other hand, when both forms of English become the norm, we take the bias out of what could have been a Standard English environment (Malcolm, 2002). The advantages of using both forms of English are compared to the equal treatment of two dialects. When Aboriginal English holds a strong position, Aboriginal identity is given a voice and we have begun to address the unequal historical power (N. Harrison, 2008). The other advantage is that children get to hear and begin to learn both 'patterns of speech, rules of grammar, vocabulary, sounds, and tonal features' that will give them skills to be effective code-switchers in their school years (N. Harrison, 2008, p. 96).

Eades (1995) cautions us to remember that Aboriginal English is an indicator of Aboriginal uniqueness, and non-Indigenous people must not take over this part of their cultural identity. I often find that when communicating not only with Aboriginal children but also adults, I do use some Aboriginal English. I never completely use Aboriginal English with Aboriginal adults, as this does not feel comfortable or right, but some aspects of their language are used to ensure comfortable communication. Eades (1995) has found in her research that Aboriginal people generally like this natural way of talking but can tell the subtle differences when non-Indigenous people speak it. On the other hand Eades (1995) also advises that non-Aboriginal speakers who exaggerate their use of Aboriginal English and attempt to be 'blacker than the black', they take the risk of making the Aboriginal person feel uncomfortable.

While I could share aspects of the local dialect that I have learned at the preschool, like N. Harrison (2008) and Eades (1995) I strongly advise the need to be aware of the many different groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across

Australia, and like all people they come with different experiences. Eades (1995) advises that there are a number of Aboriginal English dialects that range from being close to Standard Australian English to those at the other end of the spectrum that are close to Kriol³³. Thus it is up to the individual to respectfully listen, be open but polite, to learn, and thus gain the required knowledge from the local community.

Silence

Another aspect of Aboriginal English that needs to be noted is silence. Like many speakers of Australian English I had to learn that silence was not an indicator that something had gone wrong with the conversation. As Eades (1995, p. 23) points out, 'silence is frequently a sign of a comfortable interaction and is not interpreted as communication breakdown'. She also points out that Aboriginal people may like to use silence while they develop their relationship with another person, or simply to think about what they are going to say. Learning to accept silence as part of conversation with the Aboriginal people of my community has been a valuable and rewarding lesson. By using this form of modelled silence it gives the speaker an opportunity to think about how something may be said. Learning to use this silence has been an even more appropriate lesson for me, as in my youth I seemed to be able to 'put my foot in my mouth' on too many occasions.

Eades (1995) warns teachers to not assume that if an Aboriginal child is silent that the child has nothing to say. From personal experience I have had many conversations with Aboriginal children that I had thought were one way. I have then been pleasantly surprised when, after a short or long period of time, the child will make a comment about what I had talked about earlier. This is also a lesson I have taken into account when communicating with community members as well as in the classroom, such as when conducting a group time activity. A question may be asked such as what pets the children may have, and while many children may enthusiastically share information, some Aboriginal children will sit in silence. Later in the day the same children who had sat silently will come up and share information about their pets.

³³ 'To distinguish the Aboriginal creole from other creoles that have arisen in similar circumstances in other parts of the world, it has been given the distinctive spelling 'Kriol'. These creole languages are related to English, but they are not dialects of English' (Eades, 1995, p. 46).

While I do understand that shame may be a part of the reason these children do not speak at group time, I also think the cultural practice of silence is part of it.

Shame

Group time at the preschool is a time of coming together for a formal period of ten to twenty minutes to sing songs and rhymes, have discussions, and read books with the children. Often there will be a small huddle of Aboriginal children sitting or standing away from the group, not participating. A recent example is that of a three-year-old Aboriginal boy who stood off to one side near a wall for the first six months of preschool group and story time. Each group, and story time, this child was invited to join the group, but never forced. One day in third term as we sat down, he came over and sat up close to me, he then successfully joined in singing the songs and rhymes we had been learning. I feel it is important to always invite children to join this formal activity but to never force the issue.

During that six-month period we had a visit from a Community Service adviser. She had observed the group time that I had taken that day, and she had seen two of the Aboriginal boys standing off to one side. Later in the day when we had time to talk, the Community Services adviser commented on the way I had run the group time and of the two children who did not join in. She said that perhaps I had not been culturally appropriate and that is why the children did not join in. Angie quickly jumped to my defence saying that I had been culturally appropriate and the boys would join in when they were ready. Later when the Community Service adviser had left Angie commented that the adviser had annoyed her about the culturally appropriate comments. This is a good example of why it is important to know your community. The Community Service adviser had only wanted to ensure that the program was culturally appropriate, yet she had not recognised that we were, according to Angie.

N. Harrison (2008) counsels that Aboriginal children can be reluctant to attempt a new set activity in case they do not get it right and are shamed in front of their peers. He also states that 'shame can dominate how many Indigenous children think, talk and behave in the classroom' (N. Harrison, 2008, p. 28). While our preschool

environment is far less formal than that of a school classroom, we do have short periods of time that may be formal. As discussed above, a group time is one such event. During this time children may be invited to take turns sharing information or answering questions. The questions asked might be about a story that had been read recently, or predicting what may happen in a story after only seeing the cover of the book. The Aboriginal students are usually less likely to be the first to join in these discussions, and usually wait until they feel they have the correct answers. N. Harrison (2008) suggests the strategy where a very gradual and incremental approach to formal classroom participation is used. This may then allow these children to gain confidence in speaking in a formal group.

One important strategy we have found is to use those teachable moments, which may often happen outside. The sandpit or swings are as good a place as any to start a discussion about a story read earlier in the day. In this casual setting where shame is less likely to inhibit the child, we may ask the child about the story read. This then allows us to gather far more reliable information on how much the child understood, how much they recall, and if they were even interested in that particular story.

When we have visiting Elders who come in to teach Bundjalung language and culture, they often conduct their informal lesson outside sitting under a tree. Taking the lead from these Elders, we may often take a book outside and sit under a tree. It is usually not very long before we are joined by a group of Aboriginal children who are happy to listen to the story, and will then enthusiastically answer questions in this informal environment. This is not a strategy that Angie and I have discussed, but in the process of writing about shame with Aboriginal children, I know that we both use it. This is part of our relational space that will be discussed below. We have found no need to discuss every teaching strategy as we have both noted that it works, so we use it. It is only when we have new or casual staff that do not use these strategies that we note their absence. We understand that an informal place is a safe environment that ensures our Aboriginal children learn to participate without shame, in pre-reading and pre-writing activities.

Bin-Sallik (2003) notes that while there have been positive developments in Aboriginal education, cultural safety is an issue that has not been given adequate

recognition. This is an area that goes beyond cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity advises Bin-Sallik (2003). It is about helping individuals to feel empowered, thus enabling them to achieve better outcomes. 'It encompasses a reflection on individual cultural identity and recognition of the impact of personal culture on professional practice' (Bin-Sallik, 2003, p. 21). As professionals it is up to us to recognise the individual:

Cultural safety, however, requires that all human beings receive services that take into account all that makes them unique. Learning a little about culture, or confining learning to the rituals or customs of a particular group, with a "check list" approach, may negate diversity and individual considerations. (Bin-Sallik, 2003, p.21)

Our early childhood environment has provided cultural safety to not only the children and their families and community but also to Aboriginal staff. This has been achieved through Angie, other Aboriginal staff, and visiting Elders. Through ethnographic fieldwork in the community and being aware of local funds of knowledge (Gonzalez & Moll, 2002), I am also part of providing a culturally safe learning environment.

3rd space

The 3rd space is where the practitioners have shifted from an exclusive perception of their reality to accept a mindset that integrates the complementary aspects of diverse values, behaviours and beliefs into a new whole. The two perceptions are no longer perceived as contradictory, but as complementary. A new whole exists when this space embraces the riches of multiple perspectives, while simultaneously promoting respect and reciprocity by not excluding one perspective to privilege another. This 3rd space is not so clearly understood in abstract, but is best learned through practice (Barrera & Corso, 2003).

How then do you ensure that you, a non-Aboriginal teacher, may create a 3rd space where you may work with your Aboriginal teaching colleague and the Aboriginal students? Having an anchored understanding of the diversity of the group of students, and an understanding of skilled dialogue, all contribute to creating a 3rd space where all might learn. As discussed above, an anchored understanding of a cultural group or community covers a range of issues and personal experience has taught me not to make assumptions about Aboriginal culture.

I may have spent my childhood and young adult years as an active member of the diverse community that included local Aboriginal people of Alice Springs, but this did not mean I knew or would automatically be accepted within the Bundjalung community. I have had to learn about a different group of people. These people did share many similar experiences such as displacement and loss within the settlement/invasion period of Australian history, but there are also many differences. Understanding that there are many different groups of Aboriginal people and that their children come in many different shapes, sizes and life experiences is an imperative lesson that all teachers must take on board.

So with this warning to never make assumptions about Aboriginal people, I have taken on board Aboriginal ways of learning or as Hughes (2004, cited in N. Harrison, 2008, p. 17) labelled it, 'recurrent Aboriginal learning strengths'. Steven Harris (1984) conducted research in the Northern Territory in the late 1970s where he identified four distinct ways that Aboriginal children and adults learnt. From my own research I am going to share my own experiences that may be based on Harris' (1984) points about Aboriginal teaching and learning styles. I also wish to expand on his findings, in noting that this style may be applied to teaching and learning in the early years learning environment.

Learning with Aboriginal people

From my research, I found that observing my Aboriginal colleagues was, and still is the primary way of learning how to work with Aboriginal children. I feel this was the way I was taught by Muriel to work with the children from her community. She never once told me to do this or act in a particular way. It was always up to me to look, listen and learn. This included gaining an awareness of how Aboriginal people use silence, how shame may affect children and modelled learning. If I had not taken note of these things then I would never have known. I feel this has been a very empowering way to learn, as verbal instructions could not have given the depth of knowledge needed to be an effective teacher in this community. It is generally not the Aboriginal way to teach through just verbal instructions (Harris, 1984).

Learning by observation and imitation

Before we discuss how children learn, this is a great place to start for non-Aboriginal teachers learning to work with Aboriginal communities. As mentioned above, I did not receive any verbal instruction from my Aboriginal colleagues on the best way to work with, or teach, Aboriginal children. As an adult it was up to me to learn by observation and imitation. Harris (1984) warns that one feature of learning by observation is that there will be a gap in time between when learning begins and when the skill may be mastered and exercised. It is up to us (the non-Aboriginal teachers) to be patient, to watch, listen and learn. As your relationship grows with Aboriginal colleagues, you will reach a place where you will be able to ask questions that may be answered. There will still be times when questions will not be answered and that is the way it is.

Harris's (1984) discussion of the four distinct ways Aboriginal people learn is something I feel we can generally relate to all children in the early childhood classroom. Rather than saying there are four distinct ways Aboriginal people learn I would argue that these four learning styles are how we all learn, but it was the Aboriginal peoples and many families who taught their young in this way. An example would be young children living on a farm who observe parents working the land and learn many skills through observation as they mature.

Fleer and Williams-Kennedy (2002, cited in Fleer, 2003) had similar findings to Harris (1984) in their research where they also found that Aboriginal children learned through observation. Yet as Feeney, Christensen and Moravcik (1991, cited in MacNaughton & Williams, 2004, p. 125) state, 'Children tend to do what adults do regardless of what adults say'. As MacNaughton and Williams (2004) point out in their book 'Techniques for teaching young children: choices in theory and practice', modelling is an important low-intervention teaching technique. They go on to explain that staff do not need to intervene directly in children's learning, but teach by example (MacNaughton, 2004, p. 125), therefore this is a technique we may well use with all children, but it is worth remembering that children have come to us with lived experiences that they have learned from their own families and community. Thus children come to us with their own experiences and knowledge.

When Bodrova and Leong (1996, p. 9) discussed Vygotsky's theory on how children construct knowledge they remind us that it was always influenced by present and past social interactions, as they explain:

Social context means the entire social milieu, that is everything in the child's environment that has either been directly or indirectly influenced by the culture. The social context should be considered at several levels:

1. The immediate interactive level, that is, the individual(s) the child is interacting with at the moment.
2. The structural level, which includes the social structures that influence the child such as the family and school.
3. The general cultural or social level, which includes features of society at large such as language, numerical systems, and the use of technology.

Therefore the social context of our preschool has a profound influence on how we, the children and the staff, think, and also how we all learn.

Examples of ways children learn

I am going to share three examples taken from my many years of experience at the preschool. These particular examples are not unique and the narratives may be generalised to cover the many different play experiences that happen at the centre. The first is from a group of Aboriginal children playing at their traditional culture. The second is from a non-Aboriginal child within contemporary culture, and the third is both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children's play in a contemporary cultural context.

Example one: A boy from a group of Aboriginal children (four boys and two girls, three to five years old) asks for the didgeridoo from the front display area. He then attempts to blow the didgeridoo to make a sound. Another boy has come back from the block corner with two short blocks and proceeds to clap them together. The two remaining boys start doing some traditional dance moves. The boy who is clapping the blocks as clap sticks tells the girls to get some blocks to clap. The two boys doing traditional dance movement tell each other what they should be doing. The first boy acts out a movement while the second child has a go at imitating. Some of the second child's actions are not quite correct, so he tries again. Then one of the other boys demands a turn on the didgeridoo. The didgeridoo is handed over amicably as the children continue to discuss what they need to be doing and who needs to be playing

each role. This play continues for over fifteen minutes with minimal adult intervention.

Example two: A non-Aboriginal four-year-old child goes into the home corner, he picks up a telephone book and telephone that is on the shelf and puts them on the table. He then flicks through the telephone book for a few pages; stops and put his finger on a number on the page. He then picks up the telephone and punches in some numbers. He waits a few moments then says 'Hello, I want a pizza' and tells them to bring it to his house.

Example three: The children have a shop set-up beside the home corner. A non-Aboriginal boy is the shopkeeper. There are several girls in the home corner playing with the dolls. One Aboriginal girl in the home corner picks up a telephone, presses some numbers then in a loud voice says 'Ring ring, ring ring' and looks at the non-Aboriginal boy in the shop. The boy picks up the telephone in the shop and says 'Hello'. The girl asks him where the shop is. The boy answers that the shop is 'Here' and then asks if she wants to buy something. The girl asks if he has milk. The boy tells her 'Yes', then they tell each other 'See yu'.

These three examples show that the children have learned from observed situations in their family or community life. The examples I have chosen show in the first instance Aboriginal children who have started to learn some of their traditional culture, while in the second and third example we see both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children taking on contemporary actions that they have learned through observation. They have then incorporated what they have observed into their play situation.

Trial and error

The second Indigenous way of learning that Harris (1984) reported in the Yolngu people was through a combination of observation, and trial and error. N. Harrison (2008) reinforces this when he reminds us to be conscious of the Aboriginal student in our classroom, who may have previously learnt through observation, imitation and personal trial and error, that they may find it difficult to learn when a teacher uses primary verbal instruction. Again, irrespective of cultural background, the young

child who uses trial and error is essentially learning to solve problems and this is a valued part of the early years learning environment. MacNaughton and Williams (2004) list problem solving as one of the general teaching techniques commonly used by early childhood practitioners. To facilitate this type of learning environment children need to be given large blocks of time, safe suitable space, and opened-ended material that encourages exploration, trial and error and problem solving (MacNaughton & Williams, 2004). All areas of a child's development are assisted when trial and error and problem solving has been a strategy in their learning.

If we look back to example one, where the Aboriginal children are organising their own traditional dance experience, there are many instances where trial and error is part of their learning. MacNaughton and Williams (2004) point out the many benefits of the technique of problem solving learning, including that of the social emotional development. As we saw in example one, the children had the opportunity to be creative, gain confidence in their ability to work things out, to be responsible for conflict resolution as well as their social leadership skills.

Skills needed at that time

The third issue that Harris (1984) noted was important to Aboriginal people was that they learned skills because they were needed at that time. They learned practical skills to survive, and aspects of cultural knowledge they needed to know. In our schools, non-Aboriginal children have traditionally spent a lot of time learning about other cultures, history, mathematics and English language, which is often not directly related to their lives (N. Harrison, 2008). On the other hand, Aboriginal students would learn to count because they needed to buy something now, so they learned about what they needed to know, not because it was something to learn (N. Harrison, 2008). As I mentioned earlier, when I was at school I was offered the opportunity to learn French but not the local Aboriginal language. This did not make any sense to me as a child as I could see no reason to learn French when we were surrounded by a group of people speaking a language we could have learned. Even as an adult it still does not make sense, though I do understand why.

Today as a teacher, I am proud that our preschool is able to promote the local Bundjalung dialect for our Aboriginal children, and that non-Aboriginal children have the opportunity to learn some of the local Aboriginal language. This is important because the Bundjalung language is part of our community, it is a skill needed now, to keep the language alive for both the Bundjalung people and other Australians.

Context specific activities

The fourth form that Harris (1984) observed was that Aboriginal children learned through context specific activities rather than through theory. 'Learning occurs in the context to which it applies' (N. Harrison, 2008, p. 18). This can be true of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. When our Aboriginal children learn about a favourite traditional food *bing-ging*³⁴, it happens at the river. The children see older children and adults diving for the turtles and then see them cooked on the riverbanks. They do not learn because an Elder has sat them down and given them instructions on how to catch and cook this food. A similar learning situation may happen on a farm where a child follows the adults and learns a particular skill that pertains to that type of farming, such as harvesting nuts. As we, the teachers, understand that these particular activities have been learned in context, we can then reinforce this learning through offering opportunities to express the learned experience through the creative arts and language.

What does this mean to us as leaders?

Through examining how children and in particular Aboriginal children learn, I have also gained an understanding of my Aboriginal colleagues, the Aboriginal community, and myself. This discussion that has included 3rd space, language, silence, shame and how Aboriginal people learn has not only been useful in assisting with how to work with the children, but it also gives support to identifying the roles that we play in our partnership as directors of the preschool. As we have taken on this position we have recognised that each of us bring our unique qualities to the position. I know that there are some things Angie is better at, so I step back; and others I am more at ease with, so she steps back. This then gives us the opportunity to learn from

³⁴ A short neck turtle that lives in the local rivers

each other, and make joint decisions that are reached with both of us able to see the others point of view, co-constructing our understanding.

Our leadership story so far has addressed contact zone, then moved on to 3rd space, which has included gaining an understanding of how Aboriginal people learn and cultural aspects such as language, silence and shame. With an understanding of this knowledge I have been able to join Angie in being able to move a step further, that being into relational space.

Chapter 6

End of day yarn

We have come to the end of the preschool day. It is time to pack up and for children to be picked up or taken home on the bus. Again Angie and I take turns, one driving while the other sits with the children and helps them get off when they arrive home. The bus trip, as in the mornings, is normally a happy time with children chatting and joking to each other or to us. Some of the younger ones who did not get a rest during the day may fall asleep. When we reach the Aboriginal village each child is taken to their home where a parent, carer or family member is there to greet them. If not we take the child to an extended family member's home.

The bus run is used as a time to hand out newsletters or share information about our day to the children's family. In the casual manner of yarning the contents of the newsletter are talked about. This then ensures that all families know of any up and coming events that the preschool may be putting on, as well as all general information about the centre. Also this time of yarning allows anecdotal stories to be shared about their child's day.

The last child is delivered home, and we head back to the preschool. This becomes our reflection time. We discuss different children's progress or needs. Back at the preschool we sit together outside for a short while and continue to review our day. It may also be a time that we reflect on our own actions during the day. There has been many a time I have reflected to Angie that I could have handled a situation or type of behaviour better and vice versa. This is always self-reflection rather than commenting on each other's actions, with our own reflections becoming more open and mature over the years. These self-reflections are an important part of our relationship, and I feel they have contributed to us being better teachers.

Some days I am in awe of special moments that have happened during the day. I wonder what happened, was that really me, was that really us? Those special moments have happened often enough for me to recognise them as extraordinary moments to cherish, they were moments of the in-between.

The highs and lows of preschool life

As Angie and I have worked together for over eighteen years, we are now providing an early education service to the next generation. These are the children of our first groups of children who attended our preschool. The Aboriginal children often refer to us as 'Nan'. When yarning, our discussions often reflect on past students who still live in the area. We express our sadness at seeing some of those bright children, who as adult, seem not to have reached their full potential. Those discussions reflect our frustrations, they are the low times, but there are also highs.

Our days at the preschool offer many wondrous moments as well as frustration and challenges. As two teachers who have spent many years working together we have shared the roller coaster ride of our life at the preschool. We have enjoyed special moments and fun times. In this chapter I share stories and reflections from some of our special moments we have experienced with the children. Those moments are part of relatedness, found in relational space, and wondrous moments of in-between.

Relatedness / relational space / in-between

Relational space is different from a 3rd space. The thinking and understanding has been done; now we have put ourselves in a space where our actions come naturally. This has come about because we have gained an understanding of what Martin (2008a) describes as the essence of relatedness, that being we have gained an understanding of the whole. When consideration is given to the many aspects of life, a wholeness or relatedness may be gained. Martin (2008a) explains that for Aboriginal people this includes physical, social, political and intellectual elements of a particular place and people. She goes on to describe how the physical contains the particular country, flora, fauna, rivers, and climate. Also the social, political and intellectual elements consider the Aboriginal group, Ancestors, gender, age, individual and group roles from the physical, spiritual, social, political, historical and intellectual environmental context. This knowledge of relatedness is part of Muriel and Angie's lives. I have also learned aspects of relatedness through having an affinity to the country and through really listening to the yarns they have shared. Having learnt so much about local funds of knowledge I am able to be part of our relational space: a

space where we are generally natural and understanding, and this allows us to yarn and work openly together.

I recall a memorable experience that explains relatedness. This happened when the preschool went on our first excursion to Jubullum Flat Camp, which is a significant site to the Wahlubal people. This place is within five kilometres of the preschool and has recently been made accessible to the public by New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Services. A road with a parking area has been upgraded to allow access. There is a walking path around the site with signs at child height, which explain the local history, flora and fauna. A circle of low benches has been constructed under a large gum tree so that this area may be used for gatherings and as a teaching place. On our first visit we walked around the site with a local Elder and we listened and learned about this special place. Angie said it was relaxing to be there. For her it was connection to country. I too found a sense of harmony being in this place. The children explored, listened to the Elder and were very much involved in learning about Jubullum Flat Camp, as was I. There was wholeness to this experience.

I acknowledge that relatedness for my Aboriginal colleagues is tied to their culture and country, yet I feel I find a similar space that connects me to this country also. I have added a photograph of a tree in Figure 6.1 for which I felt a strong attraction the first time I saw it. It became something that I looked forward to seeing every time I drove past it. An assignment for Australian Indigenous Societies Prior to Invasion, asked students to create a reflective journal on The Dreaming, so I used this photograph in my journal.

Muriel reminded me of when I was still in the 3rd space

In one of our yarning sessions I had asked the women from our sisters group, what made us work. Muriel said we just are, and then she said she was reminded of when I was just not quite there. She spoke about when their mother had passed away. I had only been at the preschool a few years and our friendship was still developing. I knew their mother was seriously ill. One weekend I got a telephone call from Angie saying their mother had passed away. That afternoon I went out to Muriel's house at the Aboriginal village to see both Angie and Muriel. I had not stayed long but as I



Figure 6.1: jade gnum-arl wundy walla juli

The title is in Bundjalung (and means) big goanna climbing up the tree, as taught at the preschool by Aunty Una Walker. The first time I saw this tree while driving from Casino to Coraki, I felt it was special. It looks like many goannas climbing up the trunk of the tree. Perhaps it is a place for spirits of the goannas to rest! (K. Amadio, 2004)

was leaving I held Muriel's hand offering condolences. Muriel said she could see the tears welling up in my eyes and knew that I felt for her, but I had squeezed her hand then left quickly. In this instance we were in the 3rd space, yet another similar situation shows how we had moved on to a relational space.

Several years later I got another telephone call early one morning. Angie knew I was an early riser and telephoned to tell me about the death of a young man whom Muriel had cared for. This young man was the son of her cousin, but because of kinship laws the father was more like her younger brother. He was one of Della's sons, and Muriel called Della her other mother. Muriel had often been the primary carer of this young man for most of his twenty-one years, and thought of him as her own. He had attended the preschool so I also knew him well. His murder at such a young age was devastating to her and the family.

This time as soon as I got that call I drove straight to Muriel's house. Angie was sitting out on the front veranda. We hugged each other and cried. Angie said Muriel was still in bed so I walked inside into her bedroom. I sat on her bed and we held each other and wept together. I stayed there on the bed until our tears stopped, then we talked for a while with Muriel telling me how she had been nagging the young man since he had been home about the things he should be doing. She laughed at herself.

While these are examples from sad times, they are part of our lives and show the real difference between 3rd space and relational space. These two stories illustrate that we had moved from 3rd space, a place of caring and empathy when Muriel and Angie's mother had passed away, to relational space when the young man had died. In relational space it was natural for me to walk into Muriel's bedroom, to sit on her bed, to hold her and for us to weep together. I did not think about these actions at the time, I just did it and it was right and comfortable for both of us.

Our relational space

Ladson-Billing (2000, p. 257) cites two philosophies she compares when examining relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. One I have already cited in chapter two, the 'African saying, Ubuntu (I am because we are), the second is that of Descartes, 'I think, therefore I am'. The Descartes saying is very much a Western

view of the individual. The African saying is relevant as it is about us as a group, and this explains a space that is often attained at our preschool. When we talk about the group, we are talking about relational space. In their discussion of relational space Metcalfe and Game (2002, p. 13) write that:

in this connecting space of lively conversation, we are simultaneously connected to and separated from others. There is a play of differences and similarities in which we lose a clear sense of borders. This allows us to hold relations open by letting go of positions, of comparison, competition, or notions of ownership.

It is within relational space that we may find the in-between. In a study of everyday life in early childhood sites, Bone (2007, p. 175) explains that in-between events were embedded in the settings where she conducted her research. She goes on to state:

The sense of 'betweenness', of being in-between realities, of being not quite in the real world, allows a space for new spiritual possibilities to emerge ... It may occur spontaneously and is an unexpected moment that suddenly transform daily life: an epiphany.

The following two stories are examples of the in-between that have happened because of our relational space.

The hair band

As I walked toward the monkey bars, I was feeling perfectly at peace with life and myself. Two four-year-old girls were near the monkey bars and starting to raise their voices. Ashley³⁵ an Aboriginal child was holding a headband and saying loudly 'I found it', while Beth a non-Aboriginal child was holding out her hand and equally loudly saying 'Its mine give it back'. I knelt down to their level and gave Ashley a big smile, and asked in a surprised voice 'Did you find that?' Ashley looked at me in a suspicious manner, and she nodded. 'Wow', I said 'You must be so good at finding things' and put my arm around her waist. The defensive look left Ashley's face. I looked at Beth still smiling and put my arm around her waist, 'Aren't you lucky that Ashley is so clever at finding lost things', I said. Ashley was now smiling and in a proud voice said 'I found this over there by the tree', and went to give back the headband. Beth, now smiling, said 'You can have a turn wearing it if you like'. I gave each child a brief hug then got up and walked away.

³⁵ All children's names are pseudonyms

This moment was not just about me using the right words for that space. I felt it was more about all three of us coming together to play the perfect roles in our space at that time. I felt so natural and comfortable, so this may have contributed to the situation not escalating. Perhaps the two girls did not really want to argue about the hair band. Maybe they just needed a space where both were accepted and valued.

On the lawn

It was a warm summer afternoon and we were all outside, the children playing before packing up to go home. Angie was sitting on the soft grass under the peppercorn tree. The grass gently sloped away from the sand pit. I walked over and sat near by. There was a soft breeze that cooled the air slightly. There was a small group of children playing together in the sandpit, and a couple riding bikes around the path. All the children were happy and harmonious in their play at that time. Angie had two maybe three children with her; one sat on her lap while the others were close by. They were talking, and as I sat down some more children joined me. A child sat on my lap and another sat close to my arm. The children talked, we listened and answered. At this moment we were not teachers who analyse the children's development, we were not consciously using this time as a teachable moment (or were we?). Maybe the lesson was about love, acceptance and enjoying the moment. We were adults sharing a space with a group of children. Some were Aboriginal, some were non-Aboriginal; in that space at that time the culture was ours. The child at my shoulder touched my hair, gently running his hands down my plait. I cannot tell you what had been said, maybe there were moments of silence when we all listened to the birds. At that time we just were, it was a perfect moment of harmony with each other and the environment. As I was part of that space I cannot recall any exact details. Then Angie laughed with the children sitting near her and we joined in. We hugged the children with us, and then got up to start packing away as time had passed and it was near the end of the day.

What happened in that time and space when I was with the two girls and when we were all sitting on the grass? As I drive home after these events, I wonder at it. What happened? Was that me? Who am I at those moments? What was that space we were in? Often that space is not there, but it happens enough for me to marvel at it. I know there is love and respect, it is non-judgemental, and it is a place I cannot explain. It is like a moment of perfect peace and harmony with the self, others and the world.

When I try to analyse it, it is like I was too much part of it to know what was happening: it just was. At one of the University of New England residential schools, I listened to a lecture by Cynthia a`Beckett talking about the in-between, and I wondered if this was the place, the space I sometimes experience at the preschool.

a`Beckett (2007, p. 108) explains the in-between as a space that ‘combines an absence of ego-directed social interaction and a presence which is alive and which is itself aliveness’. She goes on to advise that it is a social moment that occurs ‘in the non-Euclidean space and time of the in-between. The in-between has three aspects: being fully present, unknowing and mutuality through love (a`Beckett, 2007, p. vii). She explains that the in-between does not focus on an active subject and a passive object model of social exchange but it:

is about an openness that is always available. Separate identities cannot explain the openness associated with the in-between. The openness allows for times of mutuality associated with emptiness or nothingness (a`Beckett, 2007, p. 107).

This is an un-knowing space that a`Beckett (2007) describes as part of a mystery of the formation of relations. She goes on to cite Alan Pence who she heard give an address at a national Early Childhood Australia conference who argued:

for a space that is without definition. Rather than specific ideas of what may transpire during social interactions there is an openness that will not confine or limit interactions so that all is possible (a`Beckett, 2007, p. 107).

This space, the in-between, could be called the ultimate place we strive for in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the need for self-actualization (Sternberg, 1995). He explains self-actualization as when a person has experienced love, and is able to accept themselves and others unconditionally, and what the world brings to them. Rogers (1961, cited in Sternberg, 1995) extends this concept by advising that a person will have harmonious relations with others, and will live in the present rather than dwell in the past or live only for the future. While Maslow and Rogers have much more to say on self-actualization, I have only chosen words that may explain the ultimate place in self-actualization, the in-between.

I have come to understand that the in-between is a space of perfect harmony with the self and the universe, a space when we are truly connected to those people in that

place. It is a place where we understand relatedness, so we may find relational space. Yet it is even more, in that space the body, spirit and ego, have synchronised with others there and they with you. The individuals merge to become us, yet are still able to be themselves. The African proverb ‘I am because we are; we are, therefore I am’ (Tisdell, 2003, p. 86) is probably the most fitting way to sum up this section on relatedness, relational space and the in-between.

Relational space is not only about the in-between; it is also a space where honest conversations may happen. In these real conversations we talk of things that are not right in the community, the hard subjects, yet in this space they are able to happen.

Burden of race

Recently while both Angie and I were in the office catching up on paper work a mutual non-Aboriginal friend called in. Her daughters had come to preschool many years ago and now the eldest was going to University and living in the city. Our friend told us how her daughter’s car had been stolen. Even though this mother had helped with the purchase of the car, her daughter had still worked a part-time job and had contributed much of her earning to get the car. Our friend told us how her daughter was devastated at the loss of her car and the inconvenience it caused her in getting to university as well as to her part time job.

Two days later Angie advised me she had to go to a funeral out west. When I asked her who had died she told me of how her sister in-law’s young brother had been beaten and died. I tentatively asked if it had been white fellows who had beaten him and caused his death. Angie said yes it was. I expressed my sadness and commented on the shame I felt that these types of actions could still happen in Australia. Angie watched me, then after a few moments said that is how she had felt when we had heard the story of the stolen car. She had felt that it was probably Aboriginals who had stolen the car, as she knew that some of the local lads stole cars from town to get home. We both knew that neither of us are responsible for any actions of others from our race, and we are both close enough to discuss our feeling as friends in relational space; yet we both feel the burden and sadness of the actions of members of our racial group.

Self-Reflection

Jalongo and Isenberg (2000) point out that early childhood teachers become more effective when they practice reflection. As joint directors it was up to us to build a professional development tool that encompasses reflection, and we have done that in an informal way. We had high expectations of our preschool and ourselves, and our afternoon yarns were a time to discuss these expectations. Yarning has always been our culturally safe reflection tool. As we matured and felt comfortable within our discussion, our honest self-evaluations and reflections became a natural part of the conversation. We have enacted the six characteristics of reflective practice noted by Jalongo and Isenberg (2000, p. 9):

1. Reflective practitioners are active ... they search energetically for information and solutions to problems.
2. Reflective practitioners are persistent ... they are committed to thinking through difficult issues in depth and continue to consider matters even though it may be difficult or tiring.
3. Reflective practitioners are careful ... they have concerns for self and others, respecting students as human beings, and trying to create a positive, nurturing classroom.
4. Reflective practitioners are sceptical. They realize that there are few absolutes and maintain a healthy scepticism about education theories and practices.
5. Reflective practitioners are rational. They demand evidence and apply criteria in formulating judgments rather than blindly following trends or acting on impulse.
6. Reflective practitioners are proactive ... they are able to translate reflective thinking into positive action.

The points listed above, have become a part of our afternoon reflections such as being active and persistent. We are active in that a problem in the classroom, whether it be environmental or human, is recognised, discussed and a solution sought. If we cannot come up with a solution further professional help is explored. Even when seeking further professional help we ensure that it is through organisations and individuals who have an understanding of our community. This has been a lesson learned through dealing with culturally insensitive people.

Whenever I have reflected on how I have handled a behavioural situation with an Aboriginal child both Muriel and Angie have listened but never told me what I should do. Instead they will share information about the child's home life so I may have a more informed understanding of the child. They are very careful in making sure that I understand some children come from difficult and sometimes chaotic home lives. As I have come to know the families I am able to also pass on information to non-Aboriginal staff. This is about passing on facts, and not about being judgmental. We share this information to ensure that these children are treated respectfully in a consistent and positive manner, no matter how challenging their behaviour may be.

Jalongo and Isenberg (2000) advise that reflective practitioners are sceptical, where as I would say that Angie and I have been pragmatic. This means that we know we must adapt educational theories and practices to suit our children, or only use those that are appropriate to our situation. This also applies to being rational and keeping it real, when reflecting. Finally Jalongo and Isenberg (2000) advise that reflective practitioners are proactive, this being where we have been able to act on our reflections to create positive outcomes within our classroom.

By sharing our own self-evaluations through yarning in a natural, comfortable casual environment, I feel we have been able to be sincere and straightforward without feeling in any way threatened. H. Edwards (2003) found in her research in an Aboriginal preschool that opportunities for informal self-evaluation were often more appropriate than written formal professional development plans. I believe that ongoing learning, self-evaluation, and change that leads to growth, is part of the cycle of life. I am concluding this chapter with Bell's (1998) poem 'Reflections' as I feel it provides an ideal description of the reflections of life and is relevant to my own philosophy on life.

Reflections

Reflections

*All of creation is a cycle
Rocks, trees, plants, animals,
everybody who lives,
has come into being through Wunggud
and returns to Wunggud*

*in the cycle of
birth life, death.
In the cycle of life there is growth.
In growth there is change.
In change there is learning.
In learning there is responsibility.
In responsibility there is meaning.
In meaning there is fulfilment.
In fulfilment there is completion.
In completion there is death.
We are Reflections of Nature,
And Nature's cycles.*

(Bell, 1998, p. 138)

Chapter 7

Going home: going forward

I say goodbye to Angie and get into my car to drive home. The drive will take about fifteen to twenty minutes. As it is a country road I will not encounter very much traffic and the scenery is conducive to tranquil thoughts. The road home leaves the highway and heads onto the river flats before winding its way up into the hilly country. I know this road well, and never tire of it. I also know each bend and blind corner, so I am able to drive safely as well as use this time for thinking and reflection. I think about our day at the preschool, I think about each child and how we may assist their development. I also think about my actions during the day and how I handled different situations. I am not hard on myself but I am realistic, I have learned to recognise situations that I could have handled better, and as I relive the situation in my head, I use this time to learn from my mistakes. I also relive those moments of wonder, the in-between moments.

Bringing this story together using the Early Years Learning Framework

I am going to share one more story. It is a story that demonstrates our understanding of the children who attend our preschool. It is a story of one particular child and our understanding of his knowledge, and how in unison we defended him against white noise and institutional racism. This story is just one more example of how we work as a team. It is also a story that demonstrates how my skills, knowledge and attitude toward my community have made me increasingly culturally competent. This is an important area addressed in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), as cultural competency is intended to assist with ‘closing the gap in educational achievements between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade’ (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010, p. 3).

A story of local funds of knowledge

This story is about Shane an Aboriginal boy. Shane was going to school in the following year. We had some concerns about his motor movements and the outreach occupational therapist had been working with him. To get the occupational therapist to continue to support this child when he went to school we had to get the school

counsellor to assess him. After the assessment was completed the school counsellor spoke to Angie and I. She said that Shane's score indicated that he had a mild intellectual delay. This shocked us as our observations indicated that this child was generally at or above a developmentally age appropriate level. In fact he had developed some clever strategies to avoid doing motor movements that he found difficult. For example when asked to close his eyes and put his finger on his nose, he said, 'Ooo no that is soo gross.'

This child could clearly speak Aboriginal English, and had a good understanding of Standard Australian English. He spent a large amount of time with his great grandfather who was an Elder, and was learning the Bundjalung language and culture. He had learned and could tell you about many of the traditional foods, their Bundjalung names, where they could be found, caught or gathered. He could tell you when it was the right time of the year to hunt or gather them. He could also share detailed information about the wrestler whose picture was on his school bag. That year we had silk worms and Shane was most interested in this project. He would come in each morning, get the magnifying glass and examine the stage of the silk worms. He would then look at the book we had on silk worms and find the page that indicated the stage of the worms, and then make comparisons. He helped care for them and liked to discuss what had happened to them. Like his great grandfather he also used long silences when asked a question. He would eventually answer with a well thought out reply (Eades 1995).

So when the school counsellor had said his test score had indicated that he had a mild intellectual delay and she needed to speak to the carer, together as one, Angie and I said we did not think the test score was a true indication of this child's ability. The counsellor was adamant and said that he did have a delay, and it would not be helpful for him if we were in denial about it. After firmly expressing that she did not agree with the counsellor's findings, nor did she want any part of advising Shane's family of his intelligence score, Angie walked away. I asked the counsellor about the test and if it was aimed at white middle class children, or if it made any allowance for children from an Aboriginal culture. She did admit that it was probably aimed more at Anglo Australian children. I asked her if it took into account the long silences that this child

might have used when asked to explain something. Again she said no and asked what I meant by long silences.

It would seem that the school counsellor had not taken into account local funds of knowledge so the assessment had shown Shane to be intellectually delayed. Yet if you had put Shane out in the bush with the counsellor it would probably be him that would have the greater knowledge of how to find local food sources. What message would this classification of a mild intellectual delay be sending to his carers and great grandfather, people who know that this child has an age appropriate understanding of his culture and the ways of his people? Would we be sending a message that their knowledge is not as worthy as Western knowledge? Could we be sending home a message that could undermine the authority of his great grandfather and Elder? This was an example of the limitations of the intelligence measurement used by the school counsellor in this cross-cultural situation.

In this particular case we strongly suggested that the counsellor did not talk to the carers about this child having an intellectual delay. In this instance Angie and I had not had to discuss this matter between ourselves at the moment of communicating with the school counsellor. We knew the child and we knew the school counsellor was wrong. We also had no compunction about standing up for the rights of this child and his family. We did yarn about it later in the day and Angie had said that the school counsellor had made her angry. I knew that she had been angry when she walked away from the discussion, and also knew that in this instance I needed to speak up for Shane and his family. This story is part of our story, and demonstrates the understanding of our community and culture competency.

Culture competency

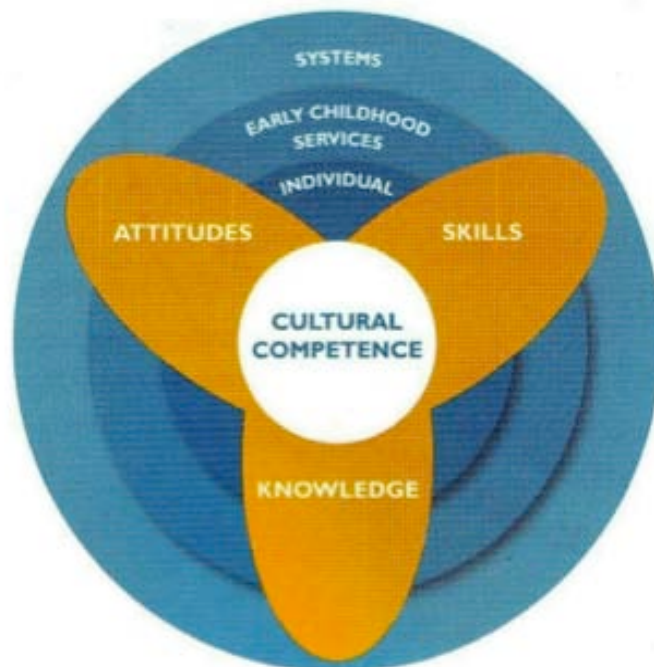
This research can be brought together using the EYLF. Our story, like the title of EYLF has been one of 'Belonging, Being and Becoming' (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010), how we women have found our place in early childhood education. The journey to relational space, or, our becoming, has been our story, that of women belonging, our story of being individuals yet also being us, a team. As we have created a place of relational space so we have been able to

extend the experience of belonging, being and becoming to the children attending our preschool.

We are from two different Australian cultures and we have achieved a space that the EYLF calls cultural competency or 3rd Space (Barrera & Corso, 2003). However, we have moved beyond this to relational space. When cultural competency is discussed in the EYLF (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010, p. 25) it states there are three elements that underpin its success, and they are on three levels as shown in Figure 7.1. The framework identifies these elements as skills, knowledge and attitude. They must be applied on three levels, the individual, the early childhood service and the systems. These three elements intersect over the three levels to make cultural competency its core.

Figure 7.1: Culture Competence in Early Childhood Education and Care

(Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010, p. 25)



Beginning with the element skills, EYLF (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010, p. 25) states:

Skills:

- for living and working in the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts (socially)
- for working in local Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander contexts (professionally).

I feel that at the individual level it means me developing skills in auto-ethnographic research, which includes looking at myself and my attitude within the community and early childhood learning environment. The individual level also requires me to consider colleagues as well as each child in the centre. At the service level it includes the skill to being open to listening and learning (ethnographic research) about children's families. The systems level is about gaining the skills to work competently with the local community, Elders, and agencies involved in our service. When this is related to Shane's story, it means having the skills to deal with the appropriate agency representative, such as the school counsellor, and being able to stand up for what is right for our children, their families and community. The system level would include the skills and desire to gain an understanding of the local and national history that gives a historical context to those Aboriginal families.

The next EYLF (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010, p. 25) element is knowledge and is stated as:

Knowledge:

- understanding and awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, history and contemporary societies.
- understanding that the importance of connectedness to land and spirituality is the core of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identity

This is about gaining local funds of knowledge. At an individual level it is about listening to our Aboriginal colleagues and children, taking time to listen to their yarns, and hearing their stories. For example from listening to the children, the Aboriginal staff, and community, I heard Shane's stories and therefore had an understanding of local funds of knowledge. At the early childhood service level there is a need to put the individual yarns together to learn the culture of the families and community. It is about learning of the families' relatedness to country affirming Martin's (2008a, p. 62) statement 'This knowledge is encapsulated and expressed through Stories.' She

explains that the capital in Stories is that they are so much more than entertainment; they signify and express relatedness and identity. At the systems level there is a need to understand the general political and social aspects of Aboriginal people.

The third element of cultural competency is attitudes (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010, p. 25) that states:

Attitudes:

- exploring individual and societal values and attitudes.

This must include an understanding on an individual level that it is my responsibility, the non-Aboriginal teacher, to be aware of my whiteness and any biases or stereotypical generalizations I may feel. Once I am aware of this I can move to the next levels where I ensure that I advocate cultural competency that will be reflected in our service's philosophy and policies. At the systems level I must be aware of the white noise that may often be felt by our families. As Shane's story demonstrates, through my attitude and awareness of white noise I can turn it down and be a vocal advocate beside my Aboriginal colleagues and families.

These three distinct elements of skills, knowledge, and attitudes must be examined on three levels. When these elements are understood individually as well as merged with each other on all levels then cultural competency may be attained. The drawing I made in Figure 4.5 was to remind myself about being an effective auto-ethnographic researcher who has learned to turn down the white noise, thus gaining local funds of knowledge, this is my version of cultural competency.

Summary

I began this thesis with the question: *What is the essence or nature of my experience as a non-Aboriginal teacher who has been part of a collaborative leadership partnership with an Aboriginal teacher?* In summarizing the answer, the research and writing about it has been a journey that allowed me to examine myself, explore a personal philosophy, and record my colleague's stories as well as our leadership story. It has been both an academic and a spiritual journey. This thesis is a current explanation of the essence or nature of my experience.

In a similar manner to Pompper (2010) who reflects on the qualitative research method of auto-ethnography, I also have learned much about myself. Pompper (2010) states that as an auto-ethnographer recounting experiences of others and self, it may reveal the very human changes experienced throughout the research processes. I discovered some of the infamous history from my hometown Alice Springs. I have examined experiences that have shaped my philosophy on life. This includes my work at the preschool in our community.

The next part of my question continues: *How have we reached a relational space as a collaborative leadership team? Why have we been able to encourage each other's personal growth, as well as support the children and community of our preschool?* Through examining my whiteness, and looking at the white noise of our society, I have explained how I have moved from contact zone to a 3rd space and then to a place of deeper understanding, that of a relational space. Within this space we have been able to form a close collaborative leadership team with similar ideals. This space has also been conducive for us in that we have seen a need to extend our knowledge on child development, and we have acted on that by both completing formal tertiary studies. It has become natural to be supportive of each other in the area of academic and personal growth.

In chapter two I discussed how yarning was used to collect my data, and I believe yarning is a methodology in itself. I acknowledge that the methodology of yarning is an Aboriginal research method, and therefore belongs to the Aboriginal community, but I have been encouraged to use it. Yarning has not only played a major part as a research methodology, it has also been a key part of our working and personal relationship. We have used yarning to encourage each other's personal growth, and as the title of this thesis states, these are our yarns.

Our leadership relationship has grown and been maintained through yarning, with humour playing a major role. As I reflect on our journey, I know that being able to laugh together has been a major natural strategy used when facing the many challenges that confronts us. As a leadership team we are also part of our sisters group. This group provides support through being there for a yarn and a joke. Our dinner outings are a time we can relax together and laugh about the stress in our lives.

Open yarns that acknowledge each other's qualities and roles are an imperative part of our relationship. Within our relationship I looked to Muriel, and now Angie with regards to any matter involving their community, and I would be foolish not to. Often Angie is happy for me to deal with government departments, though we do yarn about all matters before any decisions are made. We understand that we can still learn from each other as well as learn together.

Throughout this research I have come to know names for the wonder I have felt at times. Those names are relatedness and the in-between, and they are part of the answer to our personal growth. As explained in chapter six my feeling is that the in-between is that perfect space where a person is in harmony with themselves and the universe. It is not a place most of us live in, but it is a place we may find and it does have a place in the early childhood educational environment.

The final part of my research question asks; *are there lessons for other early childhood educators from this narrative, and will these lessons give a full and deeper meaning to our joint leadership role?* I think the lessons that I have learned and been able to share with the reader, are lessons that will give a deeper understanding to our story of joint leadership. As part of this journey I have spoken at several conferences and shared anecdotal stories from my journey. Feedback from the majority of non-Aboriginal participants has been that, the stories I have told have assisted them in seeing the problem of white noise. Through understanding that problem it has made them feel aware of their whiteness, and thus been a reminder of how to be more culturally competent with Aboriginal colleagues and families.

This thesis was written to share my experiences. I have told of strategies used that work for us, our leadership team, our preschool. While some may be useful to you, I would like to conclude with the advice that as unique individuals and communities, each early childhood teacher must find what works for their community.

Final thoughts

I wish to conclude this thesis with a poem and a drawing. I started to write the poem before beginning the last chapter. It became a space where I could express my feelings about the journey my research has taken me on. The drawing was done in 2004 when I had been asked to convey my relationship to the land. As soon as I had completed the poem I knew the drawing would complement it. I do not consider myself an artist, poet or writer, yet I feel we all have a creative aspect within us. It is our life.

My philosophy

Many people have touched me
I am me, yet also a member of many groups
These groups may intertwine or be separate
I am a member of my family
I am a member of an extended family and family friends
I am a member of our sisters group
I am a member of our community and social groups
I am a member of an academic group
So many people from all of these groups have given to me
I have received love, friendship, mentoring
I have felt wonder and the in-between
I laughed, wept and shared many conversations
There are many who are a part of my life

I see such beauty
I have seen the red deserts
I have seen purple mountain ranges
I have seen golden beaches and blue green oceans
I have seen rainforests, woodlands and pastures
I see the wonders of mother earth

I have tasted traditional Bundjalung food
and foods of other cultures
I have tasted disappointment and success

I taste the wonders of life

I have smelled the earth,
and its range of joys and challenges

I smell the wonders of life

I have heard the birds,
and the sounds of the Australian bush

I have heard the music and conversations

of our cultures

I have heard children laughing, crying,
and telling their stories

I hear the wonder of life

What goes around comes around

So much has been given to me

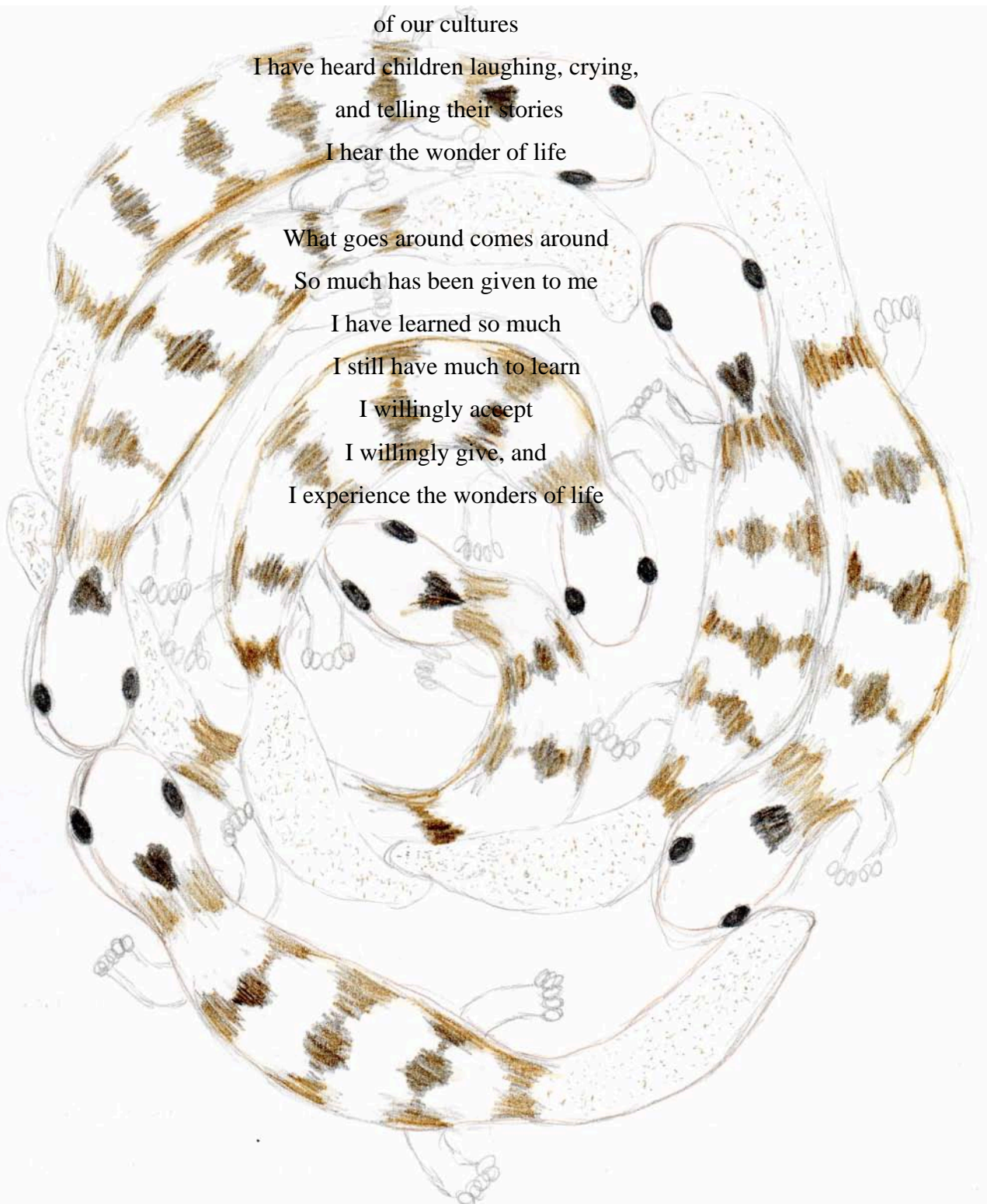
I have learned so much

I still have much to learn

I willingly accept

I willingly give, and

I experience the wonders of life



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