Interrogating social justice in early years education: How effectively do contemporary policies and practices create equitable learning environments for indigenous Australian children?

This paper will examine some of the contemporary policies and practices in Australian early years education to provide an insight into why social justice is such a critical element in preparing Australia’s Indigenous children to engage in learning experiences in ways that will enable them to establish sound foundations for their future learning journeys. To understand why social justice and equity are central to delivering quality early years education to Indigenous children, it is vital that ...
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Professor Jeannie Herbert  
Foundation Chair of Indigenous Studies  
Centre for Indigenous Studies  
Charles Sturt University, NSW  
Australia.

Professor Jeannie Herbert  
Foundation Chair of Indigenous Studies  
Charles Sturt University  
Locked Bag 49  
Dubbo  
New South Wales 2830  
Australia

Tel: +61 (0)2 6885 7389  
Email: jherbert@csu.edu.au

JEANNIE HERBERT AM is Foundation Chair of Indigenous Studies at Charles Sturt University, New South Wales, Australia. Following a long career as a teacher, guidance officer and educational administrator and manager, she has, during the past 2 decades in the university sector, established a reputation for strong leadership and innovative thinking in Indigenous Education. Professor Herbert was awarded an Australia Medal in the 2012 Queen’s Birthday Honours for her work in education, particularly through improvements to educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians. While her PhD study focused on examining Indigenous success in education especially in terms of clarifying Indigenous Australian perspectives of what constitutes educational success, her current research focus is education/research as a tool of empowerment for indigenous peoples. Her research interests focus on Indigenous education and education/research as tool of empowerment.

The work contained in this paper is my original composition and contains no material that has been previously published or submitted elsewhere except where due reference is made.
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Abstract

This paper will examine some of the contemporary policies and practices in Australian early years education to provide an insight into why social justice is such a critical element in preparing Australia’s Indigenous children to engage in learning experiences in ways that will enable them to establish sound foundations for their future learning journeys. To understand why social justice and equity are central to delivering quality early years education to Indigenous children, it is vital that the modern educator has some knowledge of educational history, in particular, the role of education in promoting and maintaining the status quo thus ensuring the continuing dominance of those who occupied positions of power.

Viewing the expectations of contemporary early years education against the backdrop of past realities will serve to highlight the way in which education sets the scene for the cultural destruction and dispossession that has, in too many parts of the world, been the long-term outcome of education for Indigenous peoples. Examining the themes and forms of discourse that have informed the theorising and practice underpinning the development of concepts around social justice will demonstrate the importance of addressing diversity in early years education contexts.

Introduction

In choosing to interrogate social justice in early years education for Indigenous Australian children, I will begin by demonstrating my capacity to undertake such a task. I am an Aboriginal woman from the Kimberley region of Western Australia and my long career in education began when I graduated as a primary teacher in 1962. Over the following 25 years, I gained a diversity of experience as a classroom teacher across all levels of education from pre-school to university. My unique experiences have included teaching early childhood composite classes in rural and remote locations for over a decade; running a local pre-school
when I lived in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea; and in 1978-79 when, based upon my
teaching experiences on Christmas Island and in Papua New Guinea, I was one of three
women invited to establish and run the first pre-school to be operated in Jubail, Saudi Arabia.
In addition to my considerable experience as a classroom teacher, I am a qualified P-12
guidance officer and have worked as a district guidance officer, senior guidance officer,
primary school principal and regional co-ordinator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
education (P-12). Social justice for Indigenous students was a critical focus of my work in
these roles. Since moving into the university sector in 1996, I have been employed in various
positions including: director of several Indigenous support units; head of an Indigenous
Studies school; Professor of Indigenous Studies; and both the Director and then the Vice-
Chancellor of Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE), the only all
Indigenous tertiary education provider in Australia. As Foundation Chair of Indigenous
Studies at Australia’s Charles Sturt University, social justice continues to be a major theme in
my work. As a qualitative researcher, I undertake research that identifies Indigenous
educational success and achievement and demonstrates how education can be a tool of
empowerment, enabling people to acquire equity and justice. As this was also the focus of my
PhD research, I would argue that it reflects my capacity to contribute to the discussion around
the theme for this journal: “Social Justice in Early Years Education: Practices and
Understandings”.

Given that this paper will focus on Australia’s Indigenous peoples, the following information
may provide some useful insights into some of the issues that contemporary educators may
need to address in working with Indigenous students. Increasingly, in program administration
and some legislation, Australian Governments define an Indigenous person as a person of
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies and is accepted as such by the
community in which he or she lives. Identification is determined by: descent; self-
identification; and community acceptance (Gardiner-Garden, 2003, p.4). Aboriginal people
and Torres Strait Island people are generally acknowledged as having been the inhabitants of
the Australian continent in 1788 when the British arrived and colonisation began. It is
generally accepted that there were over 700 languages and dialects spoken by the various
clans or ‘nations’ each occupying their own country across the continent (Herbert, 2006,
p.73). Many groups had different languages and cultural beliefs although there appears to
have been no population records kept. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)
2011 census data Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples now account for 2.5% of the total Australian population.

As identity is a critical issue for Australia’s Indigenous peoples, it is important to clarify the terminology used in this paper. Up until the early 1990s, the term ‘Aboriginal’ was generally used to indicate any person/persons of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage. But, by the late 1990s, the Australian Government, as evidenced in written documents, appears to have adopted the term ‘Indigenous’ people when referring to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. While discussions with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people demonstrates their preference for the term Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, it is worth noting that individuals are increasingly identifying according to their personal line/s of descent, eg. mother’s and/or father’s clan groups. However, in this paper, the term ‘Indigenous Australians’ has been used to denote Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, in an attempt to avoid confusion for international readers.

The issue of identity, and who determines one’s identity, is a critical factor within the context of social justice in early years education. This is because in Australia, identifying people on the basis of their race, particularly with regard to the colour of their skin, has been a critical tool of the coloniser. Herbert (2012) argues that societal power structures in Australia reflect the British commitment to centre-periphery thinking, suggesting that this could be ‘... the core issue lying at the heart of... [Australia’s]... colonial history, the issue that appears, in hindsight, to have proved most damaging to Australia's Indigenous peoples’ (p.2). Dealing with the long-term impact of power relationships that positioned Indigenous Australians at the margins of society and ultimately led to the serious inter-generational educational disadvantage that continues to be evidenced in many Indigenous families is an everyday reality for many Australian educators, including those in early childhood settings. As race continues to be a critical element in determining whose voice is heard in Australia, the establishment of socially just learning environments, especially during the formative years of schooling, is vital.

**Early childhood framework**
In reflecting upon the theme for this journal, it is worth noting how closely it is aligned to the mission and value statements of Early Childhood Australia (ECA the largest early childhood advocacy organisation in Australia) as set out in their Annual Report 2008-2009.

**ECA’s mission**
Early Childhood Australia will advocate to ensure quality, social justice and equity in all issues relating to the education and care of children from birth to eight years.

**ECA’s values**
The rights of children, leadership, excellence, respect, courage, honesty, openness, collaboration, diversity, justice and the social inclusion of children (ECA, 2009, p.1).

Significantly, the ECA (2009) also reported that their “Strategic Directions ask the organisation to give particular priority in its work to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families” thus enabling “the organisation to build a way forward” (p.7). The notion that there is a need to ‘build a way forward’ in redressing this nation’s educational history is a critical element of this paper.

It could also be argued that by articulating the importance of social justice within both a philosophical and a strategic framework, the ECA highlights the critical centrality of social justice in ensuring an equitable service delivery to Australia’s Indigenous children from the beginning of their engagement in the formal education process in this country. Two questions arise as a result of this. What do we mean when we talk of ‘social justice’ today? and What are the social justice implications, for teachers and schools, in seeking to create inclusive learning environments for Indigenous students in the early years of schooling? In attempting to answer these questions, this paper will now move to an exploration of what is meant by the term ‘social justice’. While acknowledging that a commitment to social justice may be perceived as central to what many early childhood teachers think they do, it is essential that they recognise and accept that the concept of social justice is complex and diverse and as such remains contested amongst those who call on it as the foundation of their practice.

**Defining Social Justice**

Defining social justice may be easier said than done when we consider the sheer scope of meanings encapsulated within the word ‘social’ and the possible implications of those meanings given the current policy focus regarding the need for early childhood services to
provide inclusive learning environments. The 2011 Indigenous Child Care Choices (ICCC) Project Report (Bowes & Kitson, 2011) suggests that the provision of inclusive learning environments are “a matter of social justice and equity” (p.3). Within this context, a consideration of the work of the social theorist Nancy Fraser could be useful. In 1996, Fraser argued that the concept of social justice appeared to be increasingly divided into two types: one that focuses on the notion of redistributive claims that “seek a more just distribution of resources and goods” (p.1); and another that focuses on the notion of recognition or the acceptance of difference, “where assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect” (p.2).

This may appear to be a relatively straightforward solution in a paper that seeks to highlight ways in which the nation might seek to redress the legacy of history. However, it could be more complex than it sounds for, as Allan Luke pointed out in his contribution to an Education Queensland on-line conference in October, 1999:

> we can’t begin to decide what to do educationally or how to plan or where to put resources and programs unless we know something about the students we’re teaching and the communities we work in . . . equity and social justice are still prime educational issues, and it’s imperative that we understand exactly who is being left out and left behind, educationally and economically (p.2).

Such arguments align with Fraser’s (1996) assertion that claims to do with identity reflect “recognition of the distinctive perspectives of ethnic, ‘racial’, and sexual minorities, as well as of gender difference” (p.2). She argues that the increasing domination of recognition claims has led to a shift in the “discourse of social justice” so that “developments have conspired to de-center, if not to extinguish, claims for egalitarian redistribution” (p.2). This would appear to be particularly relevant within the current discussion concerning the importance of social justice as a critical element in enabling Indigenous children to effectively engage in contemporary early childhood learning environments. Why are these arguments around the redistribution of resources and the acceptance of cultural difference so relevant in this paper? Because, in the 1990’s, after centuries of oppression, these were the critical areas of focus for effecting change and creating more socially just educational environments for Indigenous Australian students. However that focus changed as a result of the massive societal changes that Luke (1999) indicated were impacting upon educational
service delivery. Hence, the current situation, where it could be legitimately argued there is a danger of equity and social justice being buried beneath the mountain of new demands continually being churned out in education at both systemic and school levels. At this point in the discussion, it may be useful to reflect upon how the system, within both individual and collective contexts, responds to the expectations that are placed upon it. If it is, as is often the case, the squeakiest wheel that gets the oil, then social justice may well be a casualty for it is often those groups who have suffered the highest degree of previous educational disadvantage whose voices remain silenced. This relates to Luke’s (1999) argument that, “equity and social justice still matter, but differently” (p.1). Here Luke is warning that educators need to be aware of the structural changes that are occurring in society due to “new economies and cultures” (p.1) and what that means for them in terms of the way in which disadvantage may be changing in their area or impacting upon different groups of students.

**Contextualising social justice in Australian early years education**

Elliott’s 2006 Australian Education Review of “Early Childhood Education: Pathways to quality and equity for all children” suggests a real hodgepodge of early childhood provision in this country. She highlights what she terms the ‘care-education divide’ to demonstrate the importance of Australia moving on from its long-held position of “early childhood care and education services” (p.54). This division may well reflect the way in which an increasingly complex administrative and regulatory environment, at all levels of government, has not only blurred the policy/practice commonalities and differences between ‘care’ and ‘education’ but also created a state of persistent confusion within the sector (Elliott, 2006). Interestingly, this ‘confusion’ to which Elliott refers could also be connected to the arguments raised by both Fraser and Luke and discussed above. In acknowledging the complexities of a service provision that appears to have evolved, over decades, in response to the demands of a diversity of groups, Elliott (2006) argues for urgent action to overcome the care-education divide. Significantly, in recommending a collaborative approach to gathering and using research outcomes and data already available across the nation, she also provides a strategic and systematic approach. This approach could enable the nation to take that “first step to close the care–education gap” and move to do whatever needs to be done in order to simplify the system and “provide a better coordinated, whole-of-government early childhood strategy”
While it may be difficult for our various levels of government to reconcile their actions with such thinking, common sense suggests it is the answer to delivering equitable early childhood education for all Australian children. This would seem particularly relevant within the context of ensuring social justice guides the development and delivery of inclusive early childhood educational environments to Australia’s Indigenous children. It is even more relevant when considered from a viewpoint of how we, as teachers, respond to change.

Given that the focus of this paper is early education for Indigenous Australian children, and that a number of writers (for example, Brennan, 1998; Gordon, 2006; Purdie et al, 2000; & Martin, 2007) have identified issues of equity and inequality in early childhood services as being critical factors in continuing Indigenous educational disadvantage, it is timely to consider the following statement from the Australian Human Rights Commission:

Social justice is about making sure that every Australian – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – has choices about how they live and the means to make those choices. It also means recognising the distinctive rights that Indigenous Australians hold as the original peoples of this land (downloaded from Human Rights website 2013, para 4).

That the Human Rights Commission considered such a statement necessary, has implications for education service delivery when considered within the context of the introductory statement to the National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples: “Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders are the first Nations of this continent and have inalienable rights as the indigenous peoples of Australia. Education is one of these rights” (DEET, 1995, p.xi).

**Beginning with the discourse**

Recent Australian research (Purdie et al, 2000; Martin, 2007) clearly reveals that education has failed to deliver on its promise to Indigenous students. In particular, the research highlights the reality that educational engagement, at both systemic and schooling levels, has reflected the racist psyche that emerged out of Australia’s colonial history. Martin, in her 2007 paper “Ma(r)king Tracks and Reconceptualising Aboriginal Early Childhood Education”, names the colonial discourses of “invisibility” and “paternalism” as having prescribed “the relationships and thus the outcomes in the education of young Aboriginal
children in Australia” (p.15). Critically, these discourses informed educational thinking in Australia for most of the past two centuries and have had a devastating influence upon the quality and the focus of service delivery for Aboriginal children. In laying bare the Indigenous experience of what passed for ‘education’ of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Indigenous researchers have highlighted the reality of the neglect that had been especially prevalent in the areas of early childhood, senior secondary and tertiary education. Herbert’s 2003 study found that the discourse of failure that surrounded Indigenous education not only contributed to, but served to perpetuate, assumptions concerning the inability, particularly of Aboriginal students, to achieve academic success due to a supposed lack of intelligence and/or parental failure to appreciate the value of western style education. In reality, education was a de-humanising experience for many Indigenous Australian children. Most importantly, however, this same study found that where Indigenous students had been enabled to engage in the process of their own education they tended to emerge as confident and empowered citizens in control of their own lives. Significantly, such ‘enabling’ may or may not have been teacher inspired although, in retrospect, the capacity to engage often appeared linked to an individual’s self-esteem, their capacity to value themselves.

The critical importance of such findings, however, is the implication that Australia may not be done with its colonial past, an argument that would appear to be supported by the following excerpt from the Northern Territory’s (NT) Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: “Little Children are Sacred” Report of 2007:

... like Learning Lessons, the Inquiry found the need to prepare Aboriginal children for learning and get them “ready” for school and learning. The importance of the early years in a child’s development are well documented by health professionals and education experts. The work of Professor Fiona Stanley and her research in Western Australia further confirms the importance of the 0-5 years period in the development of an Aboriginal child (Wild & Anderson, 2007, p.149).

Furthermore, the “Little Children are Sacred” Report also revealed that seven years ago, Recommendation 84 of the 1999 Learning Lessons Report stated that “Within a period of five years, there would be guaranteed access to play centres and pre-schools for all children in the three to five-year age group” (Wild & Anderson, 2007, p.149). This has not happened.
The Inquiry believed that early childhood education must be available for all Aboriginal children, wherever they live and that this is now critical.

In the face of this reality, it could be argued that the colonial attitudes that have long nurtured the negative discourses surrounding Indigenous educational achievement appeared, quite recently, to be intact and active in the Northern Territory. Of even greater concern, however, is the likely reality that, in 2013, the guarantee given in that 1999 Learning Lessons Report remains merely a paper promise, an example of the continuing effectiveness of the old colonial discourses.

**Past informing the present**

There is a reason for this country’s apparent inability to deliver educational services that enable Indigenous children to achieve increased equality of outcomes from their education. All educators in this country know the underlying reasons for this situation even if many prefer not to think about such matters. The reality is that until our education systems and those that work within them face up to, and accept the truth, of this nation’s colonial history we cannot move forward. This is a critical dimension of ensuring social justice in early years education for this has been a complex and deeply damaging history. A history that has not only impacted upon Indigenous students and those whose families can trace their Australian residency back over several generations but also, in more recent times, can be seen to be influencing those who are more recent arrivals to our shores, many of whom come to seek protection.

It is not only a matter of being aware of the past educational policies and practices that were imposed upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, but also of engaging in a process that will enable all educators to develop a deep understanding of what was done in the name of education, in order to undo the long term damage that has been visited on Indigenous Australians. In order to achieve the attitudinal change that will ensure different discourses around the education of Indigenous Australian children educators must first acknowledge that the shutters of colonialism cast long shadows and continue to do so in many of our educational institutions. The deeply embedded racist psyche that evolved out of those colonial discourses, can be as elusive as it is offensive, but must also be recognised as
extremely persistent. Within this context, it must be acknowledged that The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF), the first national framework for early childhood education in this country could be argued as an attempt to address some of the issues raised in this paper. In a discussion around the development of the EYLF, Sumson et al, argued the importance of beginning with an underlying vision, agreed values and stakeholder-defined goals in creating such frameworks but also indicated potential challenges associated with negotiating such agreements when working with a diversity of stakeholder groups across the country (2009, p.1). This is valuable advice because, despite these potential challenges, the most important issue here is that the development of the EYLF represents a commitment from government to endeavour to address educational inequity, nationally. Choosing to begin this task in the early years of education, offers considerable hope for the future. But, if education was the tool of the coloniser - creating, promoting and maintaining the centre-periphery power structures that controlled the nation –can it also become the inspiration for building a socially just society?

Seeking social justice through policies and practices

The critical question is: “How useful would simply changing education policy be in addressing the educational inequities previously identified?” In terms of Indigenous education, there is a precedent. The National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP later NATSIEP) was the first policy ever developed in this country to specifically address the education needs of Indigenous Australians (MCEETYA, 1996). The NATSIEP was endorsed by all governments and implemented on January 1, 1990. Indigenous educators and communities around the country expressed considerable support for the policy which was developed out of the recommendations of the 1988 Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force. It established twenty-one long term goals designed to improve access, participation, retention and success rates for Indigenous Australian students across all levels of education. These goals were grouped under four main themes: involvement in decision-making; equality of access to educational services; equity of educational participation; and equitable and appropriate educational outcomes. The NATSIEP presented the argument that a concentrated effort from pre-school through to university would ensure the achievement of more equitable educational outcomes for Indigenous Australian students (DEET, 1995, p.10–11). While it reflected the commitment of the Commonwealth Government at that time toward addressing issues associated with education for Indigenous Australians, it was equally valuable in terms
of its focus on equity provision as a means of achieving quality while catering for diversity. It is likely that many educators may not have read the NATSIEP, but its implementation and subsequent review contributed to raising the profile of Indigenous education across the education community. This was a critical step in ensuring Indigenous students became an identified group within annual institutional planning processes (Baldwin, 1991, p.41).

In 1993, the Commonwealth Government set up a taskforce to review the NATSIEP across all sectors of education. Significantly, their final report found that ‘[t]wo principal themes emerge from the evidence presented to the Review — equity and reconciliation’ (DEET, 1995, p.14). Despite evidence of improved educational experiences and outcomes, particularly in the tertiary sector, respondents expressed considerable concern that ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities are not achieving equitable outcomes — culturally, economically, or politically — from their education’ (DEET, 1995, p.14). In fact, the statistical evidence revealed that retention and success rates were actually demonstrating the failure of the higher education sector to provide an education that met the needs of the majority of Indigenous Australians. Hence the university sector could be perceived as having failed to develop a culture of learning amongst an oppressed minority. Such failure could be attributed to ignorance within the sector or the direct outcome of government policies that reflect internal colonization, a process that can occur when a nation fails to become independent of those who colonised it, hence its people continue to be dominated. According to Welch (1996), the important difference in relation to internal colonisation is that ‘both colonisers and colonised occupy the same territory’ (p.34) with the dominant culture continuing to use its ‘same mechanisms of cultural domination, political oppression, and economic exploitation’ (p.34) to foster and/or maintain dependency. It is also valuable to align the issues emerging out of arguments around colonial oppression, racism, etc. with findings from recent Australian studies into concepts of privilege, especially white privilege, in Australian society.

Following the NATSIEP Review, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment and Training established a taskforce to develop a National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 1996–2002 (MCEETYA, 1996), in which the twenty one goals of the NATSIEP were re-aggregated into eight priority areas. This ensured Indigenous education continued to be a priority for Commonwealth and State/Territory Departments of Education in 1996 and strategic funding was focused on the need to achieve
educational equity for Indigenous students. The implementation of the National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS) (2000–2004) was designed to enable Indigenous students to achieve English literacy and numeracy at levels comparable to those achieved by other Australians. Interestingly, this strategy, intended to ‘close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children’ (Kemp, 2001, p.1), through targeting elements including absenteeism, conductive hearing loss and other barriers to learning, along with the provision of pre-school opportunities. These same issues, which closely resemble issues previously identified as deficits, have now been targeted for more than two decades with very limited success. There is a sense of déjà vu — of Indigenous peoples simply getting more of the same. Based on these outcomes, it could be argued that the mere changing of education policy does not in itself appear sufficient to address educational inequity.

Significantly, while the NIELNS articulated the need for teachers to use culturally appropriate teaching methods, Osborne’s (2001) work on culturally responsive pedagogy, suggested that culturally appropriate teaching “is perhaps too powerful in its connotation for our purposes, given our lack of knowledge of the range of cultural differences” (p.59). Such comments suggest a mismatch between what the government was advocating compared with what pre and in-service teachers had the capacity to deliver in terms of addressing diversity in the classroom. Such issues demonstrated a failure to align policy and practice, and were a critical concern when considered within the overarching framework of The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century (1999) and, in particular, the social justice goals of that declaration. Viewed within the framework of the current debate concerning educational achievement in this country, it could be argued that the realities of the past, in terms of attitudes and actions, could be continuing to inform contemporary policy development and implementation to the detriment of teaching practice, thus maintaining the educational oppression of many Indigenous children. Building socially just early childhood environments could be said to still be in its infancy.

Nevertheless, in revisiting past policies and practices, it is obvious that there has been progress although the pace of change has been incredibly slow and has not always led to equitable outcomes for Indigenous students. In establishing the need for education that addresses both the education of Indigenous Australian students as well as the education of all students about Indigenous Australian cultures, societies and issues, members of various Ministerial Councils, over recent years, have endeavoured to provide educational providers
with clear directions regarding the effective preparation of students as citizens of the future. However, the real dilemma may be the degree to which social justice is achievable in a society where successive governments ignore the continuing impact of their country’s racist culture upon specific groups within the society (Herbert, 2003). Given that the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), the peak intergovernmental forum in Australia, was established in 1992 with a brief for driving social and economic reforms intended to improve the lives of all Australians, including closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage, it has been interesting to observe the power struggles that not only slow the progress of reform but at times threaten its continuation.

The fact that many of this nation’s Indigenous people must still struggle to acquire an education and that for many, the quality of the experience and the relevance of its outcomes, will be entirely up to their own or their family’s determination to get what they want out of education, remains the Australian reality and is a damning indictment on our education systems. Acknowledging the reality of this history, this paper is premised on the belief that any discussion concerning the future education of Indigenous Australians must involve a negotiated process. This is a vital step in ensuring an education process that has the capacity not only to challenge past assumptions but to also engage in scholarship that is deeply focussed on recognising, accepting and using the truth to drive any future educational social justice agenda. It is worth noting that, in their report, the research team for the Indigenous Child Care Choices (ICCC) Project (Bowes & Kitson, 2011), not only outlined their initial approach to engaging Indigenous communities in the proposed research but also highlighted the importance of their negotiations with those communities in relation to the choice of “a methodology that recognises difference” (p.31). The subsequent findings of the 2011 ICCC Report reflect the value of their stance in endeavouring to create a process that enabled effective and meaningful engagement with Aboriginal people in undertaking the research. Significantly, the findings of this study indicate that simply changing education policy will not in itself deliver equity in education. Rather in highlighting the importance of meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities in relation to future education for their families, it reveals the critical significance of teacher practice in creating socially just learning environments for all students.

**Overcoming the history**
It is only through a deep engagement with the history of the education of Indigenous Australian’s that educators can even begin to understand what happened to Australia’s Indigenous peoples in the name of education. Engaging in such a process would essentially enable every participant to not only experience education research as a tool of empowerment at both an individual and collective level, but also to reflect upon the purpose of education in today’s global environment. Such reflection will allow them to better appreciate that “[p]edagogy is bigger than methodology, it involves reflecting on society, values, history, environment and learning itself . . .” (Wrigley et al, 2012, p.99). Just as Herbert’s research (2003) demonstrated the success of using education as a tool of empowerment with Indigenous students, so too could this be a worthwhile approach to providing individual pre and in-service early childhood teachers with the knowledge, skills and understanding they need to create inclusive learning environments. Environments in which they can accept their responsibility for delivering equitable education experiences that will enable all of their students to get what they want and need from the education experience. The critical concept here is that the teacher is taking responsibility for engaging with his/her students and the wider community, in ways that make the connections between the learning that takes place in the school and that which occurs beyond the school, in the community. Such a process could be linked to Martin’s (2007) explanations regarding ‘relatedness to one’s Ancestors, Ancestral estates and the animals, people, plants, skies, waterways, climate, land, and spirits that is unquestionable . . . experienced according to one’s gender and lifehood stage . . .’ (2007, p.18) and its importance in effectively working with Indigenous Australian children. Essentially, Martin is highlighting the critical importance of teachers, including those in early years settings, adapting their practice/s for preparing Indigenous students to engage in the lifeworlds they are likely to inhabit in the future. But to ensure the quality of both the product and the process, teachers also need to realise and accept that:

[d]eep care is central to socially just pedagogies, which understand the need to scaffold from where students are at, respecting their existing knowledges, while at the same time making available the high-status knowledges traditionally valued in educational systems. This involves a commitment to epistemological inclusion: effective pedagogies are contextualised and connected to students’ lifeworlds, whilst stretching beyond these in educative ways – community funds of knowledge meeting valorised cultural capital. (Wrigley et al, 2012, p.99)
This is what happens when social justice effectively permeates a learning environment. Creating equitable learning environments that deliver quality early years education for all students, including Indigenous Australian students, will both enable, and inspire, individuals to embark upon their own educational journey. It is through such acts of personal engagement in quality learning programs, that all learners, including Indigenous Australian children, empower themselves in ways that enable each and every one of them to achieve their potential in life. This is the ultimate promise of education, particularly a fair and equitable education.

Within this context, it is time to return to the question regarding the usefulness of simply changing education policy in order to address the educational inequities identified in this paper. The discussion around the implementation of the NATSIEP could be perceived as having revealed that the mere changing of policy in and of itself is not enough to deliver equitable outcomes for Indigenous students. What are the implications of that conclusion for the implementation of the EYLF?

Looking to the future

“Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia” (2009) is the result of a national collaborative process that involved inclusive groups of government policy-makers and administrators, educators, communities and parents. In making children’s learning its core focus, the framework identifies Principles, Practice and Learning Outcomes as the critical elements that should underpin all early childhood pedagogy and curriculum decision-making (DEEWR, 2009, p.9). Significantly, the EYLF document seeks to encourage educators to engage in reflective practice around the way in which they approach their work – developing their personal capacity to acquire the professional knowledge and ways of understanding and working with young children that are needed to develop inclusive learning environments. Such engagement is a critical step in providing all children, including Indigenous children, with the rich and rewarding learning experiences that ensure education does live up to its promise, thus ensuring they will have the best start in life.
In order to deliver on the promise, however, Australian universities have a vital responsibility to ensure that their learning programs provide the opportunities that will enable all pre-service teachers engage meaningfully with the students they teach as well as the families and communities from which those students come. Such deep engagement in their own learning is an essential element in enabling future teachers to move into their professional careers with a capacity to connect with their students. More importantly, however, it may also be the critical factor in ensuring the ultimate success of the ELYF in delivering more equitable education outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

References


