Building positive relationships with Indigenous children, families and communities: Learning at the cultural interface

ABSTRACT

Drawing on the work of Martin Nakata this paper brings into focus the everyday complexities involved in the cultural interfaces that educators, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, negotiate in order to promote children’s engagement with formal education processes. Analysis of emergent data from a recent evaluation of a preschool education program operating in 35 rural and remote Indigenous communities in Queensland, Australia revealed that educators struggle to situate—_their own knowledge and experiences in relation to the knowledge and experiences of others in both the educational and cultural contexts in which they work. A series of composite vignettes reporting the experiences of early childhood educators across these communities is used to examine the pedagogical opportunities available to educators when they are able to recognise—the value of the knowledge and experience of all those involved in—a child’s educational success.

Keywords: cultural interface, Indigenous education, Indigenous children, teacher experience

Building positive relationships at the cultural interface

A key factor leading to improved educational outcomes for all children is the development of positive relationships with teachers in the early years of schooling (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009; Early et al., 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Positive teacher-child relationships can complement existing relationships with primary caregivers and act as protective factors where children do not already have strong existing attachments (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). For Indigenous children the importance of positive relationships with teachers is vital. It is these relationships in the early years of schooling that are integral to establishing connections between
home and school and thus providing a consistent sense of community, well-being and belonging (Zubrick et al., 2006).

Indigenous children who navigate both the community and the school contexts are sometimes faced with conflicting developmental, social and cultural expectations of their capabilities and capital (Santoro et al., 2011). These conflicting expectations can lead to misunderstandings, feelings of shame, and quite often, negative experiences of schooling (Zubrick et al., 2006). Bridging school and community contexts can be difficult, particularly as many Indigenous adults’ own experiences of schooling have been negative. This can lead to a certain level of reticence when interacting with teachers and schools (De Plevitz, 2007). Such disconnects can contribute to negative relationships between teachers, children, families and communities and often persist because of assumptions about the role of the teacher as the arbiter of a child’s success at school and their associated pedagogical authority. An alternative approach is to utilise De Lissovoy’s (2011) notion of ‘pedagogy in common’, something that is shared and generated between teachers, children, families and communities. When pedagogical authority is re-conceptualised as pedagogy in common then relationships and dialogue as well as different knowledge systems are all recognised as equal contributors to the educational success of a child. For an approach such as this to be effective, all involved in the education of young children, including children themselves, work to promote shared understandings of the contexts in which they find themselves - home, school and community, whilst also generating new meanings through the building of those relationships.

Australian history, particularly the history of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, is replete with instances of mistrust. These extend to educational institutions, such as preschools or schools, where there are perceived power and authority inequities between the teacher and other people, including parents, children and other professionals that can exacerbate these feelings of mistrust (Warren, Baturo, & Cooper, 2010). Additionally, schools as institutions, and education as a discipline, historically derive from Western frameworks of knowledge which are often
tacitly or implicitly embedded in educational policies and practices. Indigenous ways of knowing may be acknowledged in these settings but are not often well understood (Martin, 2007). In this sense, Indigenous ways of knowing are interpreted through a Western lens and, as a result, there may be limited understanding of Indigenous representations that are based on Indigenous epistemologies and agencies. Rather, ‘Indigenous’ may well be represented as ‘other’ through the discursive practices of Whiteness which are commonly invisible (Moreton-Robinson, 2004) or from the “standpoint of scientific paradigms” (Nakata, 2007a, p. 9). If we are to promote high quality educational outcomes for all children, this imbalance needs to be recognised and addressed in ways that discern these different knowledge traditions and elucidate these representational practices.

Achieving this goal requires recognition that theories of Indigeneity do not represent fixed categories, or a singular approach. Rather, theories of Indigeneity reflect a dynamic field of ideas embedded in multiple ways of knowing and diverse origins of place. They extend across diasporic contexts and are rooted in diverse experiences of colonisation and anti-colonial resistance. They are grounded in a sense of connectedness to community, spirit, culture, place and history that exists in relation to, outside of, and beyond the colonial encounter (Sefa Dei, 2011). In the same way theories of Whiteness¹ attempt to make visible what Garner (2007) calls the ‘framing position’. Experiences of Whiteness, although manifestly plural and diverse, are, also, rooted in colonial experiences and colonial privilege. Those privileges are often represented as universal, and it is these normative framings that tend to position Indigenous experiences as ‘other’, as opposite to universal, and thus allow Western frameworks to become dominant forms of power. Representations of Whiteness as normative mean that Indigenous representations of self tend to be positioned within this relational frame, rather than constitutive in their own right. Representations of Indigeneity and Whiteness

¹ Henry Giroux argues that ‘Whiteness’ ought to be framed as “both a discourse of critique and possibility” (Giroux, 1997, p. 384). In this sense whiteness can be understood pedagogically as having the potential to transform and reform relationships at the cultural Interface.
shape the ways in which we collectively understand and respond to one another in the everyday (Nakata, 2007b).

Indigenous ways of knowing and Western ways of knowing are epistemologically and ontologically disparate (Nakata, 2007a). When the systems of knowledge that inform people’s approaches to life are different, it is not surprising that they will also approach and understand things - and each other - differently. Nor is it surprising that researchers have explored ways of understanding these differences. Martin Nakata’s (2002) work on the cultural interface provides a useful framework for thinking about how we might engage and relate these potentially conflicting approaches in ways that do not restrict the framing of Indigenous experiences from within a dominant Western framework. Nakata (2002) describes the cultural interface as:

...the place where we live and learn, the place that conditions our lives, the place that shapes our futures and more to the point the place where we are active agents in our own lives – where we make decisions – our life world. (p. 285)

For Indigenous communities around the world, the central importance of community, based on holistic worldviews, is well established and is something that is shared across a diversity of Indigenous experiences (Ball, 2005; Jackson-Barrett, 2011; Shroff, 2011). Connections between community and school are therefore an important factor in promoting Indigenous children’s educational success (Burgess & Berwick, 2009; Newman & Yasukawa, 2005; Weiss & Stephen, 2009). Yet, there are many instances where the connections between school and Indigenous communities, as well as school and Indigenous families, are fraught with difficulty. This is in part because at the cultural interface all who come together in these spaces draw on a range of diverse understandings and experiences: ontological, political, educational or otherwise. New understandings and experiences are then necessarily conditioned both at and by the interface. One example is that non-
Indigenous teachers are not always well equipped, in terms of their knowledge base or previous experiences, to teach Indigenous children or to make positive connections with Indigenous communities (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2004; Partington, 2003; Santoro, Reid, Crawford, & Simpson, 2011). Indigenous teachers, on the other hand, may be quite capable and attuned to working with Indigenous children, families and communities in some contexts, but have to do so while working within systems that do not necessarily value these understandings or promote them more broadly (Partington, 2003). Additionally, it is important to recognise that Indigenous teachers, like non-Indigenous teachers, may also find themselves in Indigenous contexts that are outside of their existing experiences and that challenge them in new ways.

The relationships that all teachers develop with Indigenous children and their communities operate in the intersection of Western and Indigenous knowledge domains. How teachers work to improve educational outcomes at the cultural interface is complex (Nakata, 2007a). Indigenous people are generally better equipped than non-Indigenous people to mediate between these knowledge systems as working between them is something they will have experienced from a very young age (Nakata, 2007a). For non-Indigenous peoples this negotiation between different knowledge systems is less familiar, given that cultural practices that are aligned to the privilege of Western frameworks of knowledge often go unquestioned. Non-Indigenous peoples therefore need to work both to make explicit their historical understandings and to become more familiar with Indigenous ways of knowing. It is important, however, that any approach to this does not represent Indigenous and Western knowledge systems as each singular and, by association, dichotomous. The cultural interface is a theoretical framework that allows for the contestations over understandings and possibilities to be explored in the concrete and shared experience of the every day. Knowledge systems do not operate in isolation from each other. Rather, all can contribute to achieving better outcomes where there is understanding between different standpoints. At the cultural interface, different standpoints and understandings can be explored between participants who position
themselves as learners, interested in generating cross-cultural knowledge. In this way, “people’s lived experience at the interface” (Nakata, 2007a, p. 12) becomes an opening for inquiry, not the object of inquiry. It is within these “complex and changing terrains” (Nakata, 2007a, p. 13) of actual lived relationships where change can happen.

Nakata (2007b) explicitly indicates that the concept of the cultural interface is not strictly limited to “cultural specificities” (p. 198). In this way, cultural interfaces are not only applicable to understanding the interactions between people who reflect different cultural perspectives. Rather, cultural interfaces reflect the relational spaces we occupy in our everyday lives. In each of those spaces we act and respond to situations drawing on a number of modes of understanding and experiences: personal, emerging, collective, and historical (Nakata, 2007b). In this sense the notion of a cultural interface provides a framework for a situated analysis of positions, contexts and experiences within everyday life.

In this paper we explore ways in which these relational spaces can both foster and restrict positive educational experiences for Indigenous children. We explore how these spaces are not restricted to cultural understandings and relationships between people but are also manifest in work and educational systems, tied to a sense of professional identity, historical understandings as well as life experiences. The cultural interface can be a space of contradiction and tension as different understandings are presented and challenged. Working through these depends a great deal on the ‘locale of the learner’ (Nakata, 2007a, p. 10), that is, the ways in which people inhabit the “space of contested positions at the cultural interface.” In other words, the ways that individuals position themselves, and are positioned by others, impact on the ways they experience and navigate different knowledge systems in their everyday lives and relationships (Nakata, 2007a). In this paper we adopt Nakata’s concept of the ‘locale of the learner’ to highlight the complexities involved in lived experiences at the cultural interface and draw attention to the multiple ways both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators operate in these contested spaces. To explore what this means in
practice, we draw on interview data derived from a recent evaluation of an Indigenous preschool program in Queensland.

**Working at the cultural interface – everyday experiences in the locale of the learner.**

The Foundations for Success pre-prep curricula was developed in collaboration with 35 Indigenous communities across Queensland where it was being implemented. This involved extensive community consultation and collaboration, access to support teachers and leading educators, as well as a range of professional development opportunities for staff involved in the implementation of the program (AAA, 2011).

As part of the evaluation of the implementation of the preschool program educators and community members shared their understandings and experiences of working in Indigenous communities. One of the main research questions and focus of the evaluation was to consider the enabling conditions and pedagogies that contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s learning and development as they transition between home, an early learning program and the early years of school. During the data analysis phase of the research a range of standpoints emerged reflecting a tension amongst participants around what those enabling conditions and pedagogies might and ought to be. The researchers found that to some extent these tensions could be attributed to the different professional identities, cultural backgrounds and experiences of each participant within each community where the study was being undertaken. It is these tensions between standpoints that this article seeks to unpack in order to advance an argument for creating opportunities within educational practice that situates individual educators’ standpoints, in more relational and dialogic ways, with those standpoints of the other important people in children’s lives. We argue that valuing and learning from the range of knowledge capital that contribute to a child’s educational success is, for all those involved, the precursor to promoting the type of enabling conditions and pedagogies that contribute to a successful transition to school.
The evaluation was conducted in three phases over 2009–2010 in six of the 35 sites where the program was being implemented. The methodology employed in the evaluation was based on a strengths based approach to researching with communities (Saleebey, 2000). As the evaluator was Non-Indigenous and had not previously visited the research sites a great deal of preliminary work was undertaken in collaboration with Indigenous educators in each site to ensure each community was comfortable with the way the evaluation would be conducted, and to ensure the evaluator would be welcome when it came time to conduct site visits. The first visit to all communities was not considered a data collection phase, but rather an opportunity for the evaluator to be introduced to each community and to meet with a range of community members to discuss the evaluation process. All settings were multilingual and in some traditional first languages were widely spoken. The evaluator visited each site four times. Data were generated through informal conversational interviews (Patton, 1990) with individuals or groups. All conversations were, with the permission of those involved, audio-recorded and transcribed. Interview data were analysed using constructivist grounded theory techniques (Charmaz, 2003 & 2008) Theoretical sampling of the data, including interview data and reflective audio journals created by the evaluator, informed future conversational interviews with participants. Participant interviews from each phase of the project were compared using a constant comparative method and focused coding was used for the whole data set (Charmaz, 2003). In total, seventy educators and eight parents and community members participated in audio-recorded interviews. In addition, many unrecorded conversations were held, particularly with community members who did not agree to have their conversation recorded, or where the circumstances of the conversation did not allow recording. In each of these instances, community members were happy to contribute their views and for these to be utilised in the evaluation.

The data are reported using composite vignettes (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997; Spalding & Phillips, 2007). These composite vignettes are based on a range of extracts from conversational
interviews (Patton, 1990) conducted as part of the research. The vignettes are constructed from multiple participants’ different experiences over time, around a specific theme that has been generated from the broader data set, and revised into a single narrative. The composition of each vignette is not an equal aggregate of a specific number of participant voices; rather each one is worked around a theme that emerged from the theoretical sampling and coding of the project data (Charmaz, 2003). None of the vignettes represent a single participant from the study. Charmaz (2003) in her work on grounded theory reminds us that in our approach to analysing data we should “look for subjects’ unstated assumptions and implicit meanings.” (p.265) The analysis presented in this paper works with the data from this perspective. The use of composite vignettes allows the foregrounding of participant voices whilst also generating a typology of everyday experiences that can be critiqued through a consideration of the ‘locale of the learner’ (Nakata, 2007a) as a contested space.

The following four composite vignettes, generated from the evaluation, illustrate the complexity of the lived experience of educators (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) trying to work effectively with Indigenous learners and their communities. The vignettes provide an opportunity to question some of the tensions and contradictions that emerge when expectations of appropriate pedagogies differ between educators, educational contexts and community. They also reveal some of the meaningful ways educators can promote and facilitate positive educational experiences for Indigenous children. Furthermore, they provide useful examples of how different attitudes to strengths and deficits, along with varying professional and life experiences can affect educational practice and outcomes.

**Trudy**

Trudy is a university qualified Indigenous teacher with more than ten years teaching experience. She was born and raised in the community where she is now the director of the local preschool. The preschool employs mostly Indigenous staff. Trudy has a strong belief in her ability to work effectively
with the children in her preschool group but is concerned about how they will fare when they make the transition into the local primary school. She believes the school teachers will have different educational expectations of the children.

So according to us, in their social stuff, and we see it out in there, you look at how the children are yarning and laughing. They have a little bit of fight, like anyone else does. But the language skills, how they’re sharing, how they comfort one another, in the social side of things. When we go into the room, they’re recognising their name, they’re having rich conversations. I’m telling them a book and they’re telling me all in their own language and all that kind of stuff and I’ve got it up on the wall. So we’ve got all that stuff but then when they go to grade 1. I don’t know what they expect from the kids.

And they’ve got their hand in their mouth and they get really, really, really uncomfortable and then you don’t get anything. Yet, if I ask them one on one when we’re sitting outside while they were having a yarn or if they’re competing against one another, saying the same thing, they’ll all talk. But the minute you put them into an environment or a situation where they’re not used to it they clam up.

If we don’t tell them what mainstream is all about or the language that they can use there but only concentrate on home language we’re setting them up for failure. So we can’t just keep them in our little cultural cocoon. It is not preparing them for nothing. It’s really not, it’s not doing nothing for them and we’re only setting them up to fail because they’re going to think when they go to grade 1 it’s just going to be exactly like this. All the teachers are going to understand them. All their needs are going to be met.
Trudy’s concerns can be considered in relation to different ways of knowing, being and doing (Martin & Mirrabooka, 2003). She understands that once the children leave the preschool environment, they too will be expected to navigate different ways of knowing, experiencing their own cultural interfaces. As an Indigenous teacher she feels it is part of her responsibility to prepare them for their transition into those spaces and to ensure they have developed the skills they will need to navigate their way within those interfaces. Trudy’s experiences in different educational systems and her own educational background make it possible for her to recognise that Indigenous ways of knowing are not well integrated into all educational environments. At the same time, she values her Indigenous culture and language. Trudy is concerned about the tension between the pedagogical and cultural approaches recommended in the preschool program and whether or not these prepare the children in her care for ‘mainstream’ school, where there is no guarantee that the same pedagogical and cultural approaches will be valued or understood.

Our language is not valued at school. And the kids need to know to code switch² and they do, they can. They have to be able to do it in school because the kids need to know the language. They need to know English before they can go and learn French. But also there are different discourses. You’ve got home, you’ve got school, you’ve got friends, I talk to my children the way I talk to my sisters. I talk to my colleagues differently than I talk to my mum or dad. There are different ways.

Trudy is aware of the strengths of the children in her setting but also aware of how their dispositions towards learning might change in a different pedagogical context. Trudy recognises that even when educational programs are informed by Indigenous ways of knowing, they tend still to be fitted into Western categories and hierarchies and, as such, do not necessarily represent a fair exchange of

² Code switching is when a child is able to alternate between different languages in different contexts, including different social and formal groupings.
cross-cultural knowledge production (Nakata, 2007a). Trudy is dealing with a number of tensions within her experiences of cultural interfaces. She describes both her cultural identity and responsibility to her community, and her professional identity and experience as an educator. Trudy’s scepticism about the success of the preschool program can be related to the tensions she has experienced herself in the past. Trudy has been asked to implement an educational program that has been co-constructed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators. In the preschool setting she considers that program to be pedagogically and culturally appropriate. Accordingly, the educational outcomes of the children involved in the program indicate its educational success. While it might be expected that Trudy would embrace such a curriculum, the tension for Trudy is that she knows those same children will in due course step into a new cultural interface where the framing position is quite different. For Trudy that future space is considered to be potentially harmful because of the way it might position children as knowers. That is, children’s existing educational understandings and experiences might be undercut in that future space. This might in turn lead to educational disengagement. Trudy’s situation reveals how the intersection between different educational settings can create tensions at the cultural interface even in spite of quality content and curriculum design.

Amber

Amber is an Indigenous teaching assistant who has lived in her community all her life. She has worked at the preschool for two years and is enrolled in a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care at TAFE. Amber speaks the local traditional language and her children attend the local school. Recently Amber has been away on a number of occasions attending to family business3, so she has been in and out of the preschool. Despite being well -respected among the staff, Amber’s

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3 Deaths in Indigenous communities may be called ‘family business’ and/or ‘sorry business’ and are not directly referred to within Indigenous communities.
absence from the pre-school because of family business has, on occasions, been judged by some non-Indigenous staff as a lack of interest in her job.

A new non-Indigenous teacher has recently been employed at the preschool. In the previous year Amber had worked alongside another non-Indigenous teacher with whom she had developed a good reciprocal working relationship. The previous teacher deferred to Amber for cultural knowledge and language expertise. Amber took a primary role in communication between the preschool and the community and was often responsible for implementing learning experiences in home language while the teacher supported the program in English. Amber is considered by a number of the other teachers in the preschool, the children and the local community to be an outstanding educator and integral to the success of the preschool program. Amber is concerned that the new teacher will change the way things are done in the classroom.

She will never understand what the kids will say to her on the first day. There are some kids who will just say it in XXX (local language) but we’ll be here supporting her in many ways. I hope she doesn’t change everything that we’ve been through for the past 18 months. And I hope it still runs the same. And hopefully she’ll understand that. Like I could tell her to get to know the families around the community and have a talk to them. Tell her that she’s pretty new in town and I get to show her around.

Amber’s experience with changing staff is not unusual. It is common for Indigenous staff to have to build new relationships with the ‘new teacher’ every one or two years (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2004). While staff turnover occurs everywhere, many Indigenous communities experience a high proportion of new staff in educational settings at any given time. New staff may have no previous knowledge or experience of the communities in which they work. They are often newly graduated teachers with little teaching experience in any context. In addition, traditional educational hierarchies tend to position teaching assistants as subordinate to teachers. This can mean that the
expertise of existing Indigenous staff can go unrecognised by new teachers. In appointing new staff, Indigenous staff members will often not be consulted about who the new teacher will be, what his or her experience is, or how that teacher might best approach working with the children in the classroom. Amber’s position as a teaching assistant means that the new teacher will come in as her ‘boss’. This is despite the fact that she has worked in the educational setting for much longer, has significant teaching, cultural, linguistic and community expertise, knows the children and will be integral to the successful induction of the new teacher and the success of the educational program. In her role as a teaching assistant Amber is, financially at least, a subordinate to the new teacher, Amber is limited in her capacity to advocate effectively on behalf of the children and to assert her expertise (Partington, 2003; Santoro et al., 2011).

**Stephanie**

Stephanie is a non-Indigenous teacher who has been working in the local community for about three years. She had at least five years previous work experience overseas and in urban schools before moving to the community and has developed strong working relationships with her Indigenous colleagues. Stephanie always refers to her Indigenous colleagues as teachers and seeks to work collaboratively with them.

... I’m just so incredibly lucky to have three Indigenous teachers who teach with me and so I think because they’re not necessarily thinking of a big push for literacy and numeracy I do tend to do a lot more of that. They have a lot of input into our program and I think that gives it a balance in its own way because they are thinking obviously more culturally, which I encourage them to do. They’re the sort of cultural side. And so I do think we end up with quite a balanced program then. Obviously relationships are a big thing. They do take a long time. But I think in XXXX there’s constant change, all the time. I’m just talking about in people’s lives. Let alone when XX or anyone else decide to keep changing what you’re teaching
and what words you use. So I think number 1, we’ve all been together on training which helped a lot. But number 2, it’s also just taken a bit of time for everyone to realise OK this is definitely what we’re doing. We’re going to do it every single day and we’re going to do like term planning at the end of every single term. And I think now that we’ve got … I now have that trust with the Indigenous teachers, as in they realise OK, yep this is what we’re doing and it’s going to be a constant thing this year, they’ve been able to trust me and trust the program and realise that OK, yep we can now see how it works. And they’ve become much more interested and involved in it since that.

Although there is some evidence to suggest that Stephanie views her role as the pedagogical authority, her approach to team teaching is child-focused and she is able to recognise that she is a learner as much as she is a teacher within the educational and cultural context in which she works. She values other people’s knowledge.

Especially for me because it’s not where I’m from and it’s so different to where I’m from, she [Indigenous teacher] helps me understand how to help the children that it would be different to how I would expect it to be done but the children here are much more responsive to it because that’s what’s normal to them. So I learn a lot from her as to how to deal with kids in situations that come up and how they learn as well and what they listen for.

Can you give me an example of one of those sorts of things?

Well the way that she asks questions from the kids. I know that they know her from the community but I think also that because she understands how they think and how they organise their thoughts better than I do she can ask questions so that the kids understand what’s being asked of them and they have more freedom
to give a deeper, more complex answer. Where I get the impression sometimes, not only because of the language but because of the way I ask things they’re not quite sure as to what I’m actually going for.

By positioning herself as a learner at the cultural interface (Nakata, 2007a), Stephanie has been able to build positive relationships with her fellow staff, the community and the children. As a result of these positive relationships the children have successful and positive educational experiences. Stephanie’s example indicates how positive relationships at the cultural interface can foster positive educational experiences for Indigenous children. Stephanie has worked hard to make the preschool environment a place where the community feels welcome and where they can be active participants in the educational lives of their children. She is aware that building a level of trust in the community where she works has taken time and effort and that this may not be replicated in other contexts.

Yeah exactly, I’ve worked in a lot of other communities, where it’s been a lot harder. But this is my third year here and XXXX (Indigenous teacher) and I have worked together before, so it’s a little bit easier in that I know her so well and I developed those relationships through her. And those kids, I’ve seen them for a few years. But I think it’s harder if you come to these places new and you’re developing your relationship with your teaching partner and then you’re developing your relationship with your families and it’s just little steps. I wouldn’t be able to do some of the things that we’re trying now when I first arrived. And I just think you just don’t want to come in too fast either, you just want to build slowly, slowly. It’s really important to do that.

Alison
Alison is a recent graduate from a large metropolitan city on the coast. She is non-Indigenous and has not had any previous experiences living in or working with Indigenous communities. Alison has recently arrived in a small remote Indigenous community and is still adapting to living in a remote community away from her social support network. Despite being a recent graduate, Alison is confident in her knowledge base as a teacher and eager to have success with the children in her new class. She has three Indigenous colleagues working with her at different times across the week but reports struggling to build effective working relationships with them. Alison works part time in the pre-school and part-time in the school. She is working hard to make sure she conforms to her understanding of the educational expectations of the school and the curriculum. This is not uncommon for new teachers (Sharplin, O’Neill, & Chapman, 2011). When asked about how she is going in her new setting, Alison’s comments reveal that she may not be aware of the range of expertise of her Indigenous colleagues and may struggle to find ways to work effectively in the cultural context in which she finds herself.

I think mainly it would be because the teacher aides, well English is their second language as well so there’s that barrier between us and ... Yeah, it’s ... I don’t know how to explain it. It’s just hard. And I was trying to explain why I was doing things but then that’s not always understood as well.

**Ok. Had you done anything in your training, in your teacher education about interacting with adults in the classroom?**

Yes, I think we did one course about it. Networking, maybe it was, something like that? Yeah. No, I did find it really difficult and also because I’m young as well. Well, I found the age difference, me telling them what to do, was very difficult and I don’t really like confronting people either.

**What about in your teacher education program about working with people from a language background other than English?**

No, there wasn’t really anything about that.
Alison is struggling to find her way and, perhaps unsurprisingly, she does not seek the answers to those struggles in the cultural context in which she is operating, but rather seeks those understandings within her professional field of knowledge. In so doing she may make some assumptions in terms of what ought to work in promoting the educational success of children.

But I understand this first term I’ve been doing most of the planning myself, not with the children, because I’m just trying to get my head around...I can’t understand them at all, hardly. And the teacher aides, it’s really hard because sometimes they’re here and sometimes they’re not. They come at all different times. So I find that I have to do all the setting up and maybe that’s my fault because I’ve put the responsibility on me and they’ve found that out and thought Ok, we can slack off. But I don’t know...I’m very organised, so I have to have everything organised for the day.

Alison’s reflections indicate that she is experiencing the cultural interface on many levels: personal and professional, as well as in interactions with children, staff and community. Her responses suggest that, at this stage of her experience, she is not recognising her own subjectivity (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009). While it could be argued that Alison is not discerning the potential to learn from the community in which she is working, there is also evidence that she is overwhelmed, both professionally and personally, by the first year experience of teaching (Goddard & Foster, 2001; Renard, 2003). This is amplified by being in a community where there are also significant social problems, including substance abuse and domestic violence. Amber’s limited experiences of Indigenous communities, her relative inexperience as a teacher, and little outside support make just being there a challenging experience for her both personally and professionally (Bornholt, 2002; Jorgensen, Grootenboer, Niesche, & Lerman, 2010). Alison is finding it difficult to build successful
working relationships with her education team and to work effectively with children who have English as a second language. This raises questions of whether, or to what extent, Alison could have been exposed to consideration of these types of issues in her initial teacher education program as well as the types of support or mentoring systems that are available to new teachers working in diverse cultural contexts. Alison is experiencing multiple cultural interfaces and her inexperience within and across those interfaces makes it difficult for her to know how to negotiate within those spaces. However, within traditional educational hierarchies she has been placed in a position of power that, in and of itself, generates tensions and contradictions around her role, the role of her teaching partners, the educational experiences of the children within her care, and the nature of her relationships within the broader community.

**Advocates for Indigenous learners**

The four vignettes reveal a diversity of experiences for educators working across multiple cultural interfaces. They highlight the importance of building strong, communicative relationships, within teaching teams, across educational contexts and within communities. They, also, suggest that such connections are the forerunners of positive educational experiences in and with preschools and schools. Building these types of relationships is complex and requires educators to learn how to traverse cultural interfaces. The vignettes also illustrate how different ways of knowing, if unacknowledged, undervalued, and misunderstood, can lead to barriers to educational success, rather than to opportunities for learning.

These vignettes offer several opportunities to examine the importance of the ways educators acknowledge and navigate cultural interfaces. Tensions exist for all working within cultural interfaces. Foregrounding these tensions draws attention to a recognition that the knowledge bases that inform peoples’ actions are often implicit, suggesting that exploring different ways of knowing requires an explicit effort to name and discuss differences, if the aim is to avoid the notion of
difference as an obstacle to educational engagement. The vignettes also caution that the role of educator is multi-faceted, as educators find themselves in “complex and changing terrains” (Nakata, 2007a, p. 13) in any educational setting. Navigating these terrains is complex. In addition, the vignettes afford opportunities to explore the ways in which educational practices can contribute to the challenges faced in Indigenous education⁴.

In all of the vignettes there is evidence that the educator is working with the best interests of the children in their care as central to their practice. In spite of this, each educator is also faced with tensions that act as potential barriers to promoting educational success for Indigenous children. These tensions arise from different expectations around what the enabling conditions and pedagogies that contribute to the educational success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are. In each vignette these tensions have been made explicit through the educator utilising their strengths to find meaning in the situation they find themselves. In the case of Trudy she draws on her experiences as a community leader and as an educator working across different ways of knowing to identify the potential lack of continuity for children as they transition from one space to another where different pedagogical approaches might be valued differently. She wants to help her children prepare to navigate these differences to ensure their continued educational success.

Amber recognises her role as a translator both for the children learning English and for the teacher with no local language skills. She has an understanding about some of the ways that this can work and wants to ensure that the new teacher gets to know the community and the families in order to get to know the children. Stephanie recognises her own strengths as an educator, what she brings to the balance, but at the same time she recognises the strengths of her colleagues in the contexts where she is not the expert. Allison, who is perhaps struggling the most out of all the educators,

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⁴ Indigenous Education does not simply refer here to education solely for Indigenous learners, it refers rather to what Biermann and Townsend-Cross refer to as “pedagogy based on Indigenous values, philosophies and methodologies” (2008, p. 147). Such a view positions Indigenous Education as having transformative potential for all learners.
still draws on her expertise as a teacher to help her navigate the tensions she is experiencing with her teaching team and with the children to do the best she can in a situation that is entirely new to her.

In each vignette the ‘locale of the learner’ (Nakata, 2007a), or the ways that educators inhabit the contested spaces they work within in the everyday, provides a lens through which to make explicit the tensions that might contribute to conflicting developmental, social and cultural expectations of children and their capabilities and capital. They also demonstrate how important relationships and dialogue are when working through these tensions and point to the necessity of a dynamic pedagogical model of connection, or ‘pedagogy in common’ (De Lissovoy, 2011), as a means to support educators to work in complex educational environments.

Analysis of the data presented in the vignettes prompts a focus on re-conceptualising pedagogical approaches at the cultural interface and examination of the ways in which the reproduction and/ or subversion of assumptions and practices can potentially impede or nurture the education of Indigenous children. For example, challenges to the traditional educational hierarchy that promote greater understanding and collaboration between classroom teachers, teacher assistants and community may be one avenue to achieve the ‘pedagogy in common’ advocated by De Lissovoy (2011). However, such challenges create associated tensions and contradictions, not the least of which relates to the awards and conditions under which educators work, and the value (including rates of pay) associated with this. Any re-conceptualisation of pedagogy requires time and commitment as novice teachers are challenged and supported to explore different ways of knowing and being as well as their own assumptions about their roles as educators. Similarly, when working in Indigenous communities, educators, be they from within or outside the local community, face a range of tensions and contradictions as they try to successfully move children along their educational journey. The cultural interface is a space where meanings and values are in constant negotiation. Similarly De Lissovoy (2011) argues that ‘pedagogy in common’ requires this same
constant negotiation to bring about social change. This has implications for how future research relating to educational questions both within, and in response to issues raised in these spaces, might be investigated. Regardless of the context, educators;

...need themselves to develop their scholarship in contested knowledge spaces of the cultural interface and achieve for themselves some facility with how to engage and move students through the learning process. (Nakata, 2007a, p. 13)

Educators can become positive agents of social change when they are able to position themselves as learners in each new educational, geographical and cultural context in which they find themselves. Educators contribute a great deal to the educational success of children: so too do families and communities. When educators and communities are afforded the facility to generate a ‘pedagogy in common’ (De Lissovoy, 2011) that can operate across educational systems, the relational and dialogic nature of such educational practice has the potential to promote opportunities to build understanding, transform meaning and engender positive educational experiences at the cultural interface.

References

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