

Lessons from a face-to-face meeting on embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives: 'A contract of intimacy'

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You can't have a partnership without a relationship, and you can't have a relationship without a conversation. You've got to have the conversation. Everything starts here. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011)

THIS PAPER PRESENTS THE findings from a conversation between an Aboriginal educator and a non-Indigenous pre-service educator about the importance and complexities of building productive partnerships. Although the participants focused on the challenges and benefits of building relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and non-Indigenous educators in Australian early years settings, the more significant outcome of the meeting was the personal connection two young women were able to make when a friendship began to develop. The project was intended to enable an opportunity for the participants 'to engage in reflexivity on their pedagogic work', something Mills (2012) understands as crucial to the support of social justice and transformation in the classroom.

Background

It has long been recognised that the Australian early childhood context could play a significant role in reducing the effects of social, cultural and economic disadvantage on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (MacNaughton & Davis, 2009; Martin, 2003; Miller, 2011). Yet despite current efforts such as those outlined by *Closing the gap: Prime Minister's report* (FaHCSIA, 2013), Australia is still facing a stark dissonance between the educational achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their non-Indigenous counterparts. In recent years, researchers have attempted to shed light on potential factors contributing to the educational gap, recognising their ongoing obligation to address relevant historical, geographical, economic, cultural and social problems. One problem, which has received some attention in contemporary research, is the lack of productive partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and non-Indigenous educators. More often than not, the types of partnerships that are emphasised are those between schools and communities; these 'group' partnerships have the potential to enhance the cultural aesthetics of curriculum and practice in early childhood settings. However, strategies for developing productive

partnerships between individual educators with different cultural backgrounds are seldom explicitly examined. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to explore how an informal dialogue between two educators, one non-Indigenous and the other Aboriginal, can influence the blossoming of relationships, and as a result, have a positive impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia.

Closing the gap: Challenges and opportunities

The research suggests that building relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators can potentially present challenges for non-Indigenous educators who may lack experience, knowledge or even the motivation to engage in deep dialogue. However, good relationships take time and trust (Colbung, Glover, Rau & Ritchie, 2007; Phillips & Lampert, 2012; Price & Hughes, 2009). There are concerns among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that non-Indigenous educators lack cultural sensitivity, understanding and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and are, therefore, inappropriate custodians of Indigenous culture (Brady, 1997; Grace & Trudgett, 2012). Furthermore, non-Indigenous Australians often resist the process of adopting a critical framework and challenging their own 'whiteness',

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thereby hindering their ability to see the ways in which educational contexts disadvantage Indigenous children.

Over 200 years of dispossession, segregation and assimilation have culminated in the current state of disadvantage that affects many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The magnitude of the effects of disadvantage is highlighted through many studies (Moyle, 2004) that identify Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations as possessing the worst overall rates of socioeconomic disadvantage, globally. A complex range of socio-cultural factors are acknowledged as the impetus behind the equity gap, but the dominance of Australia's white hegemonic culture over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures is a factor (Hewitt, 2000). For instance, a study conducted by Frances, Hutchins and Siggers (2009) attributes the comparably low attendance rates of Aboriginal children to the inability of mainstream childcare services to provide an educational system that meets the diverse needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. In this study, Aboriginal parents raised their desire to have their children cared for by staff who are responsive and involved with their community. In fact, the discourse of culturally responsive pedagogy (Delpit, 2008) is more recently being supplemented with the more powerful discourses of cultural safety (Bin-Sallik, 2003), implying not only that non-Indigenous educators may be insensitive, but also that their practices may be unsafe or damaging.

This highlights the importance for non-Indigenous staff to develop relationships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through professional development and dialogue. These relationships are widely acknowledged as crucial (Craven, Halse, Marsh, Mooney & Wilson-Miller, 2005; Price & Hughes, 2009; Sarra, 2003); indeed, many feel there will be no improvement in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children until more respectful relationships develop.

Learning how to build relationships is potentially a difficult issue for pre-service educators because there is little opportunity given for building relationships with families and communities within Faculties of Education (McFarland-Piazza, Lord, Smith & Downey, 2012; Moreton-Robinson, Singh, Kolopenuk & Robinson, 2012; Patton, Lee Hong, Lampert, Burnett & Anderson, 2012). The resolution of such a challenge is inherently multi-faceted, both on an individual scale and on an institutional level. For example, student teachers are not likely to be placed on professional experience with supervising educators who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, nor are there many opportunities for non-Indigenous students to learn about developing partnerships in their courses (Patton et al., 2012). An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander presence is largely invisible in university settings. As the teaching profession becomes more culturally diverse, the still largely white, middle-class profession needs to attend to bridging the cultural disparities between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous educators (Brady, 1997; Reid & Santoro, 2006).

It is generally acknowledged that non-Indigenous educators cannot be experts on Indigenous Australia, nor can they teach from an Indigenous standpoint (Nakata, 2007; Phillips, 2011). For example, in an early childhood context, non-Indigenous educators may not understand or embrace Indigenous priorities. Furthermore, it is fundamentally important that non-Indigenous Australians understand the social, historical and geographical differences between the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and the fact that each group maintains its own cultural practices and histories. As such, it is imperative that each local community is consulted to ensure that the teaching and learning within and around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are both culturally appropriate and show sensitivity for the children and families of that place (Grace & Trudgett, 2012). Yet many non-Indigenous educators feel ill-equipped to face the complex challenge ahead of them. Not only must they find a way to gain deep, respectful, understandings, but they must also build trusting, secure and respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities to gain their confidence. The complexity of the task at hand is seemingly further heightened because the teaching profession is largely immersed in 'whiteness', and non-Indigenous educators are sometimes blinded by their reluctance to examine their own culture.

Often, what inhibits non-Indigenous Australians is this inability to acknowledge their own whiteness. A term described by Aveling (2012) as a social construct, whiteness is both historically and culturally specific and demonstrated through the natural and unexamined embodiment of white/western discursive practices. In the educational sphere, to explore one's own whiteness is to deconstruct the identity of white self as a construct of privilege and race. However, given that the predominant background of Australia's teaching force is white and middle class, there is limited opportunity for educators and pre-service teachers to develop understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural issues and practices in cohesion with the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Reid & Santoro, 2006). Consequently, what often develops among the profession is a lack of understanding, negative stereotyping and ignorance. Racism is also an unavoidable consequence. For instance, many non-Indigenous students in Phillips' study of compulsory Indigenous studies at university (2011) express anger and defiance, claiming to feel blamed for the mistakes of past generations and resentment at being held responsible for solving issues they feel are not their problem.

If we wish to bridge the gap, then we must acknowledge and focus on creating genuine partnerships between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators. Collaborative partnerships will ensure that the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are both recognised and embedded in early childhood

policy, curriculum and practice. The National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care (COAG, 2009) advocated the importance of such

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relationships, with the commencement of the *National Quality Framework* (NQF). The NQF not only recognises but also legislates the importance of building collaborative partnerships with families, communities and educators. Educational approaches that embrace multiple standpoints are leading the way in educational reform.

This paper explores what is possible when an Aboriginal early childhood educator and a non-Indigenous pre-service early childhood educator meet less formally, establishing common ground as they discuss pertinent issues.

Method

developed an interview schedule with targeted questions, this was simply a guideline and was largely abandoned once a 'natural' conversation ensued. Data was collected at this one session, which took place in a café and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Conversation was followed up by email.

The interview was taped and transcribed, with Rebecca choosing what she considered salient excerpts, and sending them to Lisa afterwards to check. The choices Rebecca made about which parts of the conversation were important contributed to later email discussions. As researchers, we wanted to think about the significance of the conversation as a whole: What was more important to what Rebecca learned, the content or the process? What was more salient, the formal learning or the informal relationship—the 'yarning spaces' (Fluckiger, Diamond & Jones, 2012) that came from getting to know someone over a cup of coffee? Drawing on elements of Indigenist methodology (Aveling, 2012; Martin, 2003), informal yarning modelled the respectful relationship we hope is represented in this research.

Working collaboratively, and back and forth between Lisa, Rebecca and the two non-participating researchers, we looked at the experience from various angles, sometimes discussing the formal learning, sometimes musing over what can be gained from this kind of 'set-up' relationship. Thus, participants were involved in the narrative analysis, searching for themes, common threads and insights based on dialogue.

Results

What transpired from the dialogic relationship between an Aboriginal practitioner and a non-Indigenous pre-service educator was the sharing of knowledge, perspectives and thoughts on a number of salient issues associated with relationships. Those issues pertaining to the complexities of building relationships between the two cultures are discussed in turn.

The beginning: Establishing the relationship

Every relationship starts somewhere. The thoughts and perceptions held by individuals in the moments leading up to a first meeting have the power to influence the dynamics and the sustainability of a relationship. Knowledge is a powerful key to unlocking the prejudices and assumptions that sometimes reside in our thoughts when we are confronted with difference. Knowledge empowers us to see beyond these limiting traits and helps us on our journey of understanding and embracing differences. The knowledge that guides our preconceptions often plays a powerful role in determining how we interact with others. It is to this topic, that our attention first turns.

Rebecca: What was I feeling before the meeting? I wasn't sure what it was going to be like—I mean, they tell you about protocols, eye contact, etc ... and even though I knew [Lisa] was young and would probably be chilled, you still have all that at the back of your head.

The method used in this exploratory research is based on what we came to think of as 'a contract of intimacy'; that is, the belief that intimate conversation between two people allows commonalities, and more significantly, differences, to surface. The premise is that opportunity for conversation may (though will not always) add depth to the formal and sometimes 'fragmentary knowledge' (Lund, Panayotidis, Smits & Towers, 2012) that early childhood educators gain from their pre-service course. It also draws on the notion of 'teacher as researcher', especially in the active participation in the dialogue that we believe is required for praxis (the merging of theory and practice). This paper draws on the method of interpersonal communication research, selected because of its interest in 'what can be learned by bringing individuals together—most often strangers who have had a particular experience—to discuss a small set of issues' (Tracy & Munoz, 2011, p. 66). In effect, the participants in this

study, Rebecca and Lisa, were also researchers. Thus, we include both of their impressions and responses to their conversation below, in each case letting their voices speak for themselves, with equal status.

Participants and setting

Participant One, Lisa, is a young *Kamilaroi* woman. She has taught in early childhood, primary school and secondary school settings and now writes policy and curriculum that involves embedding Indigenous perspectives. She has also tutored at a university. Rebecca is a young, non-Indigenous early childhood education student in her final year of study. Rebecca was educated both in state and independent schools, mostly in what she called 'leafy green neighbourhoods'. These two young women were 'set up', much like a speed date, as Rebecca suggests in her comments. They had both willingly agreed to meet and have a conversation about their views on how building productive partnerships could contribute to the embedding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges in early childhood settings. Their discussion included both the potential benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and communities, but also the complexities and challenges experienced by both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous counterparts in the development of such partnerships. Although Rebecca

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I felt like [we] were going on a blind first date but we hit it off straight away. To be honest, sitting down with Lisa was just like sitting down with any of my friends. With cultural protocols I think school education makes you nervous about interacting with Indigenous people ... there are times when, yes ... it will be like that ... but now I know it isn't really going to be that hard. I suppose my nerves were because I haven't had that much experience, personally with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Even in primary school. I never had an Indigenous person in my primary school. Lisa asked me how I would know that, and that made me think, well, maybe I did. But the closest I think I've come is seeing Ernie Dingo on TV and I suppose when I got to university and I took an Indigenous education class. That's the extent of what I know.

Lisa: Even before I met her, Rebecca's sincere and keen interest regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives was refreshing and gives [me] a hopeful outlook for the future. To know that there are future educators, like Rebecca, who are genuinely interested in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives helps our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community know [that] education and the future of Australia is progressing.

The middle: Deepening the conversation

After the first point of contact was made, conversation flowed freely. On finding commonalities, the conversation slowly became more formal. Lisa's dialogue reveals a number of key considerations in building relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous educators. Knowledge, trust, sustainability and ethical conduct underpin the development of productive relationships between the two cultures. In all relationships, there is a time to speak, and a time to listen. Lisa's reflections on her past and present relationships with non-Indigenous educators shone light on some of the complexities that come into play in building relationships.

Lisa: [Working with non-Indigenous colleagues] has been pretty interesting really, ... because so many factors come into play. Not just cultural factors, but there's personality and age and things like that. A lot of factors come into play. But what I find is that it can be a struggle and I don't think it's just a cultural struggle. I think there are lots of things that come into play. I've come across some really wonderful [educators] who do have a good understanding [of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture] and that's because they've actually engaged with it. So they understand cultural experiences because of the community, or their interests within the cultural topic of history, and they can have that empathy and understanding.

I've had three pre-service teachers and they have been amazing, really eager to learn. And I find that that's really good for me because I think that's where our future is going. That's where we're going to see real change.

A strong theme in the conversation explored how the cultures and knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups are often specific to place and Country. Ensuring that non-Indigenous educators actively seek out and learn about the local customs, history and stories of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is a crucial step in beginning the relationship.

Rebecca: [Lisa told me that] knowledge is the foundation. And if you don't actively seek it out yourself and engage in learning about the local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander populations, then you're effectively trying to build a relationship without the beginning. Knowing where to start was always my issue. Not having the

connections, not having the experience always made me feel like I had the tools, but I was missing the instruction booklet. Talking to Lisa has shown me the way, and we need to know the way if we want to have culturally safe classrooms.

Lisa was able to guide Rebecca on strategies for building relationships, something Rebecca saw as crucial.

Lisa: Be really aware of the protocols and Education guidelines and go through the right channels; if you're not too sure, you can always call up the libraries within the local community. Look at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander map of areas so that you can identify who's the mob in this area, try to engage with people that way and just make sure you're following things correctly. That's the biggest piece of advice I can give. You know, the little things add up to community. You've got that really basic understanding, so you can say, well, I need someone to mentor me, to guide me, and that's when you can reach out to someone in the community.

Lisa reminded Rebecca how it is vital that knowledge be contextualised as contingent on Country and place.

Rebecca: Talking about what culture means with Lisa taught me that it is not just learning about the shared histories, or the stories of the dreaming, but that culture is everything. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who embrace their culture and knowledges, understand that culture cannot be assumed. Culture is how we eat, sleep, our families, our traditions, our stories, how we raise our children, how we dress, our beliefs, our values, our language ... culture is who we are. When you look at it like that, it's easier to understand how it's so important that we respect the cultural practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in our educational practice. Otherwise it'd be like me enforcing my beliefs onto someone else's child.

Meeting Lisa as an individual enabled Rebecca to develop a deeper understanding of identity in multiple ways. Lisa is a young woman like Rebecca in some respects, but a reminder of her strong identification as a Kamilaroi woman represents the significance of culture in her life.

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Lisa: [As an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, not teaching in your local area can present a challenge.] Some communities, if you're not from there, you can have really big challenges, where they'll say, well, you don't know about this community, you can't really engage in it. The Elders, they're amazing and they've helped a lot of people engage with community, doesn't matter where their mob is or anything like that. At the end of the day your goal is to create a relationship ...

As Lisa and Rebecca established their relationship, they saw the transformational potential: understanding was now within reach. A mutual trust needs to exist before an exchange of knowledge can occur.

Rebecca: Our dialogue around relationships touched on many of the foundational qualities needed for any relationship ... trust and security. Being accepted by [an] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community means that a member of that community must vouch for you. Knowing that an individual has put their trust in you, enough to be responsible for your actions once you have entered in their community, for me, really highlighted how important trust and respect are in partnerships between non-Indigenous teachers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers.

Lisa: It's like vouching for someone. When you introduce someone, you need to know that you're trusting in reliable company. If you're in a community, you take responsibility for the person that you introduce into the community. You are going to be basically a part of something, once you're in; you're a part of a family and a really close network. It's that relationship, and that's also important in education. And that's the difficult because there is the policy side, but there's also the connection side.

While building relationships is paramount, it would be unethical to ignore the additional responsibilities this places on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators. For the non-Indigenous educators, engagement with Indigenous issues is 'optional'. Non-Indigenous educators can walk away from the task, if they like. This is impossible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators who 'live the issues' every day. The results from the dialogue would suggest that, although challenges exist, they can be overcome with communication, knowledge, trust, respect and sustainable relationships. Furthermore, when sustainable relationships are formed between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous educators within an educational setting, the potential for cultural cohesion, understanding and mutual celebration is realised—with benefits across curriculum, practice, philosophy and community.

Lisa: *[It's not always a balanced partnership] but understandably so because I [have] the knowledge and the connections to get access to knowledge from the Elders within the community. Some people would feel out of place and out of comfort and also it's following protocol. It's really important for the Aboriginal and Torres*

Strait Islander communities to engage with a person of their own culture because it helps with the relationship with the school.

In reflection after the face-to-face meeting, Rebecca understood her part of the 'contract', and the need for her to 'step up to the task'.

Rebecca: *In gaining the trust and building a relationship with an Aboriginal teacher, they must know that you are genuinely interested and willing to listen and respect, and that once you are in, you are in for the long run. Becoming a part of a community is akin to joining a family—for better or for worse. This idea ran alongside the notion of non-Indigenous teachers and their willingness to help and support the Aboriginal teachers in their cohorts. It wasn't surprising to learn that Lisa has experienced both ends of the spectrum, from teachers who are excited and willing to get involved and work together in schools, to others who are reluctant or opposed to embedding and supporting cultural programs. It was uplifting to hear that her experience with pre-service teachers has been predominately positive and proactive, as this is the new wave of teachers entering the education system.*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators are often laden with additional responsibilities that pertain to cultural tasks and education. Reid and Santoro (2006) confirmed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators are regularly called to be a cultural bridge between white and black knowledges; to be role models for their culture; to be cultural experts; to share their knowledge freely with members of their educational setting; to become leaders in the educational reform for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; and to be the primary person responsible for issues and challenges faced with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. For Lisa, the experience of developing and pioneering educational objectives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children has been rewarding and yet incredibly demanding. A strong circle of support and encouragement from both fellow educators and administrative staff meant that Lisa's work has been both acknowledged and successful. While Lisa feels supported in her own work, she acknowledges that personal and professional pressures on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators often confirm research about increased workload and responsibility sometimes resulting in resentment and anger at the lack of recognition some of her colleagues receive (Reid & Santoro, 2006).

Lisa: *I have heard of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators feeling under-recognised and overly stressed by the additional workload of 'training up' a non-Indigenous colleague or doing all the work with community. I was fortunate enough to have a really fantastic administration team that recognised the work I was doing, although you weren't given the time to do it, it was just outside your work hours. It's one of those responsibilities that can be extreme, but for some schools, they have made an Indigenous education teacher so they can take on*

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the responsibility of learning and helping other teachers. But it is a huge responsibility and it can be a huge ask for teachers, because it is assumed. And, in a way, you can understand why, a) because some people don't feel comfortable in that area, and b) some people just don't know the protocols, and c) it's one thing that you do need help with and should be seen as a wonderful thing, but at the same time the pressure is extremely difficult, especially in large schools. There are so many things that you take on board that you end up not having your own personal life.

Extending the conversation: Sustaining the relationship

Conversations like the one begun by Lisa and Rebecca are really just starting points. Indeed, real (rather than tokenistic or fabricated) relationships have no end. Sustainability and longevity are two key ingredients in a successful relationship. Looking back, and reflecting on the early relationship between Lisa and Rebecca, leads us to consider the importance of conversations such as this one. Why talk about relationships? What stands to be gained? Ultimately, it is the responsibility of early childhood educators to ensure that curriculum, philosophy and teaching practices are both culturally safe and responsive. One first step towards achieving this is conversation. The potential held within simple conversations can sometimes be forgotten.

Rebecca: *Conversing with Lisa taught me so much, yet the most important lesson came from the act of having a conversation rather than what was said. It made me realise the value in dialogic relationships, the power of listening and the importance of sharing what we know. Our conversation has empowered me, to know where to go, to know where to look and to know that I have the tools to be able to make a difference with the children and families that I will come to work with.*

Lisa: *As an educator, the power of communication needs to be upheld and appreciated. Teaching children is as important as teaching each other. Knowing and having the skills of relational communication is essential to connect people with content. Without this skill, your job as an educator can be frustrating.*

I feel that I'm doing my best job as a teacher when I am sharing my learning and experiences, because that's what education is all about. It's all about sharing, and culturally, that's what we like to do. We like to share. If you've ever come to any sort of Murri 'do', you've got enough food to feed an army and you have to leave with something, and it's always sharing and that's the part of the family. I think it's really important for us to look at education as a sharing experience because you can grow from that, and by making partnerships, you can really ensure that education is going to flourish and it's not just going to stay stagnant, hidden in a cupboard, or as a text book that gets thrown out after 10 years, 20 years.

Rebecca: *I learnt that as a non-Indigenous pre-service teacher, it is important to first build your knowledge about the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, to understand their customs, history and their protocols. There are supports in libraries and sometimes there are local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups that can be contacted for help in this area. Being able to talk with Lisa about how to begin forming relationships cemented the importance of developing an understanding and a respect for their culture. Not every school is lucky enough to have an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher on their staff, so being active in your personal life to seek and build relationships is important.*

Discussion and conclusion

Building relationships between non-Indigenous educators and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators requires a great deal of knowledge and understanding. For the non-Indigenous educator, it is about listening and learning, and building a foundation of understanding before approaching an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person to seek a relationship. For the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander educator, it may be about trying to strike a balance between their responsibility to self, to their community and to the policies and curricula of their educational setting. Our research suggests that dialogue is the impetus to building mutually beneficial relationships and enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices to be heard in the journey towards achieving the best opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Our goal is to support early childhood settings as places for hope. They must become places where social and professional relationships are constructed and communities are developed, and where educators work together to create for children a culturally sensitive, safe education and a better future. To achieve this, we need to first engage with and then listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and community members. In this case, it started with a simple cuppa, and an 'intimacy contract'.

Rebecca: *Since the beginning of my university years, I have believed that we need to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges in classrooms. What our conversation has taught me is the role of dialogue in this process. As a non-Indigenous pre-service teacher, I cannot hope to have the understanding or the knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture that a person of that culture has; however, what I can hope to have is a strong relationship bridge with someone of that culture. Working in partnership with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher presents many fruitful opportunities: opportunities to develop your own professional knowledge, opportunities to be a part of Indigenous communities, to share understandings, to share histories and to learn and teach together. As Lisa so eloquently puts it, education is all about the sharing of knowledges. We learn from each other. I have learnt that*

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the need to listen is greater than the need to talk, that an open mind can overcome many challenges and that conversation is the foundation of the most powerful tool towards a better future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education—relationships.

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Social inclusion

The Australian Government has placed priority on policy related to closing the disadvantage gap between Indigenous and other Australians (COAG, 2009) and the Prime Minister reports annually against the targets set (Australian Government, 2010, 2013). In the most recent report (Australian Government, 2013), the then Prime Minister demonstrated that the aim of ensuring all Indigenous four-year-old children in remote communities have access to a quality early childhood program by 2013 was on target for success. Other aims include halving the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five and halving the gap in reading, writing and numeracy by 2018. The former is on target to be achieved, but progress on the latter is slower (Australian Government, 2013). These particular aims which relate to young children are of particular interest to early childhood professionals.

These aims are based on an understanding of the important contribution experiences in the early years of life make on lifelong outcomes. The aims are based on the premise that reducing Indigenous disadvantage over the long term can effectively be addressed by changing Indigenous children's lives today. This discourse is well documented (Mustard, 2008; Sims, 2013; Walker et al., 2011) and, I believe, well understood by early childhood professionals. Thus the involvement of early childhood professionals in the *Closing*

the Gap agenda is crucial and it is equally important that these professionals understand the issues associated with disadvantage, social inclusion and closing the gap as well as they understand the importance of the work they do in the early years. This paper presents some of the issues currently being debated in social and community work and the implications of these issues for early childhood professionals' very important work in addressing government priorities.

Closing the Gap is a key aspiration in the social inclusion agenda (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2011). *Closing the Gap* involves targeting services to those children who are at the greatest risk for disadvantage in the long term (p. 2) and the early years' strategies associated with *Closing the Gap* provide more detail in how to develop and deliver these targeted services. As *Closing the Gap* is a key platform of the social inclusion agenda, it is useful to be clear about what is meant by social inclusion. The Australian Social Inclusion Board (2011, p. 1) posits that:

... people must be given the opportunity to: ■ secure a job

- access services
- connect with family, friends, work, personal interests

and local community

■ *deal with personal crisis* ■ *have their voice heard.*

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