WEAVING THE PAST INTO THE PRESENT: INDIGENOUS STORIES OF EDUCATION ACROSS GENERATIONS

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Abstract

In Queensland, there is little research that speaks to the historical experiences of schooling. Aboriginal education remains a part of the silenced history of Aboriginal people. This thesis presents stories of schooling from Aboriginal people across three generations of adult storytellers. Elders, grandparents, and young parents involved in an early childhood urban playgroup were included. Stories from the children attending the playgroup were also welcomed. The research methodology involved narrative storywork. This is culturally appropriate because Aboriginal stories connect the past with the present. The conceptual framework for the research draws on decolonising theory. Typically, reports of Aboriginal schooling and outcomes position Aboriginal families and children within a deficit discourse. The issues and challenges faced by urban Murri families who have young children or children in school are largely unknown.

This research allowed Aboriginal families to participate in an engaged dialogue about their childhood and offered opportunities to tell their stories of education. Key research questions were: What was the reality of school for different generations of Indigenous people? What beliefs and values are held about mainstream education for Indigenous children? What ideas are communicated about school across generations? Narratives from five elders, five grandparents, and five (urban) mothers of young Indigenous children are presented. The elders offer testimony on their recollected experiences of schooling in a mission, a Yumba school (fringe-dwellers’ camp), and country schools. Their stories also speak to the need to pass as non-indigenous and act as “white”. The next generation of storytellers are the grandparents and they speak to their lives as “stolen children”. The final storytellers are the Murri parents. They speak to the current and recent past of education, as well as their family experiences as they parent young children who are about to enter school or who are in the early years of school.

In order to gather the narrative data, I immersed myself for three years within an Indigenous playgroup. The playgroup was located in a school. It created an informal “grass roots” experience for families as their children were making the transition into school. This playgroup story offers a strength-based teaching resource for Indigenous transformation, healing, and self-determination. The playgroup
community was situated in a rural urban town just outside the metropolitan area in south-east Queensland. Storywork interpretation assumes the strength-based “story” as an Indigenous resource to deal with community issues and issues that emerge in contemporary Aboriginal urban lives. The narrative process and protocol was collaboratively designed with the Murri Mums of the playgroup. It re-positioned the “researcher” as an equal, rather than an “expert” or “authority” figure within the playgroup. The tenets of this research align with the post-colonial literature and decolonising research principles that seek to fully engage and empower the typically oppressed and marginalised. These directions align with decolonising theory of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999). The research is also informed by Western scholarship that creates the engaged dialogue of this thesis across different worldviews. Indigeneity and a colonised worldview remain points of difference between Western and Indigenous methodologies and research.

The storytellers identified and described negative experiences and inhumane treatment in their childhood and school experiences. Nonetheless, their stories speak to Aboriginal strength, survival and resilience. In each generation the storytellers spoke to the value of school, despite difficult experiences. Each generation raised the issue of racism. This research project is significant because it explains from the Aboriginal worldview the reasons for the education gap, which contrast to mainstream deficit thinking about Aboriginal education. Transformation needs to be shaped by humanity and healing. New stories of successful and supported healing and education can teach our families and children the ways forward. Education systems need to show greater understanding of the broader social constructions of Aboriginality that continue to fail this generation of Indigenous families and their children.
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List of Abbreviations

ABS  Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIHW  Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
COAG  Council of Australian Governments
HREOC  Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
NHMRC  National Health and Medical Research Council
SNAICC  Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care
Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature: _________________________

Robyn Sandri

Date: _________________________
Acknowledgements

I begin by acknowledging my beloved grandmother Amy Dodd who was taken from her family as a young child in 1916. This story began with her and it is written from my heart to hers and all the other little children who were stolen from the love of their families and stories of their culture. May they all find their way home.

I sincerely acknowledge the storytellers who recollected and shared deeply painful and personal stories with me. I trust that by giving voice to their lived experiences their burdens were lightened if only for that moment. I honour their willingness to share their stories in order for this thesis to become a reality. I trust my work does their stories justice. There has been much humour and laughter on this journey too. I acknowledge the resilient and creative spirits of the Aboriginal Australian community. I have enjoyed my time with the Murri Mums and acknowledge their sharing and wisdom and thank them for making space for me in the life of their playgroup. I believe in the power of our mothers, the capacity of our children and I am proud to be one of “the mob”.

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space within the academy. I appreciate the time she spent in deep thought about my work and processes, and all she generously brought to this project. I acknowledge with gratitude the challenge of her journey into these uncharted spaces too.

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I offer this thesis to my descendants including my daughters Emma Jane and Amy May. I trust it is a note in our family songline leading to the socially just futures that they create. Finally, I thank all of the elders and ancestors for their wisdom and intuitive guidance. I hear you in the rustle of the red gum leaves and in the song of the magpie larks. *Yung-a undee Gunggari – Unyah dhagul Yugambeh.*
Glossary

Note: The term Aboriginal is used in this document to include Torres Strait Islander people. It is not used only as an adjective but as a noun, as preferred by many Aboriginal people (Atkinson, 2002).

Aboriginal: This term relates to the First Nation or original people of a country. While the research focus considers the Australian Aboriginal peoples, other global Aboriginal or Indigenous literature is considered. For a people to be Indigenous to a country, they trace their original ancestry to the country in which they culturally belong, rather than just their birth.

Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people are the preferred terms in Queensland by the people themselves. However, the use of Aboriginal people is inclusive of all the original people of this country including the Torres Strait Islander people.

Anglo-Celtic, European, American-European: These terms refer to non-indigenous Australians. Australia is constructed as a European country. The white majority can trace their original homelands and mother language to another geographical country.

Community: The term community usually refers to a group of people living in a geographical area or close proximity, with similar interests, interdependent and interacting with each other for mutual support in a network of relationships. In this thesis the term community is used in an urban context where the “Aboriginal community” is interconnected through shared experiences and historical contexts.

Country: The term country refers to the homelands of a tribal or extended family or language group.

Culture: The set of beliefs, values and rules for living that is distinctive to a particular human group. Typically, culture is passed down the generations in the complex relationships, knowledge, social organisations and life experiences that bind diverse individuals and groups together.

Elder/eldership: The adjective elder is not a synonym for elderly. In Aboriginal context it usually denotes an older, wiser, influential member of a family, tribe, or community. All Aboriginal knowledge and lore is local, and in some tribes eldership is familial lineage.
Emic: This term refers to research which is emergent. It emerges from the narratives of the participants. It is the participant who determines the focus of the research, rather than the researcher.

Indigene is used similarly to the term native. However, in the contemporary context, Indigene is preferred, as native carries a more primitive subtext.

Indigenous is an appropriate way to refer to the original people. It is also commonly used in international and global literature.

Intergenerational: The prefix inter- is Latin for between or among, together or mutually together.

Intergenerational trauma is trauma or crisis transmitted across a number of generations. In some definitions, it means within a family and transgenerational is a more correct term. In this thesis, both terms are used interchangeably to mean across generational groups.

Mob: This term is regularly used to mean a group of people. Unlike broader English, it does not usually mean an indiscriminate crowd but a cohesive group. Mob is also often used to refer to a language group – that Warlpiri mob. The playgroup would also be considered “our mob” to its participants.

Murri: The tribal people of the Queensland area refer to themselves generally as Murri people. I understand it to mean “our people” or “our mob”, or ordinary people of the country. This is a self-attributed name, unlike other constructions applied to the original people of this land. It is the preferred term within the Murri community because it acts as a border to identify people as separate from the European majority.

Other/Others/Othering: These terms are used in social sciences to understand the processes by which societies and groups exclude others who they want to infer are subordinate or who do not fit into their group or community. Othering is imperative to national identity through which practices of inclusion and exclusion occur. These terms are italicised throughout this thesis.

Race, racial identity: Race is a sociopolitical construct of what it means to be designated to a population group. Aboriginal Australians are Caucasian people with no genetic marker to separate them from European people.
Racism: Racism is a system based on racial prejudices, involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals.

Traditional owners: All Aboriginal people belonged to their own country. The original people of the tribal groups of traditional country are traditional owners of that country. Country refers to tribal group, family group, geographical land, language or dialect group.

White world, mainstream and whitestream: These terms are used commonly in Aboriginal conversation to refer to the dominant groups. Whitestream is typically used in Canadian Aboriginal literature to mean dominant school systems.

Whiteness, white privilege: Whiteness theory and critical race theories are relevant schools of scholarship based on the normalisation of white majority culture. White people are members of a race that is so normalised that many of its members do not consider it as a race. White privilege is unearned access to resources such as social power only readily available to some people as a result of their social group membership (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Moreton-Robinson, 2004).

Worldview: This term denotes the underlying cultural assumptions that position a communal tribe or group of people. For instance, English people are considered to have a Western worldview. This contrasts to Indigenous worldview.

Yumba is an Aboriginal camp usually located near but outside of towns. Each camp is a small community based on ties of kinship and friendship.
Our Stories Protect Us

there are as many stories
as campfires
in the milky way at night
our spirit ancestors sit
around those campfires and tell old stories
they whisper them on gentle night breezes
into our ears
to tell us who we are
to make us strong
but we cannot hear
what our tongues have forgotten
their words
are the soft sounds carried on night winds
notes in the magpie song
rustles in the red gum
leaves
stories we no longer know
we are lost
fragile
without our stories
to wrap around us like possum-skin cloaks
when the night is dark
and the stars cannot take us home
without our stories

Robyn Sandri (June, 2012)
Preamble

I am a descendant of the Gungarri people; a brown water tribe from the south-west of what is now Queensland, and across the border into New South Wales. Some of our ancestors remain today wrapped in bark and their kangaroo-skin cloaks in the sacred creation caves of the Carnarvon Gorge.

I am an Indigenous woman along my maternal line. My grandmother was Amy Dodd, and her mother was Alice Foster; and her mother was Lucy Sheridan. I do not know any of the names before Lucy because they were not Western names. They were named in their own native language which they spoke from the beginning. The women were probably Kooma women, as the Kooma tribes shared the same land since the beginning with the Gungarri people. Gungarri men married Kooma women, this was the way of marriage lore. My family and my mob do not remember the language now, so we do not know the stories and the lore and we cannot talk to the spirits and do ceremony.

A policeman came to the Bollon camp after Alice Foster died and wrote a report to say the children were well cared for, well fed and the house was clean. The children were sent to school and worked the station cattle like their father. So, the policeman wrote them out a paper to say they were exempt from removal. But not long after that, my grandmother Amy Dodd and her brother Tom were in St George shopping and the police rounded them up with all the other kids in the town and locked them up in the jail. Later they were transported to a mission. Wherever she was taken, and whatever happened, remains unknown and unspoken. I only knew she was a stolen child long after she died and I went looking in the archives for her papers.

Amy was from the emu tribe. She was around 11 when she was taken so she would have spoken her language and known her stories, but she never told me any. I think she was taught to be ashamed of being Aboriginal, because she never told anyone about it. Or she may have been scared because she had a Certificate of Exemption which meant she could live as freely as a white woman as long as she abided by the rules on the Certificate. She was not allowed to speak language, or drink alcohol or mix with any Aboriginal people. I don’t think she ever did any of those things.
She raised her family of eight children telling them to just say they were Greek. My mother was Amy's eldest daughter. My mother did not tell me any of the story, for fear I would tell someone and I may be taken away by the government people. She couldn't bear the worry. When I grew up, I moved to America for 20 years. I think it was the ultimate hide-out.

My worldview is Aboriginal in that I can see Western ways that are normative to its own members. In my dreams my ancestors are alive and visit me to offer me comfort, company and wisdom. In the day the birds come as messengers to remind me that my being is interconnected with all living things. My ancestors live in the stars in the Milky Way, and whisper to me in the wind. These are good Aboriginal things, but there are hard things too. These are the colonised worries. I remember nearly every day that the fair-skinned children were removed first, and I was born with the bluest eyes. And sometimes, when I glance in the mirror, I wonder who that white-skinned girl is? I forget I do not look like the dark-skinned Aboriginal women in my family as that is how I feel. I am a fair-skinned urban Aboriginal woman.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

This research gathers stories of how individuals’ experiences of school affect their current attitudes and ideas about education. It explores stories of childhood and school from Indigenous Australians, across generations. Many Aboriginal families remain absent or distant from home–school partnerships. Many educators continue to blame the families for this state of affairs. Typically, many educators interpret a lack of engagement as a lack of interest (Friedel, 1999; Hutchins, Martin, Saggers, & Sims, 2007; Malin, 2003a; Mellor, 2003; Shepherd & Walker, 2008). What remain unheard in these conversations are the voices of Indigenous people about their reasons for not engaging with schools and the challenges that individuals continue to face while at school. This thesis investigates how Aboriginal people view schools and schooling. It is recognised that all Aboriginal people do not necessarily share one point of view. How do Aboriginal people experience, see, and feel about schools? What experiences of the past linger and place a shadow on the contemporary reality of education for Indigenous families and children?

The last decade has seen much attention to health and welfare policies for Indigenous people through policies to equalise opportunities and outcomes (COAG Reform Council, 2010, 2011, 2012) and attention given to improving the educational outcomes for Aboriginal children. Such reforms have identified a pivotal need to engage Indigenous parents in education and understand the reasons for their reticence about engaging in mainstream schooling (Shepherd & Walker, 2008; Silburn & Walker, 2008; Vimpani, Patton, & Hayes, 2002). This thesis offers to break this silence and provide educators with a means to develop a collaborative dialogue with Aboriginal families. As I was not raised “inside” the collective Aboriginal culture, I was unaware of the historical schooling Aboriginal people had experienced. I wondered if their experiences had shaped ideas and beliefs that blocked their involvement with schools. I wanted to understand if their childhood experiences impacted on subsequent generations’ views about schooling. Perhaps, these transgenerational experiences continue to shape the current educational experiences for Aboriginal families with young children.
This thesis seeks an academic space in which to reframe embedded assumptions about Aboriginality and education. It is not about government or paternalistic approaches or intervention programs. It offers the other perspective; encompassing the reality of colonisation, history and the impacts of those experiences on the current circumstances of Aboriginal families. This research will contribute toward a more complete understanding of the ideas Indigenous people have about schooling. If research and policy continue to be constructed without the collaborative Aboriginal perspective and voice then the achievement gap for Aboriginal children will not be reduced (Hutchins et al., 2007; Shepherd & Walker, 2008).

**Aboriginality and Disadvantage**

An estimated half a million Indigenous Australians comprise 2.7% of the Australian population and it is clear that they are the most disadvantaged group in Australian society (Altman, 2009; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2010; Hunter, 1999, 2000, 2004; Taylor, 2006). While Australia is renowned for its rich resources and a superior quality of life, as well as the quality of its educational and health systems, there remain significant educational and health inequalities for Indigenous Australians. They experience high rates of unemployment and incarceration, low income, substandard housing, and a high burden of ill health and mortality (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2009, 2010; AIHW, 2010). These findings from the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey* demonstrate lifestyle difficulties which are similar to other colonised people internationally. The social and health concerns include high rates of smoking, substance misuse, exposure to violence, and obesity (ABS & AIHW, 2005; Silburn & Walker, 2008). Life expectancy is 17 years less for Indigenous Australians compared with other Australians.

The psychological wellbeing of Indigenous Australian families is a major health policy concern (Purdie, Dudgeon, & Walker, 2010; Silburn & Walker, 2008). While the measurement of social and emotional wellbeing is difficult, it usually relies on self-reporting of wellbeing and life stress of individuals. According to the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey* (ABS, 2009, 2010), Indigenous adults are twice as likely as non-indigenous adults to report high levels of
psychological distress and life stressors. In the previous 12 months more Indigenous people reported stressors including the death of a family member or friend; alcohol or drug related problems; trouble with the police; and being a witness to violence. Almost 20% of Indigenous people reported that a member of the family had been sent to jail in the previous 12 months (ABS, 2009, 2010).

Overall, Indigenous women tend to birth more children and at younger ages than do non-indigenous women. About 20 in 100 Indigenous mothers were teenagers when they had their first child. This compares with 4 in 100 for all other Australian mothers. Indigenous child mortality rates are more than twice those of non-indigenous families (COAG Reform Council, 2010, 2011). The most startling statistic is that 33% of Aboriginal children are involved with child protection services. This is an upward trend (AIHW, 2010). According to age trends reported by the ABS (2009), the average age for Aboriginal women is 21 years compared to an average of 37 years for all women in the mainstream population. Based upon these demographic trends it is Aboriginal families who will increasingly be creating new families and having children to send to school.

**Closing the Gap**

Closing the inequality gaps on Indigenous education, health and disadvantage has become the overarching policy objective of Australian governments. However, little attention is focused on the underpinning social determinants and injustices (Cooper, 2011). In this thesis, I suggest that social determinants are consequences of past experiences of colonisation and European settlement. As part of policy initiatives, Australian governments have also called for greater partnership between Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians (Close the Gap, 2008). Gaps in educational and health outcomes for Indigenous people are being addressed and monitored under the *Close the Gap* initiative (COAG Reform Council, 2010, 2011).

*Close the Gap* (2008) is both a policy and a strategy aimed at reducing Indigenous disadvantage with respect to life expectancy, child mortality, early childhood education access, educational achievement, and employment outcomes. With regard to early childhood and schooling, the government identified a number of core components to address in the strategies. Two of the core components recognise the importance of Indigenous parents’ relationships with schools (COAG Reform
Council, 2010, 2011; Docket, Perry, & Kearney, 2010). Specifically, strategies include creating opportunities for parental engagement and for community–school partnerships. The most recent COAG Reform Council (2012) report indicated some improvement in Indigenous health. This report noted that efforts to reduce educational inequalities were “disappointing”. Across Australia, only a relatively small proportion of Indigenous children reach the national minimum standards in literacy and numeracy. More than one third of fifteen-year-old Indigenous students lack essential literacy skills. In the Northern Territory of Australia, only one in five children living in remote Indigenous communities can read at the acceptable minimum standard. As well, school attendance for Indigenous students “got worse in every jurisdiction from 2007–2010” (COAG Reform Council (2012, p. 1). Cooper (2011) also noted that equal partnerships and community level control are not being demonstrated; rather, he suggests, the current policies are likely to intensify processes of cultural loss and alienation.

Earlier research in Indigenous education has revealed that teachers typically consider Aboriginal homes, children or families as deficient or in some way lacking. As such, the problem is considered by such educators to be outside the realm and accountability of the school or teaching process (Cooper, 2011; Hutchins et al., 2007; Malin, 1989, 2003a; Zubrick et al., 2005). The broad issue of Aboriginal education is described as “the Aboriginal problem” which implies it needs to be “fixed” by non-indigenous schools and governments (Fleer, 2004; Malin, 2003a; Malin & Maidment, 2003). Through their non-participation in schools, Aboriginal families are largely held to be uninterested and thus responsible for the overwhelmingly negative outcomes of their children’s schooling. Within educational settings, cultural or colonisation issues have not necessarily been considered as related to disengaged families (Fleer, 2004; Hutchins et al., 2007; Shepherd & Walker, 2008). The current gap in outcomes between Aboriginal children and Anglo-Celtic children within school is constructed by educators as an achievement gap. This is a deficit construction as the children, families, and culture are perceived as deficit by culture, biology, or intelligence (Altman, 2009; Gould, 2009; Hutchins et al., 2007; Reynolds, 2005; Shepherd & Walker, 2008).

Conversely, from an Aboriginal community perspective, the gap is considered to be a schooling or teaching gap on the part of educators or schools. It appears to the
Aboriginal community that the majority of Anglo-Celtic educators seem unable or are ill equipped to educate the cultural other inclusively within Australian schools. Schools continue to act as agents of social reproduction rather than transformation. While there are successful education stories, they remain too infrequent and ad hoc. Aboriginal children remain the most educationally disadvantaged and impoverished Australians. Schooling contributes to ongoing oppression and schools are an agency of neo-colonisation by their implicit Western processes (Smith, 1999). Aboriginal families do want their children to succeed in mainstream schools. They often feel that schools are exclusionary, “white business” and culturally unsafe (Hutchins et al., 2007; Malin, 2003a). Yet, majority thinking does not seem to recognise or understand this view or consider how normalised paternalistic practices implicitly other Aboriginal families.

According to the Little Children are Sacred Report commissioned by the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse (2007), the Indigenous community in the Northern Territory considers the current Indigenous education situation a crisis that continued mainstream paternalistic policies fail to address. Respect, equality and non-discrimination need to be present in the discourse on Aboriginal education.

The Indigenist Thesis

In order to counter the enduring dominant literature about the Indigenous other, this thesis is framed by an anticolonial and decolonising theory and voice. It is guided by the voice of the Aboriginal other naturalistic conversational narratives. Only one percent of the Aboriginal Australian population holds a doctoral degree; so our academic voice is not yet a whisper (Paradies, 2006a). Lester Rigney (1999) indicated that an Indigenist positioning and approach is formed around three principles: resistance, political integrity and privileging. In Canada, Battiste (2000) emphasised the role of research in enabling people and communities to reclaim and tell their stories in their own ways and give testimony to their collective experiences, stories and struggles. In contemporary research practices, narratives are typically acknowledged as powerful agents for resistance and change because they connect the past to the future (Archibald, 2008; Smith, 1999). In Australia, Professor Martin Nakata (2007) asserted that the Indigenist thesis must resist a prescribed academic
space. He argued that to define a thesis as Indigenist means that it may also be *othered* and compared to Western research.

Internationally, Indigenous academics do not have a monocultural view of the world. Typically they hold a bi-ocular view as they have grown up embedded in two cultural spaces and worldviews. They do not speak with one voice, or dictate any one methodology. They do share a common quest for social justice (Smith, 1999). I presume to write this thesis as a “two-way strong” document. It is informed by Western literature as well as Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. Nakata (2007) recommended that Indigenous scholars should use their Western training as strength. His idea aligns with my personal way of being in the academic world. I am of Aboriginal heritage yet trained in academies of Western knowledge in Australian and American universities. This thesis is supervised by a non-indigenous academic. This process has been undertaken as a journey between both spaces in order to un-silence the marginalised Indigene and offer privilege to Aboriginal voice, history and struggle.

Recent Indigenist doctorates speak to variations in shape, form and intent as Indigenous academics write themselves into the higher education research journey. For instance, the recent Australian Aboriginal thesis by Karen Martin (2008) speaks to how Indigenous people construct knowledge from their environment. In another instance, Native American scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) wrote his non-conventional thesis as a teaching letter to his children. His autobiographical thesis referred to Indigenous scholars in Queensland being told during their oral defence that they required more (Western) theory in their methodologies. Conversely, I was told by a non-indigenous female academic during my oral defence at the same institution that my thesis was not Indigenous at all. Such stories speak to the challenges Indigenous scholars face in seeking a shared space within the university.

Nonetheless, Indigenous scholars must work with courage to find this contested space because academic qualifications remain important. I want to achieve within this space because it has been so often closed to me and other Aboriginal people in the past. This is how culture, beliefs and stories were affirmed across generations. While this thesis honours the Western academic traditions it is positioned between two worldviews. It draws strength from both constructions of knowledge and ways of knowing. As an academic thesis, this document is initially
aimed at the readership of my academic peers. However, it is also written to be accessible to non-indigenous educators and leaders as a space to hear authentic dialogue and Aboriginal ideas. Its purpose is pragmatic in that it seeks to position and offer an alternative discourse to teachers and policy writers about Indigenous perspectives. It seeks to offer a positive rather than a deficit position to educators’ current understanding of Indigenous families and education. As Nakata (2007) advocated, the strength of an Indigenous doctorate is that it is accessible to the Western reader. Currently mainstream teachers and policy writers are the dominant engineers of Aboriginal experience in education processes.

Although I am an Aboriginal woman, I cannot fully claim an authentic Aboriginal space. I no longer have access to my traditional maternal stories, lore or language. I carry only fragments to offer into this thesis. I do write this thesis from my own colonised Indigenous life experience, as well as from my Australian and American academic training and professional practices. I rely upon a narrative methodology and interpretation of whole stories so the Indigene, as storyteller, speaks for herself within and about her own colonised and historical context.

The Indigenist thesis by nature is an undefined entity at this time (Nakata, 2007). In gathering these stories, I have discovered the rich counter-narrative and deep understandings which Indigenous voices, scholars and research bring into the academy. However, as I come to finalise this thesis journey, I see that there are emerging books of Indigenous methodologies such as *Indigenous Research Methodologies* by the South American Indigenous academic Barbara Chilisa (2011). In it, she presents Indigenised Western frameworks and concepts such as “validation” and “triangulation”. An Indigenist thesis must also honour worldview and ways of knowing, being and doing. A thesis, like all good research, must be designed to find answers to the research quest.

While Indigenous theses take many forms, the important thing is that they retain an Indigenous conception which aligns with the aim of the research undertaken. As Moreton-Robinson and Walter (2009) assert, our work and our writing must remain a space defined by the Indigene and not one defined or constructed by white women and academics. As worldviews and assumptions are so embedded into ways of being, I agree with Linda Smith (1999) that it must be left to the intelligence of the Indigene to create this space. If we are to be respected in the
university, we must be assigned mutual trust and respect as we journey into Indigenous spaces within the academy. As Indigenous academics, we are a walking point for those who follow on our journey into the academy.

**Research Problem and Objectives**

The current demographic trends for Indigenous families are toward living in major regional and metropolitan areas. Unlike the majority of Indigenous research, this project is situated within an urban context. The largest communities of Aboriginal people in Australia are in the cities of Sydney and Brisbane; followed by the regional town of Coffs Harbour (ABS, 2007). Professor Lester Rigney (2011) also identified this issue when he stated that what is observed in the remote Kimberleys may not be reproduced in Adelaide. Urban Indigenous people are increasingly alienated from their identity by living anonymous lives within urban and suburban contexts. Their lives may be more invisible as trends toward mixed marriages are creating a “whitening” of Aboriginal people (Paradies, 2006b). Aboriginal people recognise our skin colour does not hold our cultural or spiritual identity or connectivity.

There is a paucity of literature considering the unique challenges Indigenous families and children encounter in urban schools. While research on Indigenous families and young children is sparse, urban Indigenous research is even more so, particularly from the Indigenous perspective. At least 75% of Aboriginal people are urbanised (ABS & AIHW, 2005). The emerging profile of the urban Indigenous child may offer challenges not encountered or anticipated in Aboriginal communities where they may be the majority or a discrete community. Aboriginal presence in urban areas is largely invisible to the mainstream population because they live in spread out suburban areas. They often live in isolation without kin and cultural community and social connections. Therefore in addressing the paucity of research on urban Aboriginal issues, this research is conducted in a rural urban town, as defined by the ABS and AIHW (2005).

This thesis required that I step outside the usual arena of early childhood education research to speak to the breadth of complexities in relation to Aboriginality, identity and mainstream deficit constructions that situate the ordinary
lived reality for Aboriginal people. The grander social and contextual issues needed to be voiced as the storytellers in this research “speak back” to deficit constructions assigned to Aboriginal families. I felt strongly that these broader complexities are unseen by the dominant educators and contribute to blocking success for our students.

This project is emic. This means that it is designed to allow the issues of the families to emerge from the storytellers’ narratives rather than have the participants respond to predetermined issues identified by the researcher. In this research, the emic stance also allows the voice of the Indigene to be spoken within the same cultural context as described in Grande (2005) and Patton (2002). The themes are discovered and shaped from within the storytellers’ voices in their narratives. An emic project also aligns internationally with the emerging native pedagogies, such as the Native American Red Pedagogy (Grande, 2005). Sandra Grande states that the Indigenous thesis should not begin with predetermined questions, questionnaires or instruments which would supply a limited scope of response to the participants. My quest was to hear stories about Aboriginal people’s own memories and their recollections of school experiences. I then looked to identify common ideas and beliefs about schooling to see if they carried across generations into the contemporary context of Aboriginal Australian families. I identified the core research problem as wanting to understand from the Aboriginal perspective the reasons for the poor outcomes of Aboriginal children in mainstream schools. I noticed that the playgroup families were reluctant to engage with schools and did not form collaborative partnerships with educators. The research aim was to determine if colonising education carried an impact across generations about how our families felt about schools.

This project sought to determine:

- What was the reality of school for different generations of Indigenous people?
- What beliefs and values are held about mainstream education for Indigenous children?
- What ideas are communicated about school across generations?
The Playgroup as the Story Space for the Research

When I returned to Australia from America in 2005, I was contracted on a part-time basis by the Queensland Department of Education in the Indigenous Learning Unit for the Sunshine Coast region. An Australian Government funding program through the Department of Education, Science and Training was known at the time as the Parent School Partnerships Initiative (Australian National Audit Office, 2008). The program supported the development of parent and school collaborations and partnerships. Along with support from Playgroup Queensland, I established at least twelve targeted Indigenous playgroups across the region. The playgroups were considered to be an informal opportunity to assist Indigenous families and children with the transition to school process.

Playgroups are informal unstructured spaces for parents and young children to come together for social support and to gain ideas about how children learn. This playgroup was designed to be culturally appropriate or “Aboriginal way”, and to be self-sustaining in the community even after funding ceased. The host school was required to provide three hours of a teacher aide salary out of their Australian Government Aboriginal student monies to pay the Aboriginal facilitator. The playgroups were located within mainstream state primary schools. Education Queensland offered expendable resources and “in kind” support. For a year a community partnership officer and I canvassed schools for locations. Not all the schools approached by the units offered us space. The community partnership officer identified Aboriginal families in the community through his networks, school enrolments and health services. It was necessary to “sell” the program to the families as they typically were reluctant to be involved with schools, unless it was compulsory. The families were initially reluctant to come to the school playgroups; however, over time, they became a culturally safe hub within the schools. Two years after establishing the groups, I identified the original community playgroup as a focus of my doctoral research. I returned to immerse myself within the original group to undertake this research. It took much longer than expected to gather these stories as I had to establish trusting relationships with the new families.

In order for this research to be undertaken and offer cultural safety to the participants, I located the storytelling space within the playgroup. Originally, I
envisaged visiting families in their homes, but the families requested using the playgroup space and time. Stories were often told, and casually member checked within the circle time at morning tea. At times, elders suggested we meet outside in comfortable settings like coffee shops and two of the grandmothers asked me to listen to their stories in their own homes. I honoured all requests so the storytellers felt they were the authority in the situation. All were honoured as the experts in their own life. My role aligns with what Judy Atkinson (2002) called *Dadirri* or deep listening. Aboriginal people believe that by listening the soul fills up with wisdom. Deep listening is a reflective space which does not necessarily require comment from the listener. It is listening without concern for a response, which is more typical of Western ways of listening.

Although I originally attempted to implement my research in a predesigned and timelined Western narrative research design, I found I needed to revise my design. The Murri mothers in the playgroup became collaborative co-designers and authors of the story gathering process. I used naturalistic and narrative research techniques (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Patton, 2002) which included the everyday and culturally safe playgroup setting; conversation-like interview dialogues; no predesigned research instruments such as a survey or questionnaire; and I relied on the support of other parents by using group circle narratives as well as individual conversations to gather stories.

**Research Framework and Methodology**

By its nature, this is an intergenerational or transgenerational qualitative study informed by Indigenous ethnography and narrative inquiry (Benham, 2007). The thesis is a journeyed narrative as storytellers speak across colonisation, history, policy and familial experiences. I speak to three adult generations of storytellers from elders to parents of toddlers. The first generation of storytellers are community elders. They speak their constructed recollected testimonies of their forcible removals, mission life and dispossession. The next generation are the grandparent generation to the playgroup children. They speak to being stolen from their families and how their lives were shaped by trauma and abuse. The third generation are the present-day young families or the Murri Mums of this playgroup study. They speak
to their own school experiences and for their young family and children’s realities in school.

The youngest storytellers are the playgroup children who create a fourth tier of storytellers. However, the cohort did not add voice rather silence to this project. The three adult generations consisted of five community elders (aged around 80), five grandparents (aged around 48) of playgroup children, and five parents of young Murri children who attended playgroup regularly. One of the Murri mother storytellers was a non-indigenous woman, who was married to a traditional Aboriginal man and mother of his four Aboriginal children. All participants self-selected to be involved in this project.

My voice is also included in this thesis as the auto-ethnographic “I” as I discuss in the methodology chapter. Its inclusion is autobiographical and typical of emerging Indigenous scholarship (Benham, 2007). This thesis is also a personal journey in which I sought to discover my own identity and deeper understanding of my heritage and Aboriginality. My family chose denial of Aboriginality and “passing” as non-indigenous in order to survive government policy and practice which included taking children to be raised as European. I grew up with only slight insights to my Aboriginal identity as it was never spoken of in my home. Nonetheless I had an Aboriginal mother, who was raised by her Aboriginal mother. My family chose to hide because of fear of the children being taken. The fairest children were taken first and I was born with the bluest eyes.

All of the storytellers were playgroup families, or associated with the extended playgroup community. I reflected upon narrative inquiry research models that allowed for emergent categories to occur. I sought to inductively identify core common issues or themes within and across the generations (Clandinin, 2007). Narrative inquiry honours holistic interconnected constructions of Indigenous knowledge. I positioned myself naturally in a non-authoritative role within the group and collected narratives within the playgroup context as a naturalistic space (Clandinin, 2007).

While much is said in the literature about Indigenous research and story gathering, there is less said about ways of interpreting the data. I have found that these stories are teaching resources which offer my community another benefit from my research. The process considers the told story; the underpinning story (what the
story is about); and the potential for new teaching resources that the story offers. My interpretation was also informed by interpretations of the ideas of Jean Clandinin, (2007) and Amia Lieblich (1998) and their insightful and empathetic approaches to narrative research and life story analyses. However, I do question the cultural universality of analysis approaches.

I undertook culturally respectful practice and was advised by my tribal and community elders around all matters cultural. Their input was as insightful and important as that of my academic supervisors. While I personally undertook this project as an apprenticeship into the academy with my supervisor as mentor, I also had the opportunity to learn so much about my own tribal and traditional ways of doing business where I have much to learn. It is an engaged methodology because it includes the Indigenous stories and participant collaboration of design and implementation in the processes. Even when I rely on Western strengths in literature and design, my point of difference at all times is my Indigenous worldview.

Justification for the Research

As an Aboriginal woman and academic, my first obligation is to achieve all I can in my profession as I am the ancestor and bridge builder for the young women who follow me. I consider this an obligation from our original laws. I do this thesis for myself and my community. My grandmother and mother lived lives of shame, self-hatred and denial because of how European Australians viewed and treated them. These so-called inferior people are my family and my mob. I am the first in my family to achieve a university education, and already both my daughters are engaging in professional law degrees. An education has created change within one generation in my family. I see how the insight and social justice agenda of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam and the gift of a teacher training scholarship in 1973 led me into tertiary education and changed my life, my children’s lives and perhaps will influence all the descendants who will follow. I regret the loss of my own traditional culture, and wish I too carried that sacred knowledge.
Ethics

In order to respect the community wishes, I returned all intellectual property in the form of stories, photographs and recordings to the community with the exception of those in this document which I have permission to use. I continue to hold my observations and handwritten field notes with permission. All storytellers were made aware of, and consented to, their story’s publication as part of the academic thesis process. All participants could opt out of the project at any time. This thesis is underpinned by respectful Indigenous research protocol and practice. I have reflected upon and informed my work with the Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research (NHMRC, 2003). It also honours the academic and ethical requirements of the Queensland University of Technology. All storytellers’ names are pseudonyms and any other identifying markers have been changed.

I wish to add an additional disclaimer to this project as an offering of protection to Aboriginal readers. I discovered during this journey in literature and reality, that recollection or remembering back to traditional times, past family members and colonisation events can be re-traumatising to people as they can re-experience such events. Stories contained in this document may be emotionally upsetting for many people, particularly those who endured similar life events. My storytellers expressed to me that they found the opportunity to tell their story healing. However, I suggest readers be aware that this may occur and that if the stories should trigger any difficulties, Indigenous cultural healing services do offer counselling support, including Aboriginal stolen generation support groups.

Overview of the Thesis

Chapter 1: Introduction. This chapter has described the Indigenous and academic rationale and aims of this research. It has discussed the rural urban research site and the playgroup as a site for the storytelling. It has provided an overview of the research problem and research methodology.

Chapter 2: Literature review. This chapter describes the historical, sociological, individual and colonisation forces which may have shaped and perpetuated the deficit discourse applied to Aboriginal Australians in contemporary settings. It
considers how colonisation has impacted upon Aboriginal people and culture. Through colonisation they have moved from a position of cultural identity and maintenance to one of cultural trauma. It considers whiteness as a normative constructed context. Alongside Indigenous literature, I offer typical Western models of capital which describe the world. I demonstrate how such models are perpetuating the Western worldview and implicitly othering Aboriginal people. Sociologically, I consider the aspects of social capital in Aboriginal urban contexts. Existentially, I consider the impact of culture, cultural maintenance, cultural genocide and cultural trauma to a society. Finally, the chapter considers how ideas and personal beliefs develop over generations.

**Chapter 3: A decolonising conceptual framework.** This chapter describes the underpinning decolonising framework of Linda Tuhiiwai Smith (1999). Emerging qualitative trends in research and Indigenous research offer a counter position to Western research models. As well as the conceptual framework, I consider emerging global Indigenous research methodology and instruments which honour the underpinning conceptual framework and the voice of the native. It describes Indigenous ethnographic research designs.

**Chapter 4: The Indigenist methodology.** This chapter describes the research journey and methodology of intergenerational Indigenous ethnographic narratives. It explains how my original Western design and process using Indigenous standpoint theory implicitly othered my participants as deficit. The chapter describes how I redesigned the Indigenist methodology and how it was co-authored and co-designed by the playgroup mothers. It describes how the collaborative design leads to deep and insightful stories about schooling from their perspective. The design also acted as a healing and empowerment agency to the group of Murri mothers. At times I do align my Indigenist design with emerging Western designs. I do this because international research theorists are seeking new ways to authentically engage and hear other truths.

**Chapters 5, 6, and 7.** These three story chapters each contain the narratives and findings for each generation. The story chapters are arranged in generational order from elders to children. Narratives are interpreted and analysed within the same chapter using an inductive, holistic interpretation as Amia Lieblich (1998) described.

**Chapter 5: Yimbanyiari – Listening to the old people.** This chapter considers the schooling-related narratives of five Indigenous elders. It is respectful Indigenous
protocol and practice to begin this research with the stories of the community elders. These stories speak to colonial education in mission schools, country town schools, and Yumba camp schools. One story speaks to the complexities of family in hiding who were “passing” as white.

Chapter 6: Us taken-away kids. These stories are the narratives of the stolen generation of children who are now grandparents to the playgroup children. The storytellers are five grandparents who attend playgroup with their families. They are aged around 40-55 years. Their lived stories are shaped by trauma and abuse. The storytellers were focused on survival, escape and finding their homes, rather than schooling experiences.

Chapter 7: The Murri “Mums and Bubs”. This chapter holds the cumulative destination stories of intergenerational narratives. This group are the Murri Mums who are an eclectic mix of parents. They situate the contemporary Aboriginal world in the real-world issues of identity, demographic trends and government intrusion into their everyday lives. They are contextualised in poverty and racism but the Murri Mums of the playgroup are building urban tribe.

Chapter 8: Conclusions. This chapter reviews the findings of this research and situates the findings within the broader contemporary social context. It summarises the main points across generations which have stopped Murri families engaging with schools. Implications relate to whiteness which underpins much policy and practice. It considers how normative whiteness blocks inclusive engagement of Aboriginal families and children in schools. It considers how racism is inherent to schools and causes difficulties for Aboriginal children in many school contexts. It also suggests implications of the research and how Indigenous research can lead to better outcomes and inclusion of our children.

Conclusions

This thesis is situated between Western and Indigenist ways of knowing, being and doing. It provides a space for testimony, voice and knowledge to policy makers and educators by giving voice for Indigenous people. It offers their perspectives on their experiences of education and their life experiences. The thesis may offer a broader understanding as to why Indigenous families are reluctant to engage with
schools. It speaks where there is a paucity of research. The research process involved listening to the stories of three adult generations of storytellers and the children who wished to be included. It seeks to understand ideas and beliefs about schooling that have transferred across generations from the ancestor generations to the offspring. I wish to understand if any such ideas continue to influence Aboriginal families’ lack of engagement with schools and teachers.

This thesis is underpinned by the story of an urban targeted Indigenous playgroup. The playgroup also acts as the culturally safe storytelling space for listening to community stories. Storytellers range across generations from elders to young Murri families. Playgroup children are also invited to offer stories if they care to do so. The stories are gathered through oral narrative techniques which align with core components of globally emerging Indigenous research paradigms. The Murri Mums as the core group of regular playgroup mothers collaborated with me on the design of the protocols and practices in gathering the stories.

The research is conducted within an urban setting which is important because the current Indigenous population trend is toward urban living. It is unknown how rural and remote research in communities translates into the urban context. The overall goal of this research is to improve the outcomes of Indigenous children in mainstream schools and to challenge the embedded assumptions of educators and policy writers so that schools can offer an equitable education to all Australian children. This thesis is written from an Indigenous perspective by using engaged Western and Indigenous methodologies. It can inform educators and policy writers about Indigenous education experiences.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Many Australians live privileged lives unaware that colonialist impositions remain as contemporary everyday issues in the lives of Aboriginal families. In order to understand the current context and issues that affect Aborigines it is necessary to understand the historical and colonising realities which are not typically considered in educational policy, practice and literature. This past knowledge is not offered to assign blame or guilt, rather to understand how that past has shaped the social and psychological spaces the families live in today. Halloran (2004) describes the impact of colonisation processes in existential psychological terms. He explains Aboriginal people moved from cultural maintenance, through processes of cultural genocide to a contemporary context of fragmentation or cultural trauma. This is not always understood by the mainstream community. They may believe that the deficit constructions of Aboriginality are the culture rather than the fragmented remnants of a culture.

Most Aboriginal people live without the existential protection of stories. Colonisation and neo-colonisation invade the daily lives of Indigenous people collectively and individually all over the world (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). In this chapter, I focus outside the realm of typical early years’ education scholarship to find theory to redress why families are reluctant to be involved with schools. I also step outside of the dominant academic literature to offer the counter story from the Aboriginal perspective. Other life-world, identity and discriminatory issues are represented here, because they are not typically encountered by the dominant Anglo majority (Kincheloe, 2005). Much of this chapter is informed by interdisciplinary literature, particularly health and Australian legal commentary. Law, unlike education, is underpinned by the discourses about human rights, social justice and anti-discrimination. I identify these discourses as those that could be transformative to Indigenous education.

While this chapter is written for the readership of my academic peers, it is also aimed toward readers who are education leaders, educators and policy writers.
According to the academic traditions of the doctorate, I have informed much of this chapter with Western literature. As academic literature is typically Western it may inherently *other* the Indigenous position. Therefore, I have interwoven Indigenous elder wisdom and my own Indigenous perspective and knowings to consider the literature reflectively. The Western sociological theories of Bourdieu (1986) and Lareau (2000) are considered in this chapter. However, this is not a traditional Western thesis and their inclusion is as a point of reference; their theories are not extensively explored in this chapter.

This literature chapter considers the historical settlement processes, but not as a timeline of events. Rather, it offers the story of colonisation as a process of cultural destruction which moved Aboriginal society from a unique, intact, and sophisticated social, intellectual and spiritual space into the current marginalised context. It begins with story, or traditional Aboriginal life as a culturally strong and safe space, and then discusses how colonisation destroyed cultural maintenance and identity for families (Halloran, 2004). Ethnic and racialised constructions of critical whiteness theory are then discussed for their contribution to the mainstream essentialised view of the native. The third section considers the concept of social capital. Traditional social capital existed inherently within Indigenous society. Western aspects of social capital and sociological theories are discussed and considered as a means to reconstitute an oppressed and damaged culture. In the final section, I consider how beliefs and ideas are formed within families and across society.

I begin this section by speaking to some traditional aspects of Aboriginal society and how land and story kept people and country strong. It demonstrates how different Western and Indigenous worldviews are. This section is informed by my traditional tribal elders and by the Central Australian Aboriginal storyteller Margaret Kenmare Turner (1996, p. 45).

*This Story is the Land, and the Land is the Story.*

*The Story holds the people,*

*And the people live inside the Story,*

*The Story lives inside the people,*

*And the Land lives inside the people also.*

*It goes all ways to hold the Land.*
This verse speaks to the traditional interconnected concept of land and lore. Traditionally Aboriginal people lived with a deep sense of interrelated cultural being which tied them and their story, or lore, to the context of their land. The concepts of land, lore, language and all living things were indivisible for traditional Aboriginal people. Indivisible means not only are all important, but no single one is more important than the other. The land was really part of who Aboriginal people were. The people were related to the hills, and the creeks, and the trees, and the waterholes and animals. As such, all things were sacred and cared for.

As Turner (1996) describes, some family lines could be related to the weather; like the winds or the rain in their ontology. The family lines could also be related to the firewood, the bark and the roots that gave the bush medicine that you gather. Aboriginal people belonged to their land from the very first day. The language, lore, spirituality, and kinship are existentially connected. All relationships are defined in interrelatedness to all other things which begins and ends with connection to the land. Kinship roots are bloodlines which run through the veins and which lead generations to the land-origins from the very beginning in the dreaming.

The family bloodlines carry the stories too, and carry knowings about the land (Turner, 1996). The land itself carries stories through the generations. So the blood of the people and the land and stories are all one. There are also spirits which belong to the land, to guard it and its people. Land and your tribal obligations and kinship give you dignity, respect and love. They define who you are and provide you with a meaningful cultural and psychological existence both collectively and individually. Such aspects of culture are invisible and collective assumptions which create the unique Aboriginal worldview.

“Dreams and stories and trees and songs and animals and ceremonies, all holds in that one big patch, just one big country group that holds the whole pile. It ties you to all things” (Turner, 1996, p. 19). Individual and collective identity was interrelated with the land, and all your knowledge was contained within the landscape in stories too. Even the sounds of the language were taken from the noises of the wind, the animals and the trees. The relationship was so culturally sacred, and so defining of identity, that the anthropologist, W. E. H. Stanner (1979) suggested there were no English words good enough to demonstrate the links to the tribe or its homeland.
In writing of intergenerational trauma, Archibald (2008) described traditional knowledge as the framework of connection and culture and included the responsibility of teaching each young child and passing down of stories. Ceremonies had purpose in providing testament to the people of who they were, and where they belonged within a society. They dispelled feelings of despair and hopelessness as they connected the lives of the ancestors to the lives of the living. They also offered a communal identity from the ancestral past and to the future (Atkinson, 2002).

Sacred obligations to family, tribe and kinships were the basis of social bonds. All knowledge was contextualised within tribal lands, so by reading the landscape cues Aboriginal people learned since the beginning of time. The most sacred knowledge, which women shared with the creator, was of procreation and birth. This was the knowledge which women held and speaks to why they were traditionally so highly regarded within their tribes. I tell the story of how people came to their country. They were placed there forevermore. This story also speaks to how knowledge became gendered.

The Wagalak sisters

Once the landscape of mountains, valleys and plains and rivers was formed by the rainbow serpent, the Wagalak sisters travelled the country with their sacred dilly bags. In their bags they carried the people, languages, knowledge and the lores. They would place the people along with their other sacred contents into their country. Thus the people belonged to the country where these Goddesses placed them. These people belonged to the country where the sisters placed them. They were all placed in their traditional nations or language groups.

On one occasion the Wagalak sisters, tired and hungry from their journey, lit their campfire. They went into the mangroves to catch crabs and mangrove bugs. They left their unguarded dilly bags hanging in the tree branches. While the women were busy, men came and stole the sacred dilly bags and ran off. The sisters did chase them but they could not catch them. So the Wagalak sisters decided this was time to trust some knowledge to men. The sisters knew that as women, they held the power of the most sacred of knowledge. This was the creation and birthing powers, the care for the country and their children.
From this time, the knowledges became divided between the genders and were shared between “sacred men’s business” and “sacred women’s business”. Both roles and genders were equally powerful within the society. Women were not considered lesser to men; in fact they were highly respected for their special creation knowledge.

Atkinson (2002, p. ix) described culture as:

... the set of beliefs, values and rules for living that is distinctive to a particular human group. Culture is passed down the generations in the complex relationships, knowledges, languages, social organisation and lived experiences that bind diverse individuals and groups together.

An essential feature of any culture is that it holds self-identity, self-esteem and self-worth as accessible. Thus by providing meaning and value to life, culture acts as a buffer against the terrors intrinsic to human life (Halloran, 2004). However, narrative theorist, Jerome Bruner (1991), described that the ways of a culture are so normative to its insiders that the culture is invisible. While cultures act to maintain those sacred foundational aspects, they are not necessarily apparent to outsiders. The loss of culture and its protective mantle is addressed by Halloran (2004) in his comment below. Australian Aboriginal people now live in a colonised state he calls cultural trauma.

Widespread and persistent suppression of cultural practice disrupts a culture, making it susceptible to trauma. Cultural trauma is a state wherein cultural knowledge and practice have been weakened to the extent that they fail in their capacity to imbue individual existence with meaning and value. (Halloran, 2004, p. 3)

Consequences of Colonisation

Among the consequences of colonisation was the disruption to this sense of safety described by Halloran (2004). Lore is the body of traditional knowledge based on wisdom that comes from experience transmitted across generations. The unchanging sacred notion of lore across generations kept Aboriginal people culturally secure. Families had the responsibility to nurture, protect and teach children. In her studies of intergenerational transmission of trauma, Atkinson (2002)
argued that colonisation led to the breakdown of children learning tribal lore. This included strict codes for proper behaviour. Atkinson argued that many Aboriginal children now only see the actions of a dismantled culture. “In 1788 colonisation brought disorder and disharmony and a new law. Law here is used to mean Western systems of legislature, enactment, principle, enforcement, courts and incarceration” (p. 27).

Cultural trauma is both a symbolic space and a health condition visited upon the cultural collective and its members as an anxiety-based condition. The effects are manifest in the form of collective helplessness and pervasive anxiety. This condition is created when the reality or place of belonging is no longer accessible (Salzman & Halloran, 2004). Aboriginal people exist in such a disrupted space, which is often represented in the media and common thought as a deficit culture. Few conquests have been as systematic and brutal as that which occurred in Australia. Consequently, it appears that the conquest was actively silenced to avoid any historical guilt and possible argument about reparations (Brendt & Brendt, 1984). Salzman and Halloran (2004) describe this as “a terrorist assault that is cultural genocide” (p. 238).

Disadvantage is typically attributed to the constructed deficit characteristics of lesser humanity, lesser intelligence and being “primitive uncivilised natives” as they appeared to the eye of the British settler (Perkins & Langton, 2008). Such constructions have crossed mainstream generations and are also used to assign blame to the victim (Gould, 2009). This construction is evidenced and self-perpetuated by high incarceration rates, early death, lack of educational opportunity, and denial of land rights. This is how cultural trauma manifests (Halloran, 2004).

Halloran (2004) suggests aspects of cultural trauma are evident in Aboriginal Australians at both the communal and individual level. Poor health, lack of housing, poor sanitation, high rates of unemployment, inadequate education, high suicide rate, and community social breakdown characterise the lives of Aboriginal people (Mellor, 2003). Internationally, Australian Aboriginal health compares badly with Indigenous communities in other developed countries and was even worse than in some third world countries (Taylor, 2006). Due to their poor social status and impoverished living conditions the Indigenous peoples of Australia are reliant upon
welfare payments that have exacerbated their perception of dependence and feelings of helplessness (Halloran, 2004).

**Disassembling culture: European sovereignty and *terra nullius***

In their book, *First Australians*, Perkins and Langton (2008) assert that there was no Anglo worldview that accommodated the real Aboriginal relationship to land and ancestral spirits because there were no obvious markers like fences, buildings and laws. According to the British normalised eye of Lieutenant James Cook, the natural landscape of Australia bore no apparent sign of civilisation or organised governance (Behrendt, Cunneen, & Libesman, 2009). *Terra nullius* was an astute economic and strategic positioning of the colonisers because it ensured that sovereignty and ownership of Australia was legally British, according to British law. Over time the concept of *terra nullius* was extended from “empty, barren and uninhabited land” to include lands that were not in “possession of civilised peoples or put to proper civilised use” (Behrendt et al., 2009, p. 8).

Historically, colonisers had little compulsion to act with sensitivity and wisdom towards the native as they imperialistically claimed new country for the Empire (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). From the time of first settlement Australia was not designated as a pluralistic country that honoured the presence of its original people. In 1992, the Australian High Court’s Mabo judgment overturned *terra nullius* as legal fiction (High Court of Australia, 1992). However the same judgment upheld that only one sovereign power and one system of law existed in Australia (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 2002). From the outset, Australia was envisaged as a white European country in the Pacific region (Behrendt et al., 2009).

The builders of empires justify their actions by the belief that their culture is superior to those who are colonised (Jamrozik, 2004). Had Australia been acquired by treaty, an acknowledgement of prior occupation of a First Nation people would be implied. Aboriginal occupation and land ownership was disregarded from the beginning. In order to justify sovereignty of the Australian landmass for England, a deficit construction of the native was necessary. In fact, according to Perkins and Langton (2008), Aboriginal people were considered essentially “animal like, cunning and treacherous, enemies of the nation” (p. 11). Such depictions justified inhumane
treatment of the native people because it was as if no “human being” was here (Jamrozik, 2004).

Australia was colonised at a time when the ideas of John Locke influenced understandings of property ownership. Locke argued that if there was no sign of agriculture then the natives must be living in a state of nature (Behrendt et al., 2009). This disregard for Aboriginal people's humanity and occupation appears to be founded in a combination of expedience, and racist philosophical and political ideas (Perkins & Langton, 2008). To acknowledge prior occupation would have also required acknowledgement of Aboriginal law. In 1807, Blackstone, the English lawyer and legal analyst, described the English legal view of sovereignty as one of “supreme, irresistible, absolute, uncontrolled authority” (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 2002).

By constructing Australia as an empty continent inhabited by uncivilised primitive people, a mindset developed that supported discriminatory treatment of another race. At the time of Federation in 1901, historian Jamrozik (2004) asserts that “hundreds of thousands of Aboriginal people had disappeared” (p. 66). By 1921, when the full population could be counted, it was reduced to 60,000 people. In her thesis that considers the psychological impact of *terra nullius*, Jane Saunders (2006) suggests psychologically the term *terra nullius* determined the disrespect and treatment of Aboriginal Australians by the civilised British cultural eye.

Prior to 1967, Aboriginal Australians were not considered as people; rather they were considered under the New South Wales *Flora and Fauna Act 1881* and therefore had neither human rights nor legal standing. The Australian Constitution was enacted as an act of the British Parliament as the *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900*. In 1967, a national referendum to alter the constitution allowed Aboriginal people the right to be counted *as people* and therefore included in the Australian census count (Behrendt et al., 2009). Currently, the Australian constitution allows the government to make different laws for Aboriginal people. This is clearly discriminatory (Behrendt et al., 2009). This constitutional clause is currently under consideration by the Australian Labor Government. It would require a national referendum to change.

From the time of first settlement, laws, policy and legislation were framed for natives without consideration of any human rights, equality or legal recourse. They
were designed to deal with the Aboriginal problem (Behrendt et al., 2009). Initial attempts to disperse Aboriginal people were successful for European settlers. Dispersal acts did not openly encourage, but condoned the removal of Aboriginal people from settlers’ properties. This time is known by Aboriginal people as “the killing times” (Pascoe, 2008b, p. 7). In Queensland, it is estimated that 20,000–30,000 Aboriginal people died violently at the hands of white settlers (Harris, 2003). In Victoria, one hundred thousand people were reduced to less than a thousand over a 25-year period (Jamrozik, 2004).

This time was so devastating that many family language groups and tribes completely vanished as a result of poisonings, forced suicides and massacres. According to Perkins and Langton (2008), it was genuinely believed that Aboriginal people were a dying race, and could not handle the civilising effects of a superior culture and modernity. In Australia, unlike other colonised countries, it was the police who assumed the paramilitary role to kill Aboriginal people (Behrendt et al., 2009). They forcibly removed them to missions and took the native children from their parents and communities. Aboriginal Australians had no recourse for help or justice.

This police role established the relationship between police and Aboriginal people today. Under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defined by the United Nations in 1948, the actions of removing children from parents and culture were clearly acts of genocide (Behrendt et al., 2009). Despite the Australian ratification of this Convention in 1949, children were removed for another thirty years, into the 1970s (Kidd, 1997). Removing children from their families also removed them from their cultural teachers, oral stories and traditions. Essentially, government policy of assimilation was aimed to teach children to be European, so when the old Aboriginal people died out, it would be a European Australia.

Aboriginal protection acts were introduced in every state to allow for the removal of Indigenous people to missions (Pascoe, 2008b) and the attitude to care for the native was constructed as paternalistic benevolence (Behrendt et al., 2009). The native was seen as helpless and unable to care for himself or to be a part of a self-determining group. People were sent to reservations or missions that were run by governments or churches. According to Queensland historian, Rosalind Kidd (1997),
mission life meant suffering and incarceration, and was almost certainly part of the genocide arsenal. In her book, *The Way We Civilise*, Kidd reports that families were often separated; and women sent to one mission and their husbands to another. While missionary life was inhumane, the missions did play a part in the survival of many Aboriginal people who otherwise would have been violently murdered (Harris, 2003). Aboriginal people were hunted out, shot, and died from introduced diseases such as tuberculosis, smallpox, chickenpox, and venereal diseases.

Children were regularly separated from their mothers as the mothers were sent out to work as domestics. The children were raised in dormitories. Movements were monitored and permission needed to be sought from government officials to visit family in other locations. They needed permission to marry. Wages and federal pensions were controlled and withheld by the state government of Queensland (Kidd, 1997). Most girls were sent out to domestic positions around eleven years old.

Gungarri Elder, Aunty Ruth Hegarty (1999), wrote in her autobiographical book of mission life that most of the girls returned pregnant after being sexually abused by their white bosses.

As Aboriginal people were considered ineducable, any education they did receive was to either “civilise or Christianise”: by teaching them to read the Bible or provide a basic education for domestic duties (Kidd, 1997, p. 32). In a recent personal conversation, Gungarri elder Aunty Ruth Hegarty (personal communication, November 26, 2011) spoke about conditions in the mission for children:

*It wasn’t any different from a prison – it is exactly like it, except that we weren’t inmates; we were children, and we’d done nothing wrong, absolutely nothing wrong at all. We got whipped from babyhood – there was no age, you just got it. And what we got whipped with was a cat o’nine tails. It was used in the prison at the time, and they were using it on us as children*

The issue of removing children from their cultural teachers was about to emerge from another context. Aboriginal people who were not in missions were usually employed as necessary domestic and property labourers and stockmen. They lived on the fringes of towns (Behrendt et al., 2009). In Brisbane, Boundary Street in West End demarked the line Aboriginal people could not cross. Aboriginal women
and children had no legal rights or recourse and were badly sexually abused by white men.

This abuse resulted in another so called “Aboriginal problem” (Behrendt et al., 2009). It became obvious that many of the camp children were fair-skinned from interracial sexual relations. Fair children, deemed half castes and quadroons (quarter caste), were being raised in the camps as Aboriginal children. When it was seen that the Aboriginal people were not dying out and were raising white-skinned Aboriginal children, other measures were considered. Acts of assimilation which removed children from their families were introduced in all states (Behrendt et al., 2009).

The stolen children: Removing the young from the cultural teachers

In 1937 as the Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities determined that Aboriginal people were not dying out, means of assimilation were sought (Behrendt et al., 2009). Western education was seen as a means of achieving assimilation. The fundamental assumption was that the state educational system would teach European values to Aborigines. It was believed that the Aboriginal people could be taught to be white, if you started with the young child (Tatz, 1999). The goal of assimilation was complete absorption of the Aboriginal people into the white mainstream society.

The most damaging tools of colonisation were the assimilation policies and actions that removed Aboriginal children from their homes, their families and their traditional cultural teachers. Indigenous parental rights had been removed under The Aborigines Act in 1897 when the Chief Protector of Aborigines was appointed. All Indigenous children were assumed as wards of the state from birth and typically policeman enforced such guardianship. Aboriginal Australians experienced the inhumanity and trauma of loss and separation as their children were abducted, enslaved, institutionalised and culturally remodelled (Haebich, 2000).

In the 1930s wholesale systematic removal of Aboriginal children occurred (Kidd, 1997). It was considered important to remove the fair “half-breed” children from their families, so that the Aboriginal culture could die a natural death. It was believed these children would learn to be European. The goal of assimilation was to civilise and assimilate the native into white society. It was to obliterate the native in the child (Behrendt, et al, 2009; Jamrozik, 2004; Kidd, 1997).
It was thought that total biological absorption of Aboriginal people (through controls of marriage and relationships) would eventually bleach away all traces of Aboriginality (Behrendt et al., 2009). Societal discourse at the time considered this for the good of the children, although Applebaum (2010) argues moral complicity. Children were removed until the 1970s although the most systematic state removal occurred during the years from 1920 to 1960 when at least 20,000 Indigenous children were removed from their families according to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC, 1997).

There are no Aboriginal families that I know unaffected by the removal of children. The number of child removals is stated as 10% in the official HREOC report. I argue strongly without empirical evidence, but with much Aboriginal community verification, that this is a dramatic under-representation and fabrication. In a study based on a sample of 530 Aboriginal people in South Australia, 31% had been separated from parents before age 14 (Clayer, 1991). Hunter (1999) also found that childhood separation from parents was strongly correlated with subsequent problems, including high levels of depression and suicide in Aboriginal people seeking primary health services.

The intergenerational impacts of Aboriginal trauma and child removals are evidenced in a mental health study by McKendrick, Cutter, Mackenzie, and Chiu (1992). It reported that over 50% of 112 randomly selected Aboriginal participants could be described as having a mental disorder, with a further 16% reporting at least 10 non-specific psychiatric symptoms, including depression and substance abuse. Atkinson (2002) argues that without the coping mechanism of alcohol, many more Aboriginal people would have suicided. Within the sample, 49% of children had been separated from both parents by the age of 14 years and a further 19% of children from one parent. In contrast, those who grew up in their Aboriginal families learned their Aboriginal identity early in life and those who regularly visited their traditional country were significantly less distressed.

In her doctoral thesis, Aboriginal health academic Atkinson (2002) makes a significant contribution to understanding the mental health issues and intergenerational trauma. Her studies specifically identify the traumatic state in which colonised Aboriginal Australians live. She attests that the lack of cultural maintenance means people continue to live without the traditional mechanisms for
healing. She does not consider their issues as Western sickness, rather as cultural crisis or wounds of the soul. Her work considers how mental health issues impact the collective lives of Aboriginal people.

In response to efforts made by key Indigenous agencies and communities, in May 1995, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) established a national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. This inquiry resulted in the *Bringing Them Home* report (HREOC, 1997). The term “stolen generations” was first coined by the Chair, Justice Peter Read, to refer to the thousands of children of mixed descent who had been separated from their mothers and families. Read claimed that for the bureaucrats, “welfare” and “neglect” were a cover-up for “a violent and premeditated attack not only on Aboriginal family structure but on the very basis of Aboriginality itself” (p. 90). Some officials considered simply being Aboriginal as sufficient reason for removal of a child from the mother. In negation of Read’s reportage, historian Keith Windschuttle (2009) challenged the archival evidence. He concluded that “not only is the charge of genocide unwarranted but so is the term ‘Stolen Generations’” (p. 174).

The *Bringing Them Home* report (HREOC, 1997) concluded that the term “genocide” could be applied to the practice of child removal in the manner it occurred in Australia between 1910 and 1970. It was considered a gross violation of human rights, racially discriminatory and an act of genocide under the United Nations definitions. The report also included looking into the current welfare and juvenile justice systems. However, removal of Indigenous children still does occur. In fact, Indigenous children are 21 times more likely to be removed by child protection services than mainstream children (AIHW, 2010).

Typically the reason children are removed is neglect, which is directly correlated with poverty (AIHW, 2010; Hunter, 2004). The consequences of forced removal on Indigenous people’s mental health are only now being considered. Marcia Langton (personal communication, September 15, 2010) describes the traumatised state of Aboriginal Australians as “a collective group psychosis that Indigenous people endure”. What was underreported was that extreme fear and trauma was pandemic in Aboriginal families and that this continues to manifest itself across generations. Atkinson (2002) wrote on the intergenerational transference of
trauma as mental health issues affecting the offspring generations. Many Aboriginal people have internalised trauma and racism as self-hatred and regard themselves as worthless people (Paradies, 2006b).

The *Bringing Them Home* report (HREOC, 1997) also noted the devastating impact of assimilation policies on every aspect of culture and social welfare for Indigenous people. The stolen children have grown into mothers who are often considered in public discourse as having lost the knowledge of parenting because of their lack of witness to, and experience of, maternal child care. However, I suggest this is a deficit translation that avoids responsibility for traumatic removal and abuse visited upon the children and families. Bruce Pascoe (2008b) writes of an interview with a nun who ran an orphanage that he watched on television the night before Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s Sorry Speech in 2008. Pascoe notes that she refused to think that she’d done anything wrong in her care of Aboriginal children who had been taken from their families. In her view, those children were better off in the orphanage so that there was a roof over their heads rather than living by the river with their people who loved them and who could tell them who they were.

Cultural trauma is common across unrelated Aboriginal communities. People manifest symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder. This occurs when people have lived “terrifying experiences where annihilation was imminently possible” (Salzman & Halloran, 2004, p. 231). In fact, Salzman and Halloran undertook a review of colonised people globally and found that all had similar experiences which lead to ongoing suffering, fear and anxiety in contemporary contexts. The collective and diverse Aboriginal world was one of relating, where social organisation structured and informed the culture. This was foundational and organisational to all thinking, feeling and behaving, and it was gone.

According to Atkinson (2002), being victimised is enacted in a number of ways in people. She described senses of hopelessness as feeling humiliated, diminished, pushed down, defiled, exploited, self-blaming, self-loathing and invaded. Significantly, the most supportive aspects for recovery would be within traditional cultural relationships with land, community, and family, yet these were no longer accessible. The loss of language and lore meant the healing songs along with the teachings of elders, songs and ceremonies were also gone. The people remained as
fractured without their inherent cultural contexts and land to hold them safely and allow them to “be” within their cultural belonging space.

**Whiteness as a Constructed Border**

Whiteness studies have evolved as part of the postcolonialist discourse of such scholars as Frantz Fanon (1967) in his essay, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Whiteness is implicit in decolonising discourses (Moreton-Robinson, 2004; Smith, 1999). When the white culture arrived in Australia as first settlement, all previous Australian history was deconstructed by the word “prehistory”. Aboriginal people often refer to this time as B. C. meaning before Cook (Atkinson, 2002). Annihilation or lack of recognition of all previous activity, people, and history speaks to the power of the whiteness concept. The most insidious aspect of whiteness is its assumption that it is the only right way or proper way of doing things. It implicitly *others* and excludes the racially different. Postcolonial scholar, Gayatri Spivak (1988), noted that this “bordering off” occurred for those subjugated by race and caste and these people were typically silenced by the more powerful castes.

All cultures and societies have an ethnocentric view of the world that is considered by its members the proper or right way of doing things (Rogoff, 1990). Postcolonial sociologists describe such relational “bordering off” of Aboriginal people by notions such as *other, alien, or subaltern* (Fanon, 1967; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). Paradies, Harris, and Anderson (2008) describe such racialised borders as permitting racism and *othering*. White culture only appears ordinary or undistinguished to its own members; yet it has a racialised presence apparent to *other*. It is the disavowing of blacks as *other* that creates the *white*. Moreton-Robinson (2004) argues that within Australia the white subject is always in the position of the “migrant coloniser” (p. 7). The dominant white construction of this nation is a European Australia. This reality is assumed as truth; therefore Aboriginal people are *othered* or considered not to belong. Racial scholar Giroux (1997) says that racial categories exist and shape the lives of people differently within the existing inequalities of power and wealth. Whiteness is a core form of difference.

Even if skin colour can be bleached away cultural attributes remain as unique markers of ethnicity. Bicultural studies by Salzman and Halloran (2004) found when
white Aboriginal people were tested for preferences such as individualism or collectivism, they identified with the Aboriginal worldview characteristics despite assuming roles in mainstream white contexts. Postcolonial scholar, Frantz Fanon (1967), labelled this as the “ontogenic” or whole-of-life development crisis of whiteness. He considered whiteness an invisible seal as the dominant essential feature of everyday white life.

In his book, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (2002) suggests stereotypical images of a group of people become “essentialised” as characteristics of all members of the other ethnic or racial group. Edward Said (1978) had similarly described the stereotypical characteristics applied by the West to “the oriental”, or those who are not “us”. Aboriginal people retain settlement identifiers and Darwinian constructions of “subhuman, intellectually inferior” (Anderson, 2002, p. 7) within their present identity.

Anderson’s notion of the “imagined community” underpins nationalism or “imagined nations”. Anderson (2002) states that imagined nations are gauged by being a sovereign state; so to imagine Australia as a white European country, the assignment of *terra nullius* was psychologically necessary from the outset. Anderson considers the conceptions of community and nationalism are born out of cultural roots. Such dominant cultural roots were in part imagined, just as Australia has been imagined as white and European.

**Constructing Australia as White European**

The call for racial purity of a “white” Australia was long heard, just as the presence of an Aboriginal population was considered problematic (Saunders, 2006). In 1913, Professor Baldwin Spencer, Chief Protector of Aborigines, stated in the *Preliminary Report on the Aboriginals of the Northern Territory* that “the preponderance of coloured alien blood and the scarcity of white females to mate with would create a position of incalculable future menace to the purity of race in tropical Australian states”. (Spencer, 1913).

Alfred Deakin, the second Prime Minister of Australia and a leader in the Federation movement, considered that the unity of race an essential issue for Australia (Saunders, 2006). White Australia policies existed in every state of Australia prior to the formal Federation Acts of 1901. Commentary at the time spoke
of the inviolability of the national policy of a White Australia “… all sections of the people are united in an ardent desire to maintain racial purity” (1937 report, cited in Saunders, p. 286). In his inaugural speech as Attorney-General of Australia in 1901, Alfred Deakin called for “… united white Australia where its members can intermix, intermarry and associate without degradation … henceforth all alien elements within it [Australia] shall be diminished” (cited in Fullilove, 2005, pp. 130–135; from Alfred Deakin’s speech on the “Immigration Restriction Bill”, given in Melbourne on September 12, 1901).

How such policy affects non-white Australians is largely unknown and silent to Anglo-Australians because as the dominant group they are not affected by such acts. I offer an ordinary story told to me of what the White Australia policy meant to an Aboriginal family. I tell this story with permission of the owner who is a Brisbane elder.

My father was African American and he came out to Brisbane as a G.I. in World War II. The black Americans had to camp outside the city and were not allowed to cross Boundary Road either (nor were Aboriginal people). He and my mother fell in love and got married. He didn’t have any family in America; he was raised in foster homes. He wanted to stay here in Australia after the war. But the Australian Government would not let him because he was black and only white people could emigrate. So because of the White Australia policy, he had to go back. He got a job and saved enough money for my mother’s and my fare. I was 2. We went to Sydney docks to sail to America. I had a new dress and all the family came to see us off. They were all crying so much the dock was wet with tears. My mother could not leave. She could not get on that boat and leave her family and her home. So we went home again. I met him once when I was about 30. I went to America to meet him. They’d been divorced of course and he had a family. They were good people. (Aunty Jackie, personal communication, May 12, 2008)

Because Aboriginal people lived without the protection of civil rights or equitable law (Behrendt et al., 2009) many fairer-skinned Aboriginal people began to deny their heritage and reinvent as European. People who pretended to be white and deny ancestral lines to communities of colour are said to “pass” (Pascoe, 2008a).
This was considered “passing” or “false whiteness” (Perkins, 2004, p. 164). Any Aboriginal people who could pass as olive-skinned Europeans did so to improve their life chances. Poverty was so difficult and denial of rights was so onerous that Aborigines of mixed blood who were fair enough to pass for white were often encouraged to do so by their own community (Kidd, 1997; Pascoe, 2008a). Many families told no one, not even their own children for fear the children would be taken (Pascoe, 2008a).

Historically, to pass as white was an act of survival to avoid the interference of the British Government within the lives of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people were being constructed as an underclass of domestics, labourers and servants (Moreton-Robinson, 2004). Aboriginal children were removed from their families and cultural teachers. To be seen as white (by passing as white) demonstrated how powerful the resource of whiteness was within the Australian context. However, Paradies (2006a) suggested that fair-skinned Indigenous people may still experience racism, scorn and disbelief from other Indigenous and non-indigenous people alike.

The assignment of Aboriginal identity

The concept of a community has been marred by a political agenda of the state whereby Indigenous people were moved into sites such as reserves, missions and fringe camps as part of the processes of colonisation, dispossession and dispersal; and later for bureaucratic convenience (Kidd, 1997). Being part of community is a facet of Aboriginal identity. Other Indigenous people know who you are and what family you belong to. Such knowings determine your obligations, place of belonging and information about your character and tribal ways. It situates you into the Aboriginal world.

However, there still is a strong Aboriginal sense of what it means to belong to a community. For some Aboriginal people, the cultural and political dimensions of the concept of community are inextricably enmeshed. The Aboriginal community may be interpreted as geographical, social and political. It places Aboriginal people as a part of, but different from the rest of Australian society. Aboriginal people identify themselves with the idea of being part of community, as it offers a sense of unity and strength and includes everyone: with whom individuals are affiliated (Dudgeon, Kelly, & Walker, 2010).
Currently, the media has drawn attention to the fact that many Aboriginal people in contemporary Australia have a white appearance. One elder in my stories mentions how there have been white Aboriginal grandmothers since she was a young girl. I suggest that my own Aboriginality is inherent and cultural and carried within my worldview and has little to do with my fair skin. However, there are more white Australians identifying as Aboriginal than ever before (ABS, 2009).

Aboriginal people in urban areas tend toward mixed marriages (or dual cultural parentage) and many families have children with different skin colours even with the same parents. Foley (2000) discusses another issue. He notes that Aboriginal Australians and fair-haired children grapple with the issues of identifying and not identifying as Aboriginal; either way they carry anxieties and issues. Many people who lived in hiding are traumatised and in fear of being found out (Pascoe, 2008b). Foley (2000) suggests the experience that fair Aboriginal people face is a perennial interrogation of their identity that leads to acute anxiety. This is my experience of being a fair Aboriginal woman. The mainstream community regularly question my Aboriginality and “blood percentage”. The Aboriginal community do not, for they are aware of the genetic lottery and we have had fair-skinned grandmothers since old times.

**Racism**

Racism is an organised system based on an ideology of inferiority that labels some ethnic or racial groups as inferior to others and differentially allocates desirable societal resources to the superior racial groups (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Racism can be broadly defined as avoidable and unfair. It acts to further disadvantage the disadvantaged or further advantage the advantaged. Racism can be expressed stereotypes such as racist beliefs, prejudice (racist emotions) or discrimination that is expressed through racist behaviours and practices (Paradies, 2006b). It acts as one manifestation of the broader phenomenon of oppression. Oppression is intrinsically linked to the concept of privilege. In addition to disadvantaging Indigenous peoples, racism also results in white Australians being privileged and accruing greater unearned opportunities. Whiteness is an unearned privilege (Alcoff, 2008).

According to Yin Paradies (2006a), racism can occur at three conceptual levels that are interrelated and frequently overlap in practice. They are:
1. **Internalised racism** – acceptance of attitudes, beliefs or ideologies by members of stigmatised ethnic/racial groups about the inferiority of one’s own ethnic/racial group (e.g., an Indigenous person believing that Indigenous people are naturally less intelligent than non-indigenous people).

2. **Interpersonal racism** – relates to interactions between people that maintain and reproduce avoidable inequalities across ethnic/racial groups (e.g., experiencing racial abuse).

3. **Systemic racism** – these are requirements, conditions, practices, policies or processes that maintain and reproduce avoidable and unfair inequalities across ethnic/racial groups (e.g., Indigenous people experiencing inequitable social and health outcomes).

Freedom from racism and racial discrimination is also a fundamental human right. In Australia, Section 9 of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* was the first piece of federal legislation that, based on the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (United Nations, 1966), made it unlawful to commit a racist act that impinges upon a human right. While there is little research on the impact of racism in Australia, there is even less research on how racism impacts education and how it impacts Aboriginal students. I attribute this lack of research and information to the fact that the dominant race is white and does not experience racism. However, I suggest findings from health research (Atkinson, 2002; Malin, 2003a; Nakata, 2007) would translate into the education field as racism is directly related to mental health issues which implicate all schooling and learning issues including attendance.

The prevalence of systemic racism in education is difficult to establish, particularly because it has not been studied within the Queensland state education system. Of the 9400 Indigenous respondents in the 2002–03 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 18% reported experiencing discrimination as a “personal stressor in the last 12 months” (ABS & AIHW, 2005). Similarly, 22% of the 1073 children aged 12–17 years in the 2001–02 Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey reported experiencing racism (defined as being treated badly or refused service due to being Aboriginal) in the past six months (Zubrick et al., 2005, 2006). A 2001 survey found that approximately 30% of Indigenous peoples reported
experiencing racism that was defined as discrimination due to ethnic origin (Dunn, Gandhi, Burnley, & Forrest, 2000). Another survey by Larson, Gilles, Howard, and Coffin (2007) found that 40% of Aboriginal respondents reported being physically or emotionally upset as a result of treatment based on their race.

The dominant white community does not experience racism or consider its effect on Aboriginal families and children. However, a range of studies highlight the widespread nature of such racism in education, health, the welfare system and the legal/criminal justice systems. According to a report by the Victorian Department of Justice (2005), Indigenous people are more likely to be charged than given a caution compared to non-indigenous people.

Considering how Aboriginal people are already at risk for cultural trauma, the effects of racism must compound tendencies toward mental health issues. The effects of racism on oppressed groups leads to the development of an array of responses and mechanisms such as low self-esteem, mistrust of the dominant culture, internalised racism, and denial. Research on systemic racism in the health care sector has been the most common to date (Purdie et al., 2010). It has been directly linked to mental and physical health and wellbeing (Malin; 2003a; Nakata, 2007). While such health and identity issues are recognised as direct links that impact wellbeing they have not transferred to the policy or practice of the education sector (Pedersen, Walker, & Wise, 2006). The difference between racism experiences in rural areas and urban areas has not been fully explored in the literature. However, some studies in Australia have found that Indigenous peoples of higher socioeconomic position; those who lived in urban areas; those who were members of the stolen generation; or those who identified with a tribal group and recognised a traditional country were more likely to report experiencing racism (Paradies, 2006b).

**Aspects of Capital and Cultural Reconstitution**

This section of the literature chapter continues to channel the broad historical construction of Aboriginality and uses the sociological framework of capital theory. Western theories of capital can be detrimental for Indigenous people because they implicitly other groups of people. For instance, Bourdieu (1986) proposed that capital is limited and society’s members are in competition for limited resources. In
my experience, an Aboriginal worldview typically views the world’s resources as abundant when shared. Social cooperation and collaboration underpinned Aboriginal understandings of how the world worked. The goal was self-empowerment of the community. This section considers frameworks that account for the loss of social capital experienced by Aboriginal Australians. It considers the work of European sociologist Bourdieu (1986) and American scholar Lareau (1987). Lareau’s work considers the Anglo-American and Black American cultural contexts. She applies capital theories to racialised education contexts.

The writings in this section are considered against the lost oral culture of Aboriginal Australia. While we cannot ever reclaim the aspects of culture that have been lost, cultural reconstitution is a healing premise that restores a sense of community, wellbeing and worth to a traumatised culture (Salzman & Halloran, 2004). Cultural reconstitution is in part a misnomer as lost oral culture is lost forever (Marcia Langton, personal communication, September 15, 2010). Once culture is gone, there is no cushion of healing that it can offer.

While the Jewish ethnic group endured genocide in the Nazi holocaust, the child survivors were able to reconnect with their culture because their sacred texts and ceremonies remained accessible to the broader Jewish community. Families who survived willingly took on and raised the orphaned children as their own in cultural safety. A Canadian study undertaken by Jewish physician and the offspring of holocaust child survivors, Shklarov (2009), found that, over time as genocide survivors and their offspring aged, they became overwhelmed with anxiety and post-traumatic stress-like symptoms.

Cultural genocide has a more enduring impact because the people have lost their frame of belonging and culture to hold them. In Australia, Aboriginal people who survived the processes of settlement and assimilation have also survived genocide (Halloran, 2004). However, the damage endures in existential disorders and manifests in mental illness. In many instances, they have lost their families too. Halloran’s (2004) writings on cultural trauma suggest the need for the Aboriginal community to seek reconnection and belonging to a collective or tribal identity.

While past culture cannot be reconstituted, a sense of value and Aboriginal worth can be rebuilt to create a sense of belonging. In Hawaii, Salzman and Halloran (2004) report on rebuilding traditional canoes and marine events as a way to
reconnect with traditional culture. The work of social capital may be a way to reconstitute cultural social organisation through belonging and empowerment. The targeted Indigenous playgroup that is the vehicle for this thesis demonstrates the application of cultural reconstitution and building a place of belonging for Aboriginal people. I refer to this as building social capital, or building urban tribe.

**The relational concepts of capital**

The significant contribution of the work of Mignone (2009) on social capital theory is framed within his own Indigenous worldview. He recognises that social capital honours the need for self-empowerment and self-determination. Non-Indigenous models do not typically consider the need for self-determination because they have a normalised or dominant conception or networking and may not be in need or aware of self-determination. To Indigenous people it means they have say in their own lives. This section considers how social capital can empower and revitalise a community.

In the Western context the notions of individual and community resources are termed capital. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) felt it was impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one considered capital in all its relational forms. He defined culture as the grounds for human communication and interaction but also as a source of domination. Bourdieu also considered that symbolic systems maintain social hierarchies (Swartz, 1997). The difference between an Indigenous worldview and a dominant worldview is evident in Bourdieu’s early work where he relied upon formal structuralist models to account for social practices. However, in his work with Algerian and French peasants he found that the world could not be described by structuralism (Swartz, 1997).

David Swartz (1997) proposed that Bourdieu considered himself a conceptual strategist rather than a theorist. However, his strategies are encapsulated by Western ideas such as competition and individualism. His interest in culture emerged as he thought it was a neglected dimension for understanding the social world. He questioned stratified social systems of hierarchy and domination and how they persist and are reproduced across generations without powerful resistance. He considered how capital was reproduced without the conscious recognition of cultural members.
in a society. Jerome Bruner (1991) thought that Bourdieu considered symbolic power as a way to address relations between culture, social structure and action.

In order to name cultural order, Bourdieu defined “habitués”. These are actions of an actor related to existing societal structure or organisation. Habitués are the acquired dispositions that are adopted through upbringing and education within a cultural context. It is what we would call social background. His later and preferred term “fields” is a social metaphor that defines the structure of social settings that account for distribution of power in the broadened interplay of social factors at work in cultural settings (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). Categories of capital as defined by Bourdieu are: economic, cultural, social and symbolic. He considered all were necessary to fully understand how the social world worked. His concepts of capital are defined in Table 2.1. Bourdieu considered none of the “capitals” existing in society in isolation; rather he found them interrelated and overlapping in symbolic space. He refused to accept sociology as distinct from psychology; thus he thought in concepts of relational space.

According to Bourdieu (1986) all human actions take place within social milieu which are arenas for the struggle for resources. Bourdieu stated that capital is inherited from the past and continuously created. His work considered the privileges that the well-resourced middle and higher classes hold in the social stratifications of privilege that continue to be reproduced in the social world. Cultural capital is defined as the shared, legitimate culture made up of status; cultural signals, such as attitudes, preferences, behaviours; and goods. He considered that if an individual had capital, such as economic capital (wealth), it can be used to purchase other forms of capital.
Table 2.1

Understanding Concepts of Western Capital as Defined by Bourdieu (1986)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capital</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic Capital</td>
<td>Position and power are determined by money and property. Economic capital can be transformed into other capitals. For instance, profits in one area, such as wealthy parents, can purchase cultural capital and social capital, for instance buying the education and networks offered by private schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Capital</td>
<td>Cultural capital is a source of domination in that those who hold the capital create power. Members of the same group share <em>habitués</em>. Cultural knowledge is needed to succeed in the education system. Linguistic and cultural competence and familiarity with high (mainstream culture). Children succeed in education when they start with an initial familiarity with the dominant culture. Education systems deem everybody alike. Cultural knowledge can only be produced by family upbringing. Social reproduction of schools. Families with higher class knowledge advantage their children from the beginning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Capital</td>
<td>Like cultural capital, social capital can explain inequalities (in education). Cultural capital and social capital overlap as the sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or group (Bourdieu &amp; Wacquant, 1992). Form the basis of solidarity. Social power and can enable pre-modern forms of social power. Access to resources. Stronger emphasis on groups themselves rather than individual attributes. Familial activities that develop social capital. Intergenerational transfer of cultural knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Capital</td>
<td>Power and high levels of culture are symbolic. One’s status is determined by symbolic capital. Those symbols of power often considered natural refinement is nothing other than a difference gap or distinctive features from relations with other properties.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a critique of the theory of Bourdieu undertaken by David Swartz (1997), his criticism emphasised that Bourdieu’s work was fragmentary in nature, rather than representing a complete view of the world. I also suggest that Bourdieu’s stratification did not allow a complete or holistic reading of the world and he was implicitly bound by his own worldview and training to think in those terms. On reflection, I propose that he was “contextualised” within his own cultural arena, as Rogoff (1990) proposed when considering the worldview or cultural milieu of the
Aboriginal child. I suggest it also applies to the elite scholar in his academic cultural milieu of inner thought, and outer scholarly restraints.

Bourdieu (1986) acknowledged the complexity of what he was attempting to describe and also acknowledged that his theories were too incomplete to fully explain many of the inherently symbolic and relational concepts; especially since scholarly dominance was aligned to the privilege of whiteness. For instance, Bourdieu suggests purchasing a private school education could allow one access to other realms of high value capital such as wealthy networks. I suggest this is not possible for everyone but is a Western construction of how capital can be redistributed. It would not be necessary for a cultural being to purchase an education if they lived by another model of learning, such as Indigenous models described by Rogoff (1990) as “guided participation” or “apprenticeship” models in which all children learned well (within their own culture).

Purchasing an education for an Aboriginal person is to buy aspects of whiteness that are of value to the white Western world. Wealth or education cannot equalise all aspects of racial ethnicity or identity. Identity carries a complexity of social capital that is not always considered, particularly by many prominent Western theorists. Such concepts are interwoven with sociocultural nuances, particularly in urban contexts. Measurement of social capital in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities may not make sense because the ideas may be considered as too “conceptually and methodologically immature” (Brough, Bond, Hunt, Jenkins, Shannon, & Schubert, 2006, p. 399). However, cultural contexts do not necessarily translate into white models. Cultural identity must be central to social capital considerations rather than simply adding another complexity to understanding the disadvantages experienced by Indigenous people. Cultural identity is a core indivisible centre, not an “add on”, nor always accessible to outsiders (Alcoff, 2008).

Bourdieu suggested that high levels of mainstream cultural capital align with success in Western schools. This reinforces the notion of Rogoff (2003) that schools align with the dominant culture. It is useful to think of schools as operating within the dominant culture because they reproduce and re-privilege the middle class and higher classes in their roles as agencies of social reproduction. Aboriginal culture or Aboriginal trauma is situated outside and apart from the dominant culture. A person who is competent in both the mainstream and Indigenous realms has a foot in each
cultural realm. An impoverished white person given money could buy an expensive education and, as a consequence, be indistinguishable in the dominant culture as a successful adult. However, this is not always the case nor is it desired for many Indigenous people.

The added dimension of Aboriginality, as a complexity of their social construction, means that even with such a purchased education, Aboriginal people would remain socially constructed by their racial identity (Hunter, 2004). As an ethnic group, many Aboriginal people would rather wish to retain their own cultural identity, while also wishing to hold skills and positions in the dominant world in order to have opportunities for education and life chances. Schools act, by definition, as exclusionary of those groups with less “high status” capital. Aboriginal students are already excluded by identity and essentialised deficit characteristics so by nature are excluded from the playing field in accessing high status capital.

Typically, cultural capital is assigned to an individual through the broader social spheres in which that person lives. Bourdieu (1977) asserted that if schools knew the extent to which they privilege children with middle class capital, they would do something about it. Despite this, schools have done little to be transformative agencies particularly around understanding or educating cultural others. When the othered race is historically and socially constructed within the deficit discourse, schools continue to assign characteristics that other and exclude rather than re-examine their existing practices.

Of interest is Lareau’s (2000) consideration of whiteness as a lens to underpin reflections about the idea of possessed capital (or my terms of white world versus Aboriginal world). She determines that whiteness adds an additional layer of complexity to racialised studies. Henry Giroux (1997) wrote that race is the central form of difference. I believe it is a core belief and idea contained within whiteness. Lareau (2000) also notes that whiteness is in itself a capital resource that is at all times denied those who do not have it. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, it is also a central element of racial politics that promotes race-based hierarchies. I suspect, considering how confronting many white people find whiteness theories, that it is an aspect the white culture do not care to share with white-skinned Indigenous peoples.
Aboriginal Australians are a conquered people, the remnants of the world’s oldest surviving culture, and their existence today is testimony to their resilience and survival as a people (Uncle Albert Holt, personal communication, June 24, 2010). Some tribes in remote areas hold the resilience of cultural maintenance through language, spirituality and culture. Following the processes of colonisation, Aboriginal families were typically no longer in a position of social strength (Mignone, Longclaws, O’Neil, & Mustard, 2003). Power is removed from a conquered group when its members are fragmented out into an urban community.

Terms like social cohesion, social support and social networks are also terms that may describe aspects of social capital or be embedded in it. These terms align with Seligman’s (1992) idea about “social glue” that is useful when considering the social reconstitution of Indigenous communities. Salzman and Halloran (2004) also discuss the importance of social reconstitution of Indigenous societies. When operating in the “mainstream”, the ongoing challenge that Aboriginal people have to face is to “prove oneself” to counter-assigned essentialised deficit constructions (Brough et al., 2006, p. 405).

While much of an oral culture cannot be restored, many positive aspects of a cultural group to belong to can. Salzman and Halloran (2004) suggested that a number of global reconstitution programs that have emerged from the bottom up, as in grassroots associations, are successful. Social capital can develop from the grassroots upwards or through top-down models such as in government community programs. These are all important ideas to understanding how ideas of social capital could inform the reconstitution of Indigenous communities. In some rural remote communities, as in my Gungarri tribe, there is inherent social capital as so many of the tribe live in the town on traditional country. Within urban settings, the Aboriginal group is more broadly spread. They may not have commonalities, such as the same tribal belongings as is more typical in country areas.

Deconstructing social capital

In his deconstruction of social capital, Edwards (2004) described the terms Bonding, Bridging and Linking as the dimensions of social capital. They are defined
in Table 2.2 below. These terms are useful for deconstruction and isolation of core elements of social capital within a community. In poorer or fragmented social strata there may be limited bonding of people into interest groups, such as when a number of families come together to form a playgroup, as for this thesis. Bridging is the interconnection between groups, for instance one playgroup may join another to create an interrelated group, or to share resources. Linking refers to developing outward relationships.

Table 2.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bonding</td>
<td>Social capital refers to that within community relations. It addresses the networks, culture and socially invested resources inside the particular society, community or group in question. Resources are symbolic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridging</td>
<td>Social capital is a horizontal metaphor. It implies connections within communities or intercommunity ties that have socially invested resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linking</td>
<td>Social capital refers to a vertical dimension. It relates to the capacity to leverage resources, ideas and information from formal institutions beyond the community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a study of Aboriginal social capital and identity, Brough et al. (2006) discussed the sources of social capital available to Aboriginal communities and identity. They considered that bonding is the primary source of social capital. It is available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through their wider family and community connections. However, in the context of an oppressive history and ongoing experiences of racism and discrimination, bridging capital may be elusive. Identity can be used to both include and exclude, and is also an aspect of social capital. Brough et al. also suggested that identity was a core construct in being able to build capital that could provide a bridge into mainstream society. They also indicated that the Australian social environment was not conducive to trust building between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. They concluded that social capital, like identity, is a complex issue and needs much more investigation within Aboriginal community-building programs.

The concept of communities can also be flexibly defined (Mignone, 2009). It may be a geographical, or an informal grouping based on a common interest, attribute or purpose. Typically a fragmented group of people spread through a mainstream town may form associations that empower the group. In Canada, Woolcock (1998) asserted that relationships with formal institutions are ways to
access resources, ideas and information from institutions of power. Mignone (2009) also indicated that sustainable communities depend on the formation and maintenance of networks, particularly at the bridging and linking level in order to build capital. Evans (1996) described obstacles that poor communities face as stemming from their members’ inability to scale up micro-level social capital and social action.

Lareau (2000) drew attention to why schools fail to offer equitable education to children is because of being *othered* by economic, cultural and social disadvantage. Significantly, Lareau identifies being white as an aspect of the “high culture” that implicitly excludes African American students. She found that *identity* itself excludes the African American student in schools in the United States. Such findings are translatable into the Australian context. While education provides some mitigation of race, it never outweighs the lack of whiteness (Wolfe-Taylor, 2005). According to Lareau (2000) it is not race, rather that different ethnicities have their own implicit ways and understandings that are not made explicit to outsiders. However, from the Indigenous perspective in the Australian context, her theoretical ideas do not totally address the complexities of exclusion that come from dark skin, colonisation and the social construction of Aboriginal identity. I suggest it is *otherness* that leads to exclusion, rather than any “inner” aspects of cultural milieus.

The broader issues of whiteness do exist and not all ethnicities hold equal power (Alcoff, 2008). Lareau (2000; Lamont & Lareau, 1988) does recognise the sense of belonging or informal social capital within a group, such as in the Aboriginal playgroup that is the focus of this thesis. Without understanding the value of belonging, it is difficult to acquire the culturally specific resources that were available through the playgroup. Another notion she discusses is the resource of *belonging* (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). As in the United States, many Aboriginal people in Australia do work within white world as well as the Aboriginal world.

I believe Lareau (2000) has not fully considered the idea of non-relational aspects of belonging *within* groups. There is a broader aspect of “identity policing” within the broader Australian consciousness that is founded on the narrative of Aboriginal “primitiveness” and *otherness* (Brough et al., 2006). This aligns with the idea of “bordering off” which Paradies et al. (2008) described. Belonging or a place of cultural safety is powerful to any ethnic group. In belonging to an Aboriginal
group, or other groups, the members are no longer in a place of marginalisation within that group. Belonging to this marginalised group may create a micro form of cultural maintenance through the empowerment of self and support and belonging. Freire (1970) considered that the marginalised are not in fact marginalised, but are always within the mainstream culture. I suggest they must be so to continue to experience racism, and such exclusions as bordering off, as discussed in this literature chapter.

The research by Lareau (2000) found a number of factors determined how families interact with schools. Middle class parents had larger vocabularies, used language differently and had a sense of entitlement to interact with teachers as equals. Although parental involvement in education is widely recognised as a component of successful educational trajectories, schools tend to make middle class families more welcome than other social classes (Lightfoot, 1978). Lareau (2000) found parental engagement was crucial for success in schools, along with strong social networks with other parents. While she considers issues of race, in the Australian context the complexities of otherness and racism need further consideration.

Reconstituting sociocultural community

High levels of social capital were inherent to traditional Aboriginal communities; however colonisation destroyed this social structure and sense of place and belonging (Halloran, 2004). Aboriginal people do create informal social capital networks. One current example is Koobara, an Aboriginal kindergarten in North Brisbane. The kindergarten building and grounds has become a meeting and celebration hub of the local community. Not only do all parents come to the kindergarten, informal social groups have formed around this place of belonging. Aboriginal people are connecting instead of being spread out in isolation in the suburbs.

Such groups develop formally and informally at this time, either by top-down government and non-government agency design, or from the community up in informal organisations like playgroups, elders’ councils, walking groups, women’s business, healing circles, and men’s shed activities. This movement toward reconnection is revitalising networks within urban communities. As a consequence of
forcible removal, many urban Aboriginal people were disconnected from their country and do not have cultural stories. Many do not know where their traditional lands and families are.

In the literature, social capital is recognised as an elusive concept and its definitions are typically offered with examples. I borrow from an example by Indigenous scholar Mignone (2009) in his descriptions of a social group demonstrating high levels of social capital. This example provides a contextual instance of an (Aboriginal) community with high levels of social capital. The economic relations embedded in traditional cultures emphasised conservation of renewable resources, limiting harvesting on the basis of need and distributing resources equitably within the community, normally family networks. Since families and clans owned rights to resources and since everyone was connected in a family, no one was destitute and no one was unemployed (Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1996b; cited in Mignone, 2009, p. 122). This example attests to the lack of competition for resources that is a Western concept as considered by Bourdieu (1986). Sharing and cooperation are more sustainable notions that underpin Indigenous social constructions of the world.

While Bourdieu (1986) correctly asserts that power is held and reinforced (possessed) by the most privileged group, it is worth considering Foucault’s (1980) concept of power that may be more appropriate within the Indigenous context. Foucault suggests power can be produced by human beings by “using it”. He suggests that by using power, it produces privilege for particular groups and reproduces itself. It can occur in marginalised positions of resistance. While the playgroup is not a politic group, it is a place of empowering Indigenous families as a transformative agency.

In a speech at the Brisbane Writers Festival, Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson (2009) suggested that Aboriginal people will pull themselves out of impoverishment one person at a time. He argued for a collective uplift powered by individuals over time. He said “rather than a critical mass, it will occur one by one and will pull others along with them over time”. Perhaps social capital offers another way of empowering social groups within the whole community toward change by empowering individuals within collectives with the resources of social capital. Such understandings suggest that a playgroup as an organisation of social capital can
develop legitimate power, according to Foucault’s idea (1980), for its members in their ability to negotiate, link and bridge into privileged organisations like mainstream schools (Mignone et al., 2003). As such, it is possible for groups to pull themselves into a more powerful space, one group at a time.

Globally, social capital is an idea currently influencing global research and practice in First Nation communities, perhaps because its potential relates to its “group strength” base. It is inherently culturally appropriate. Mignone (2009) developed his conceptual framework as a validated tool for the measurement of social capital in First Nation communities. His goal was economic development although it can also be applied to governance, sustainable development, welfare reform, and Indigenous learning communities. The concept of building social capital is extensively used in health and poverty studies in Canadian First Nation communities.

In the Australian context, Brough et al. (2006) described social capital as an important idea informing actions to improve Indigenous health status. I would suggest that as health and education are co-determinants of a distressed community it is an appropriate tool for education too. Successful health outcomes in the Indigenous context would suggest cultural healing in community that would translate into improved educational outcomes. An Australian study by Memmott and Meltzer (2005) found the ideas implicit in social capital offered successful ways to build sustainable community and social development. Social capital may well be inclusive of the notion of Indigenous cultural reconstitution. In a sense, it can rebuild tribe.

Within an urban context Aboriginal people are a particularly fragmented group. There are few informal opportunities for gatherings in the urban sites. Some urban areas attract Murris and even the emerging “middle class blacks”, a term used by Noel Pearson (2009). According to Paradies et al. (2008), there are growing numbers of educated Aboriginal people who are learning to negotiate bicultural worldviews.

Since the mid-1990s, the educational achievements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have increased significantly. According to the ABS (2011), 37% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were aged over 18 years had attained a minimum of Year 12 or completed a skilled vocational qualification compared to 16% in 1994. Across the same time period, the percentage of Indigenous students who completed a minimum of Year 10 at secondary school or
a basic vocational qualification increased from 48% to 71%. In terms of university qualifications, the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults who complete a Bachelor degree or higher qualification has increased but is still low at 5% in 2008.

Personal and Cultural Beliefs: Parenting and Education

In this section I rely on the literature of Western scholars around beliefs. I cannot determine if their contributions are universal truths or culturally transferable, which speaks to the paucity and need for further research in this area in Aboriginal cultural contexts. For instance, while worldview does change, beliefs do seem to hold the same existential attributes and intergenerational transference. They also transfer within members of a family. As such, I do offer this literature but acknowledge it is not Indigenous. It is not known if such literature about beliefs is universal across human life development.

Beliefs shapes the way people see the world, yet concepts of belief are vague and difficult to empirically define. The term is used interchangeably with, for instance: opinions, views, values, attributions, cognitions, attitudes. Jacqueline Goodnow (1992) avoids the term by using *parent ideas* when writing about the beliefs that parents hold about children’s development. Parental beliefs are defined by Sigel, McGillicuddy-DeLisi and Goodnow (1992) in their work on parental belief systems as “knowledge in the sense that the individual knows that what he espouses is true or probably true and evidence may or may not be deemed necessary” (p. 85). Sigel et al. suggest personal beliefs are implicit to the shared understandings within a particular culture. Such beliefs become normative, or ordinary, or undistinguishable (MacNaughton, 2005). I would suggest many beliefs are culturally implicit and are difficult to describe. However the attitudes, beliefs and ideas of the dominant collective become the predominant ideologies of a society.

All cultures are defined and differentiated by their sacred stories. Just as Jewish children become Hebrew through their stories and teachings, Aboriginal culture held deeply rooted beliefs taught from generation to generation by oral stories. According to Archibald (2008) the life of a culture depends on the transmission across generations of cultural stories. Historically these stories created the culture of
Aboriginal Australia. Any living culture is composed of sediments of the past that are shared and constructed (Harkness & Super, 1996). Traditional Aboriginal cultures had common beliefs that were expressed in their languages through stories, song, dance, ritual and ways of being. The beliefs and stories were one and the same. Aboriginal stories were not offered for entertainment but held three core aspects of teaching, learning and knowing (Archibald, 2008). The stories created cultural maintenance. It was through storytelling that the culture was transmitted from one teaching generation to the next (Archibald, 2008).

When a language is destroyed, many of the stories and spiritual beliefs are gone forever because there is no way to access meanings without the original language that conceived them. Fellow Gungarri tribal elder, Aunty Ruth Hegarty (personal communication, November 26, 2011) spoke with me about a smoking ceremony on our tribal land. She said that many of our traditional ceremonies and rituals can no longer be undertaken because we no longer have the original language to address the ancient nature spirits of our country. While the practices may be known, the underpinning ancient beliefs and intents are no longer accessible to us. According to Aunty Ruth, to undertake such ceremonies with incomplete knowledge would be to upset and stir up mischief from the spirits. This is debated within the community as some see it as a way to rebuild cultural practice.

From the global Indigenous view, Archibald (2008) explains that culture or beliefs are represented as stories. It is stories and the performance of stories through oral traditions of storytelling, lore, song and dance that represent, teach and reinforce the culture and beliefs of the tribe. She states that it is the stories that keep a culture strong and protect it from outside forces that seek to dismantle it. Constant reconnection with their cultural beliefs maintain Aboriginal people’s ways of knowing, being and doing alive and healthy. Removed from their stories and culture, they become a disconnected people without their beliefs. Without beliefs they are without their culture and without culture they are without identity (Archibald, 2008).

Globally, many Aboriginal people no longer know their languages or teachings from their elders. In order to dissipate a culture, it is necessary to stop cultural teaching, use of language and traditional obligations and ritual (Holt, 2001). This is particularly so of urban dwelling Murri people. Many contemporary Aboriginal people no longer know what it means to be Aboriginal. Many know of no value or
goodness in being Aboriginal. Instead, they learn what the mainstream says and the messages are negative. Therefore, they live only with awareness of the negatives but have no “good” ideas about their race or traditional stories to hold them.

In conversation with Uncle Albert Holt (personal communication, June 24, 2011), he also spoke to this concept of not belonging as it is evident in his role as a judge in Murri court. When young people present before him, he said, they don’t know anything about their people or where they come from. I propose that many Aboriginal Australians only know the experience of being a colonised Indigenous person, which means their commonality of culture relates only to the experience of colonisation. They identify Aboriginality as being impoverished, marginalised and not belonging.

I propose that beliefs and culture are so intertwined that beliefs are the culture itself. It is cultural beliefs that individuals use to define, create and maintain a (specific) cultural identity. It is the collective of beliefs that create the common culture. Collective culture is full of coded meanings that encourage circular reinforcement that is the base of collective beliefs (Bourdieu, 1977). For instance, consider how difficult it is to explain a cliché to a member of another cultural or language group. Habitués are characterised by conductorless orchestration that gives coherence, and consistency to an individual’s practices. Habitués are systems of internalised cognitive and motivating structures that are produced by the structures of a particular social environment. The collective culture itself is reinforced by its own implicit beliefs, ideas and values.

Beliefs shape the way we see the world; what we know to be true is derived from our experiences as a child and as an adult in a community in a particular cultural context (Super & Harkness, 1999). Each cultural context has its own history that is shared by all members of the culture and, yet, it is uniquely connected to each child who develops in that culture. Beliefs are constructed within cultural belief systems and are implicit. They are powerful sources of affect and motivators of behaviour. In fact, beliefs can entail scripts for action (Super & Harkness, 1999). In his studies on racism, Indigenous researcher Yin Paradies (2006b) reveals that there are no biological grounds for differences between races of people. It is culture, or stories, that create difference or so-called ethnic borders.
Beliefs held by individuals define their worldview and influence their actions (Harkness & Super, 1996). Through their collective beliefs, individuals can maintain a cultural identity. However once other labels are assigned they are thought to belong to the object (Paradies, 2006b). This is a concept similar to Benedict Anderson’s (2002) ideas that stereotypes become essentialised as true characteristics of that race, be it individually or collectively. Such assigned characteristics are important to the collective process of nationalism and the imagined community of who belongs and who does not. All cultures have deeply embedded foundations that are invisible (Harkness & Super, 1996). The term root metaphor lends itself well to understanding those core foundations of a culture that remain deeply embedded, long established, yet underground and out of sight. Cultural difference is a basically monistic outlook in that the fundamental reason for diversity between some people lies in the culture they belong to.

Parenting beliefs and children’s learning

The basic cultural beliefs that parents hold influence how they parent and educate their children. Rogoff (2003) described the nature of learning with reference to her South American cross-cultural research. She identified a number of ways that parents taught their children. They included their children in adult activities, and used observation, modelling and apprenticeship models of teaching their children. If a child demonstrated strengths in one area, like healing or leadership, he or she was trained in those skills by the adult role model of the tribe. Rogoff (2003) also acknowledged that all children learn well within their own cultural context. Beliefs parents hold are constructed and reconstructed as they reflect on their own personal history within their present culture.

Immigration does not lead to displacement of beliefs from the culture of origin nor does it lead to the mixing of old and new. Rather new models that are consistent with a view of development from the culture of origin are preserved as parents adapt to new situations (McGillicuddy-DiLisi & Subramanian, 1996). In the broader sphere of parental understanding of child development and learning, commonsense knowledge that a parent has from their culture will prevail. Such parental understandings or ideas are essentially beliefs, not theories in the scientific sense. It
is these beliefs that guide parents’ actions. In parenting groups with a shared culture there will be collective cultural understandings of parenting.

Parents make their beliefs known to children through their actions and activities (Sigel et al., 1992). Parental ideas also impact on the socialisation of their children based on the parent’s own cultural identity. The activities that parents provide, the books they read to their children, the television programs they allow their children to watch, the kinds of conversations they have with their children all impact on children’s learning (Super & Harkness, 1999). Historically, the beliefs of traditional Indigenous people were formed within their own society, landscape and context (Pascoe, 2008a). In Western societies, the role of “expert” in parenting is often assigned to those offering parenting advice or programs (Whiting, 1974). From the other view such constructions are problematic when the expert is not cross-culturally competent yet provides advice to the parents. The notion of expert may well create another form of domination to the Aboriginal person (Smith, 1999).

**Parenting beliefs and schooling**

Research has shown that the more extensive the involvement of parents in their children’s education, the higher the student achievement (Battiste, 2002; Hill, 2001). Studies on parent involvement also indicate that the most accurate predictor of a child’s achievement in school is the extent to which the family is able to create an environment that encourages learning at home and communicate high yet reasonable expectations for the child in school and for their future careers. Positive parental beliefs, attitudes and values about school are significant contributors to a child’s success at school (Harkness & Super, 1996).

Such findings indicate how disadvantaged Aboriginal families are when they feel they cannot offer anything to the expert, white induction that their children receive at school; furthermore, they may be blocked from engaging with schools. When parents are involved, reinforcing school-like elements of language at home and volunteering in the classroom, children attend and engage more positively at school (Hill, 2001). These are typical middle-class functions that parents perform in relation to their children’s schooling and I suggest that these functions do not describe how all parents interpret their roles in relation to their children’s education.
The activities that parents provide are based on their beliefs about education and transition to school (MacNaughton, 2005). For instance, as mentioned earlier, the books they read to their children, the television programs they allow their children to watch, the kinds of conversations they have with their children have a strong effect on both parents and their children. However, these environments are indicative of the dominant culture, in that parents assume the role of the primary teachers and academic socialisation agents of their children (Hill, 2001). They introduce the children to the physical, social and cultural worlds in a variety of ways. Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2005) suggest middle-class parents invest significant time and resources in preparing their children for school. These are culturally specific activities that align with Eurocentric school preparation, while others are disqualified from success because they do not know the implicit and unexplained rules of the game.

Everyone sees their own worldview as the normalised view and all other views as different. In her cross-cultural studies in South America, Barbara Rogoff (2003) determined that one thing all cultures share is ethnocentricity. She found one aspect where all societies felt their one way was the right way was in raising children. For instance, some Aboriginal parents may see mainstream parents as far too regulating of their children’s activities and time, whereas mainstream parents may view Aboriginal parents as far too casual, allowing their children too much freedom. Both views reflect culturally based differences in parenting ideas.

A Canadian Aboriginal study was undertaken by Friedel (1999) at the University of Alberta in which she investigated parents’ involvement with urban schools. The term whitestream is used in her study to describe mainstream schools. Marie Battiste (2000) also uses the term. In Canada there is an active movement toward Native schools; this is not the case in Australia. However, whitestream implies that such schools are seen as belonging to the white Anglo-Celtic Canadian culture. Similarly, in Australia many Aboriginal people consider mainstream schools to be whitefella business.

In Australia, the beliefs about genetic, cultural and moral superiority held by the mainstream population with respect to their beliefs about Aboriginal people have been held since colonisation (Behrendt et al., 2009). Dominant cultural beliefs assume superiority. Modern educators shape mainstream education as whitestream to
the detriment of Aboriginal children at school. This is a continued branding of education that continues to subjugate our Aboriginal children (Martin, 2008; Smith, 1999). The outcome of assigning deficit characteristics to Aboriginal children diminishes both the Aboriginal culture and the Anglo-Celtic educator and schooling system.

**Indigenous education in the contemporary context**

School is a cultural experience based in the beliefs of the dominant culture (Rogoff, 2003). Indigenous children are known to not transition well into school and be failing in schools overall (Close the Gap, 2008). Family and community members will avoid interactions where they expect to be blamed, shamed, judged negatively, or have their expertise and knowledge ignored (Dockett et al., 2008). Such expertise and knowledge may be a mother’s knowledge about her own child. The transition to school, as reflected in the research by Dockett et al. (2008), is an issue that has been of great interest in Australian educational research. While the explicit demands and challenges of the process from an Indigenous perspective are not well understood, well-funded intervention programs are being put in place (Close the Gap, 2008). I suggest parents and Indigenous academics need to be strongly involved as these programs remain paternalistic. Mainstream parents do not have to spend time and emotional energy making the education system reflective of their own culture because they know the school system reflects their own culture and values.

It is unknown how Indigenous parents prepare their children for school based on their cultural ideas. Educators are products of the same Western cultural system; therefore their implicit and deeply rooted internalised values influenced by social class are those that are considered the “right values”. Anecdotally, Anglo-Celtic educators express the view that there is an apparent lack of preparation from Indigenous homes. Marilyn Fleer (2004) in the Australian context writes on the “taken for granted” assumptions that early childhood teachers have about the early education of children and of the sociocultural disadvantage that Aboriginal children experience. In her study, she reflects on prior attitudes to Aboriginal children. She quotes the first *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* article by Mellor written in 1963 that described the characters of Aboriginal children, such as: to go walkabout, to move slowly and to show little enthusiasm and interest in school. The same article
encouraged teachers to move Aboriginal families and children toward the same white middle to upper class values held by many of the white teachers.

While it is understood that early childhood education does focus on whole-of-family involvement (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2002), I suggest such findings do not consider Aboriginal people’s own reluctance to come to schools. The understanding of family involvement across cultures is problematic. Hughes and MacNaughton (2002) found a need for a radical shift in the way schools address the poor parent–teacher relationships in Aboriginal contexts. Educators condemn parents’ lack of involvement as a lack of interest in their child’s education. However, Marilyn Fleer (2004) calls on educators to consider their own taken-for-granted practices and to re-appraise their beliefs. As Aboriginal people consider schools to be white business, they feel that sending their children to schools is itself successful. They believe it is up to the schools to educate the children in the mainstream context. Perhaps Canadian Indigenous scholars better differentiate this dominant context by referring to it as whitestream schooling (Battiste, 2002).

Calls to radically reframe how schools engage with parents, such as recommended by Fleer (2004), Ford and Fasoli (2001), and Malin and Maidment (2003) are not understood by teachers. Teachers immersed in their “neutrality of worldview” believe they are offering what is required and do not understand why Aboriginal parents do not engage with them. Fleer (2004) demonstrates that understanding of authentic Indigenous perspectives and history, including allowing Aboriginal children the right to retain their Aboriginal identity, builds better networks. Like other culturally informed academics she calls for critical appraisal and the need to privilege identity and not just develop “whitefella skills” (Fleer, 2004).

Conclusions

Since 1788, Indigenous people have experienced displacement, policies and practices which have destroyed and traumatised Aboriginal culture and people. There has been dispossession of land, destruction of cultural ways and the forcible removal of children. This has occurred across generations, and within an othered world that systematically devalues Indigenous families and children. Such experiences have profound effects on health and the social and emotional wellbeing of children,
families and communities. Indigenous people are typically essentialised within the deficit discourse and current poor school outcomes for Indigenous children are indicative of this situation.

In this chapter, relational and racialised concepts of colonised Indigenous and dominant white cultures were discussed. In Australia, few Aboriginal groups hold their spirituality, culture and language, but they do retain an inherent Aboriginality and worldview. Aboriginal Australians typically live in a fragmented space of cultural trauma as their stories, beliefs, spirituality, languages and lore have been lost through the processes of colonisation (Halloran, 2004; Pascoe, 2008a). Many Aboriginal people do not remember or know culture or country because of colonisation processes. White Australians are not cognisant of aspects of cultural trauma and colonisation and typically construct the Aboriginal family and child within a deficit discourse.

The development of social capital aligns with contemporary global movements toward reconstitution of tribal cultures (Benham, 2007). This has been identified internationally as a way of rebuilding communities. This chapter also considered how beliefs evolve within cultural contexts. Strong beliefs, and stories that teach them, underpin people who live within their own culture. In cultures that have experienced trauma it is unknown what beliefs families and parents hold, particularly toward colonisation agencies such as schools. It is known that Indigenous parents prefer not to engage with schools.

The child’s world is shaped by her parents as the source of genetic, social and psychological influence. Some of the teachings are inherent to the family context (Sigel et al, 1992). Parents are also the cultural teachers of the child. This teaching occurs across generations explicitly, but it is also implied in parental actions and speech. It is difficult to ascertain what beliefs are passed between generations, typically because beliefs themselves are difficult to define, but those beliefs are formed from the broader sociocultural environment. These ancestral and family beliefs are transmitted through generations to the children. How this shapes attitudes to school is unclear.

This literature constructs the other world of Aboriginal Australia that exists marginalised and often invisibly to the lens of the dominant Anglo-Celtic Australian. It seeks to offer a breadth of understanding to the challenging ideas Anglo-Celtic
educators hold about the Aboriginal other. This world is largely invisible to the dominant social milieu because many of the issues are racial and other cultural, so the Anglo-Celtic Australians do not typically encounter life in this other space. As the Anglo-Celtic Australian world is normalised, the Aboriginal Australian is often othered and viewed within the constraints of the deficit discourse.
Chapter 3: A Decolonising Conceptual Framework

Introduction

According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) Indigenous people across the world have another story to tell, but have rarely had the opportunity to tell it. Their stories represent another perspective, but they also question assumptions about the nature of knowledge and research. At this time more Indigenous scholars than ever before are negotiating space within the academy and the doctoral process. Some doctorates are creatively written as the scholar’s journey within the Western spaces of the academy as they attempt to find a non-othered space. Some scholars respect the design of the traditional thesis and Western supervision, while others shapeshift into films, journals, and letters to children. Some are offered as creative performance, theatre, or collections of art (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008).

In this thesis, I am a storyteller, and I gather the other stories for their wise teachings. While this thesis honours the Western doctoral traditions, it also seeks my own narrative space. It offers a portfolio of stories which speak to Indigenous Australian experiences in schooling, as well as my own Indigeneity and this doctoral journey. While Nakata (2007) asserts that the Indigenous doctorate must remain flexible, creative and undefined, all must be shaped by an anticolonial or Indigenous perspective. Indigenous doctorates contest the one worldview of constructing knowledge and ways of knowing. Such creative theses seek to privilege the oppressed native worldview and ways of knowing, being and doing that add to the diversity and creativity of understanding within the academy (Smith, 2005). They encourage readers to see through a different lens, and consider broader ways of understanding and making meaning of this world.

In order to create this thesis, I have considered work by Indigenous scholars across the world. This thesis, like many projects, relies on the Western academic tradition in its style and format. Native American scholar, Benham (2007) suggests this format needs to be honoured so our scholarship is taken seriously by the academy. I suggest the Indigenous thesis, whatever its shape, must speak back to the Western assumptions to privilege the vantage point of the Indigene. As such the
other confronts and questions accepted assumptions about Western research and literature by scholars within their own worldview and context. Indigenist research does not call for disengagement from the academy; rather it calls for equitable inclusion and authentic dialogue within the academy. It seeks a space for authentic engagement in the agency of academic and social power (Smith, 1999).

This conceptual framework chapter creates what Smyth (2004) refers to as the heart of a thesis. In this chapter, I describe the decolonising framework of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) as the central heart of this research project and thesis document. The chapter also considers the privileged Western voice, engaging Indigenous and authentic voice and the role of the Indigenous researcher. It considers emerging decolonising methodologies which honour decolonisation, ethnography, identity and narration. I also write to the use of autobiographical voice which I use to represent my own experiences and context to frame this thesis.

**Constructions of Knowledge**

Indigenous people are defined by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2005) “… as the assembly of those who have witnessed, been excluded from and have survived modernity and imperialism” (p. 86). In contemporary times, Indigenous people are marginalised minorities in areas of territories and states over which they once held sovereignty (Smith, 2005). They lived and learned in these contexts in sophisticated ways and were connected to the landscape and spirituality of their unique world.

Postcolonial scholars, Canella and Viruru (2004) argue that all knowledge is constructed based on worldview and no one construction of knowledge is “the truth”. According to Smith (2005), Indigenous people recognise that research has historically oppressed their truth, worldview and knowledge. Western paradigms continue to neo-colonise in the contemporary context. As such, research is a site of contestation as it challenges who owns knowledge and the power attributed to it (Smith, 2005). Indigenous Australian scholar Karen Martin (2008) refers to Indigenous knowledge and worldview as: *Ways of knowing, being and doing*. “Ways of knowing” refers to teachings, languages and cultures of Indigenous ancestors including creation stories and knowledge. “Ways of being” refers to thinking within Indigenous terms of reference and worldview. It also refers to evaluating and
validating Indigenous ways. “Ways of doing” is the facilitation of learning from a cultural or traditional place, as well as the everyday ways of a group.

In Australia the dominant Western standpoint permeates this society as including its agencies of schooling, academy and research paradigms (Nakata, 2007). Indigenous research does have a broader social agenda than that of the mainstream academy. This agenda may be constructed as political because it challenges the assumption of “Western-only” practice. It seeks to be transformative in nature as Indigenous researchers are committed to changing the status quo, by initiating critical dialogue around power relations and inequality (Bishop, 1998). It is power relations, inequality and the history of colonisation and government intervention into Indigenous lives that have created the suspicion of researchers Indigenous people hold. I agree with Smith’s (1999) assertion that fundamentally Indigenous research seeks to reassign humanity to the Indigenous other.

While Indigenous people are not a monolithic group, they do remain culturally distinct. Some of their native languages and belief systems are still alive. Others hold only fragments and at times corrupted reinterpreted fragments. Typically, Indigenous scholars are exposed to studies by Western experts on their own cultures (Smith, 1999). In his book, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz (2000) wrote that “without understanding the deeper structures [of culture] one is only describing the surface patterns” (p. 351). His statement suggests that the deeper cultural and spiritual ways of an Indigenous society are innate and invisible. They are not apparent to the outsider. Culture is observable daily activity but it is also the deeper organising and existential psychological space. When applied to research practice, Smith (1999, p. 3) asserts that:

> There are tales where the surface story was not as important as the underlying examples of cultural protocols broken, values negated, small tests failed and key people ignored. When Indigenous people suffer under such research, they carry a sense of weight and unspoken cynicism about research.

**Research as colonisation**

As culture is invisible to its insiders, research can appear culturally neutral, but it is biased within its own lens, discourse and ontology, as Bruner (1991) described.
Academic research is defined and made morally and ethically accountable in the terms of the researcher’s own cultural worldview (Bishop, 1998). Decolonising scholars like Smith (1999), Bishop (1998), and Rigney (1999) recognise that research is not a culturally neutral process, because no process can be culturally neutral.

Australian methodologist and Indigenist scholar, Rigney (1999) identified the need for research to “privilege” minorities who have been vulnerable and unable to escape the penetration and surveillance of Western gaze. Historically, ethnographic reports of the native were incorporated into colonising strategies as a means of controlling the foreign, deviant or troublesome other. Smith (1999) asserts that colonising nations relied on their researchers to observe, document and produce knowledge about strange worlds. In such contexts, Smith found that research becomes a way of representing the dark-skinned exotic other to the white world.

Conversely, anticolonial discourses seek to disrupt the dominant patterns of thought, knowledge and research. Non-Indigenous scholars are also seeking more authentic connections and learning how to dismantle traditional ways of doing research and seeking research that engages the less powerful other. Mutua and Swadener (2004) argued that there is a pressing need to deconstruct and decolonise those structures within the academy that privilege only Western knowledge systems and their epistemologies. Historically, most published work about Indigenous issues comes from outsiders and is interpreted through theories that are not based on an Indigenous perspective.

Dominant worldviews are biased toward its own context which views the native as other. Often Indigenous knowledge and stories have been recorded by the West as exotic, novel or even as quaint folk law or naïve stories (Smith, 1999). However, contemporary Indigenous people do not typically work from a position of cultural maintenance, so they too may hold corrupted cultural understandings. Indigenous methodologies do not claim objectivity or neutrality. They are biased toward their own communities in order to be transformative in representing the unfiltered voice and experience of the native (Smith, 1999). I claim my Indigenous bias in this project.

No matter how empathic the imagination or cross-cultural hybridisation processes of the researcher, Clandinin (2007) found that compartmentalisation between cultural boundaries occurs. Any “interpretative” lens is outside of the beliefs
and the existential framework as worldview remains invisible to outsiders (Andrews, 2007; Apfelbaum, 2001; Halloran, 2004; Smith, 1999). At the very least the knowings are lost in translation. According to methodological theorists (Clandinin, 2007; Lincoln, 1993), social sciences cannot simply develop voices and understandings of marginalised and silenced communities without engaging those voices.

Another aspect of only representing one view of truth is that Indigenous history is misunderstood, lost and even denied or fabricated (Pascoe, 2008a). For example, anthropological expeditions sponsored by Harvard and Adelaide Universities were led by Norman Tindale in 1938–39 to map Indigenous tribes and tribal lands (Tindale, n.d.). The maps are commonly acknowledged as inaccurate. Inala elder Uncle Albert Holt, in personal conversation (June 20, 2011), told me of his father travelling with and working for Tindale on this mapping expedition. Uncle’s father also made an Aboriginal version of the tribal country and language maps, which was accurate from the Aboriginal perspective. However, as these maps were not seen to be done by “an expert” they remained unpublished. In contemporary times, the Tindale maps are still considered to be the authority on Indigenous lands and this has added complexity to Indigenous native title claims. Following dispossession and loss of traditional knowledge, many communities no longer know their lands or traditional boundaries. The site where I undertook my research is one which is contested by different tribal groups. This is an example of the ongoing impact of research and Western colonising cartography.

The privileged and empowered voice in research

There are current divergences in research that allow for analyses of the social and power structures that influence what is spoken and what is heard. Latin American scholar Alcoff (2008) argued that in speaking for others, the other is actually re-oppressed. Typically Smith (1999) and other decolonising scholars call for “authentic voice” to inform our research as opposed to the Western interpretative voice. What is an authentic voice is difficult to define. In fact, I suggest that the authentic voice of the cultural Aboriginal person may rely on “cultural maintenance” as defined by Halloran (2004). Even in pre-colonial times, there was no one
homogenous cultural position. Indigenous knowledge by its nature is localised and contextual.

Decolonising theory rests on a foundation of postcolonial scholars including Spivak (1988), Fanon (1967) and Said (1978) as well as a number of traditions in qualitative research. The term postcolonial is often used interchangeably with decolonisation. Smith (1999) argues that “postcolonial” suggests a chronological past that implies colonialism has ended. According to Mutua and Swadener (2004), the existence of neo-colonialism is a feature of decolonising theory (p. 12). Yet postcolonial scholars Cannella and Viruru (2004) argued that decolonisation is implied within postcolonial theory. In support of the endurance of colonisation, Soto (2005) argues that there is no “postcolonial”, only endless variation on neo-colonial formations. These scholars seek to transform colonising agency and contexts so that Indigenous people must speak for themselves and not be spoken for.

American scholar Kristen French (2008) defined another aspect of decolonising theory as the “development of a cultural praxis, a point of theoretical reflection and action” (p. 4) through which to reconsider and reinvent research. The global emergence of Indigenous research, engaged dialogues and methodologies represent lived realities within the context of colonisation. The Indigenous voice can represent the nature of this other reality. In fact, the presence of other broadens the foundations of the academy as well as challenging it (Battiste, 2000). Decolonising methodologies are emerging to sit beside, if not to complement Western knowledge systems as a more legitimate engagement of the researched or oppressed other (Young, 2001).

From the postcolonial perspective, research is another Western practice that creates unequal power structures in that “expert researchers” attain power over the subjects of their inquiry (Cannella, 1997). Postcolonial critique considers the imperialist assumptions and misrepresentations of historically colonised people as well as the economic and social stratification of colonised peoples (Cannella & Bailey, 1999). A postcolonial critique seeks to recast research in democratic ways in order to re-position Indigenous knowledge and reject the colonial view of the native as essentialised and other. Internationally and, across research generally, academics are reconsidering who holds legitimate voice in any research context.
**Authentic voice**

While Linda Smith (1999) calls for authentic voice in research, I have difficulty in defining or claiming my voice as authentic. Indigenous Australian anthropologist Marcia Langton (personal communication, September 15, 2010) engaged with me about use of the term *authentic*. Langton suggested that it implies a validity of Aboriginality which may no longer exist. This thesis describes the loss of cultural maintenance of Aboriginal Australians through colonisation. As such, my traditional cultural space is also lost to me as researcher. While I share the experience of being a colonised Indigenous woman with many, including Linda Smith, I cannot claim an authentic voice as a hallmark of Aboriginality.

I do not speak for all Aboriginal people, or even all of my tribal people. I speak only to my own colonised experience, worldview and knowledge. My voice is informed by my Western education as well as my professional academic homes. My inner world is inherently Indigenous, as is my perspective in that the Western cultural space is not invisible to me. I see whiteness, and recognise it in practice. I am equally informed by silences, by what is lost and gone. I am informed by intuitive knowing, dreams and knowledge from the natural world. I believe the ancestors offer me wisdom in my dreams and intuitions. I observe and listen to the natural world and that of the messenger birds. I am informed by what I can no longer know despite how much I wish it. I honour these ways of knowing, just as I do Western literature.

Nonetheless, like Smith (1999), I do advocate for “authentic” research. By that, I seek space for Indigenist research and voice, meaning that the Indigene (native) voice is authentically heard, represented and engaged rather than “spoken for” from an outsider stance. The Indigenous voice is authority to its own experience. In order to speak for Indigenous people in this thesis, I offer my Western-trained voice and the collaborative voice of my elders and community in their narratives and in my research design. I represent their reality. Their voices speak their realities within their own journeyed narratives. I claim no “expertise”, as that is a Western construction of deep knowing of isolated knowledge. I seek the wisdom of holistic, interconnected, interrelated knowings. Knowledge is not something I can ever own, for it belongs to the community and is revealed when needed and for the good of the community. This thesis is undertaken for me and for my community. This thesis represents those Indigenous stories to the academy.
Decolonisation as engaged dialogue

According to Smith (1999), decolonisation is a theory of hope and freedom, in counter to discourses of oppression and colonisation. Freire and Faundez (1989) agree by saying that rich Indigenous scholarship is a resource that could bring about social change (Freire, 1970; Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). Indigenous research undertaken by Western or Indigenous scholars should aim to empower the researched community and lead toward self-determination. While social change sounds like a grand goal, in this context, it may simply mean that Murri mothers can create better linkages with mainstream schools so that more Aboriginal children have successful transitions into school. This is a reality of social change from the ground up. Their story may then teach those who follow.

In writing on the dilemmas of postcolonial research, Christine Fox (2008) proposes that it is the co-creation of researcher and informant that create legitimate voice. Spivak (1988) suggests it is better to negotiate a space for the other voice of researcher and native than have it not heard at all. In North America, Sandy Grande (2005) calls for the use of the native tongue to undertake authentic research; yet in Australia our languages have not typically survived. Worldwide, First Nations are calling for Indigenous researchers as lead researchers on our projects (Battiste, 2002; Grande, 2005; Smith, 2005). Linda Smith believes it is essential that Indigenous people do their own research. Karen Martin’s thesis (2008) calls for the rightful place of Indigenous knowledge, ways of knowing, being and doing to stand alongside Western knowledge within the academy.

The Role of the Indigenous Researcher

A decolonising research project attempts to reconstitute communities and their people through the use of restorative Indigenous ecologies that celebrate survival, remembering, sharing, gendering and new forms of naming, networking, protecting and democratising daily life (Battiste, 2000). Specifically, Smith (1999) argues that the principles of decolonisation theory contribute to the transformation of communities and lead to rebuilding communities at the local level. This is also a theory that is called on to underpin other endeavours, such as making education, curriculum and classrooms culturally respectful and safe places for all children.
Martin Nakata (2007) argues for a flexible stance in research. He confirms that Indigenous people need to do their own research within academic disciplinary practice, “or it will continue to be done to us” (p. x).

Nakata (2007) encourages researchers to take strength in the dualistic role of being trained within the Western tradition as researchers but representing the standpoint of Indigenous people. The Indigenous researcher is typically considered by the West to be an “insider” participant in the process of Indigenous research. The insider, as researcher, enriches data by bringing voice and the unique cultural lens as well as historical understandings to the position of the researched (Patton, 2002). Insider research is not othered. However, just as I questioned authentic voice, the legitimate insider is also difficult to define. While both researcher and researched share an Indigenous context, Indigeneity does not automatically imply insider status to a community although we do share the other context.

I suggest the strength of the insider as researcher may be from a bicultural agility to negotiate space between the academic and Indigenous traditions. I suggest this is a pressing need. I also find anecdotally that many Indigenous people who are untrained researchers are positioned as co-researchers to interact with the community. To me, this speaks once more to colonial constructions of natural master and slave, in which it is difficult for the Indigenous worker to speak up to the authority of the Western research leader.

Rightfully, Martin Nakata (2007) argues that we are capable of doing our own research. We are also capable of leading and designing our own research. This is the position of privilege and power we need to assume if we are to undertake transformative research. Indigenous engagement, consultation and collaborative design must be integral to the research process. These partnerships need to be equally powerful which means the researcher must not present as “expert”. Research that is sensitive, engaged and framed in respectful human rights can be undertaken in Indigenous contexts by any researcher. However, Indigenous researchers have an inherent worldview that positions them to do research differently. While a common Indigenous heritage does situate researcher and researched within the same historical, ethnic and social context, it does not make one automatically accepted or acceptable within an Indigenous community.
As stated earlier, I claim no position of neutrality or distance in this thesis. I acknowledge and claim my Indigenous bias as pertaining to my heritage, perspective, cultural voice and my role as a colonised Indigenous woman and academic. I believe Indigenous scholars become adept in seeing both worlds because we must be constantly vigilant to read and not betray our situations. We speak and act differently in each world. I am most comfortable in Aboriginal world where I am unmasked and truly known from the inside out. I am understood in this context. I too have discarded some of the fragments of the old learnings to modernity. Yet, my daughters know much about Indigenous worldview in ways that I have not taught them. They too carry our innate worldview in their veins.

Cannella and Viruru (2004) identify the criticism of Indigenous research as “… not being research as it does not invoke objectivity, rigor, validity, standards and generalisability on forms of research they do not understand or fear” (p. 145). A significant criticism of decolonisation approaches is that there is the potential that they will under theorise and by doing so may diminish the importance of Indigenous concepts of identity, tradition, literacy and language (Grande, 2005). However, such approaches may offer an alternative descriptive lens. While knowledge and research practice needs to be positioned inside of the academy, yet it cannot be defined by the academy. Grande suggests that in reviewing data, the cultural frame must be present to represent the Indigenous standpoint.

There is no roadmap of design possibilities for the research design. Nakata (2007) believes that the vagueness and flexibility in designing Indigenous methodologies is strength and that pinning down design specifics may mould our research practices into the other place of comparison, implying difference. Erica Apfelbaum (2001) questions how researchers can access, interpret and analyse stories that are distant from their own realities and narrative repertoires. For Geertz (2000), culture and meaning are accessed not as universal and general but rather through exploration of the fine detail. I suggest seeing the details and seeing difference requires the lens and standpoint of an Indigenous scholar for the existential and inner thoughts and ideas of the cultural worldview to emerge. Jerome Bruner (1991) argued against the neutrality of distant methods and for more intimate and revealing narratives. He suggested narratives offered power to the marginalised
and illiterate informant so that their own voice could be heard. Therefore, narrative could bridge into other cultures, where “neutral” research could not.

**Emerging Indigenous methodologies**

I have used Indigenous ethnography from the expanding pool of ways to do ethnography as my primary research methodology (Clandinin, 2007). Originally, ethnographies were a Eurocentric anthropological tool for the study of non-literate primitive cultures. Patton (2002) described ethnography as a way to seek out the “anthropologically strange, primitive or the exotic other from the outsider perspective” and as “the traditional tool of anthropologists intertwined with Western colonialism” (p. 81). However, Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith (2008) describe a newly emerging form of Indigenous ethnography.

In fact, the origins of new ethnographies are from within cultures who share a history of colonisation (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008). Indigenous ethnographies acknowledge the postcolonial sentiments about privilege and power as well as contributing toward “the new ethnography”. It is a space where an insider may study within their own culture (Clandinin, 2007) as they are underpinned by non-Western cultural, historical and personal understandings of their own culture and heritage. A richer data set can emerge with the voice of the insider.

It becomes possible to reveal a realistic way of life because the participant is the empowered voice of the storyteller. It is a more flexible version of ethnography that aligns with traditional practice but considers the values and ethics of Indigenous position. It includes the use of insiders embedded within their own cultural context. Indigenous ethnography is a tool that relies on narrative approaches (Clandinin, 2007). It is used as an interdisciplinary methodology that aims to reveal reality, rather than a researcher’s translation. Narratives and story are also emerging alongside the new ethnographies. The stories gathered in ethnography are a technique designed for discovery that avoids preconceptions and is not driven by any predetermined inflexible research agenda. The new ethnographies allow the researcher to be in the midst of the study in a way no other methodology can (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). They allow a process of deep listening to the inner world of the participant by the researcher.
Indianising narratives: Storytelling

Narratives are the telling of a story in detail (Patton, 2002). They are described by Jerome Bruner (1991) as a democratic technique with no privileged position and where the story of the participant is heard. His description aligns with the Indigenous idea of the use of a circle for storytelling. In a circle, there is no most important person or space. The strength of the circle offers support to the vulnerable, so their voice may also be heard. Bruner considered stories a way to reveal the world of the participant. It was not necessary for the story to be precise but to reveal the imagined construction and emotional reactions.

Story can sharpen the focus and allow others to see things differently and non-judgementally. Narratives can bring richness and depth to what was missing in extant research. Storywork researcher Archibald (2008) describes oral narratives, particularly life story narratives, as allowing for the truthful telling of life experiences or testimonies. It is through a narrative that a storyteller’s genuine perspective can emerge (Denzin, 2009). It is important that when “the silenced” are listened to, they may speak their own issues.

Narratives are shaped by the participant and while the “shaped telling” may not be a complete and accurate representations of reality, stories are constructed around a memory of a life experience rather than just remembered facts. By being listened to, storytellers gain a sense of importance and self-esteem (Bruner, 1991). Narrative storytelling encompasses the opportunity for compassion, humanity and healing. Such research is an important tool for Indigenous communities because it is the tool that seems most able to offer representation.

Story techniques rely upon participants wanting to share and feeling compelled to tell their own story. These are personal and subjective constructions shaped by the participants that present rich data (Lieblich, Zilber, & Tuval-Mashiach, 2008). This aligns with my insider approach and the position of power in which I place my participant collaborators. Their voices speak to their issues. Narrative is a comfortable and naturalistic instrument because it also aligns within the oral and cultural storytelling traditions of Indigenous cultures (Archibald, 2008).
Auto-ethnography in storytelling

In her descriptions of storywork, Archibald (2008) suggests that the researcher is equally present in the stories. Researchers may separate their voice from the narrator’s voice by their interpretations (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008). Certainly in an Indigenist thesis, the researcher is present and I suggest must be so in order to offer the common culturally embedded listening to the story.

In this thesis, the research approach was collaboratively co-designed and undertaken with the Aboriginal storytellers as recommended by Smallacombe, Davis, and Quiggin (2006). Aboriginal participants were included as co-authors and co-designers from the early stage of research after a failed attempt at a Western narrative model. It involved my long-term immersion within the naturalistic everyday setting of the playgroup. Participant observation, naturally occurring dialogue, and guided conversational interviews were the methodology used. Free-flowing individual and group conversations were used within the playgroup setting.

During the interviews, I took the role of a deep listener (Archibald, 2008) and mutual collaborator. In Australia, Atkinson (2002) uses the Aboriginal word Dadirri which means listening to one another. It also describes an Aboriginal way of listening silently as a way of learning. Deep listening is a highly cultural way of being within our community. One listens fully and pauses before replying, if a reply is necessary. Auto-ethnography is a technique that includes the researcher as storyteller and participant (Ellis, 2004; Hayano, 1979). The presence of “I” adds a naturalistic reality and situates the story and dialogue closely to the researched as well as the researcher (Tomaselli, Dyll, & Francis, 2008). It is a technique significantly used in Indigenist research that adds closeness and immediacy to the storied moment (Denzin, 2009, p. 216).

A storyteller and recorder must use dialogue in order to guide a process of meaning making. Just as our voice is interactive with the Indigenous storyteller, our voice may be present in our written documents for the academy (Wilson, 2008). Sandra Grande (2005) suggests Indigenous narratives should not just be stories but ought to present cogent theories that account for the rich but traumatised contemporary life of Indigenous people. Her comments suggest the need for auto-ethnographic presence in that the storytellers have already constructed and reflected
upon the story as testimony. It is the broader Indigenous context that the academic listener considers along with the other stories heard and, from this, develops theory.

In their book on ethnology and methodology, *Writing Culture*, Clifford and Marcus (1986) state that the voice of the author was always manifest in classical ethnographies, but maintained in a distant authorial style. Engaged research and dialogue are now considered so imperative that much classical research has been called into question by its lack of cultural context and native voice (Smith, 1999). Ethnography has taken a more subjective stance and includes the engaged voice of the researcher. This may be as a conversational partner, a self-informant in the role of auto-ethnography, or as a storyteller of one’s own life (Charmaz, 2006).

**Identity and Narration**

Life stories are typically not told as unrelated patches of events; rather, they are scripted around narrative formats. In story, life transcends the animalistic by organising human temporality into something significant or meaningful. Narratives are told by organisation of internal and external events. Through narrative schemata, scripts of existence are built into what is the story. The ability to consider life as an integrated narrative is created through building blocks, which the storyteller places in the right order to cohere important moments of life, events into episodes and episodes into life stories (Bamberg, 2012).

Narrative theorist, Jerome Bruner (1991), suggested the assumption of self plotted in and across time into a life story model of identity. Our narrative identities are the stories we live by. I suggest this is compromised when one is unaware of cultural truths. No one remembers stories in entire detail; rather, memory units and feelings are constructed into stories. Thus, no two tellings of a story are exactly the same. It is this construction that identifies and reflects upon the meaning making for the storyteller, which leads to how he will offer the story to the listener. Gubrium and Holstein (2008) argue for a narrative ethnography where one is able to analyse the complex interplay between stories, practices, descriptive resources, purposes, audiences and the environment that condition storytelling.

The process of narrating is a privileged genre for identity construction because it requires situating characters in time and space through time. Narrative is a
reportable or tell-able way of creating story. Therefore the narrator is able to take a reflective position about himself as a character within his own story of his life. This is a reflective construction which takes place in the present, about past events relevant to the act of telling what is meaningful and worthwhile in life (Bamberg, 2012). In our stories, we are expressing our beliefs. Therefore, it is our stories that bind culture into beliefs. I suggest the stories are the culture.

In life stories, the Indigenous informant is engaged as expert in the experience of their own lives (Archibald, 2008). In qualitative research, stories and life stories as methodology are emerging as a legitimate way of data gathering. It is essentially research that emerges from the community, not framed from the Western academy as top-down. In Indigenous culture, stories carry a multi-layered system of meaning encompassing relationships, lore and morals in a way that is easy to memorise and retell. Stories reinforce identity by presenting a worldview, by their cultural uniqueness and by teaching about the traditional ways of a culture.

Life narratives can be about a specific significant aspect of a person’s life and are sometimes referred to as personal narratives (Atkinson, 2002). A life story need not be a full life history. In this project I do not gather whole-of-life stories; rather, the stories are limited to ideas about education and life experiences that pertain to education. This research is Indigenist, as described by Rigney (1999). It occurs in naturalistic settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It is framed as an intergenerational Indigenous ethnography (Bishop, 1998). It is informed by the emerging Indigenous methodologies (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008). In situating the stories within the common Indigenous cultural context I make use of auto-ethnographies. I concur with the description of Gubrium and Holstein (2008): “The interviews in this project form a contextually based mutually accomplished story that is reached in collaboration between the researcher and the narrator” (p. 66).

**Constructing truth in identity**

In the next chapter of this thesis I discuss my use of oral narratives as the story-gathering methodology I use. Story of self and cultural identity are closely related as I have suggested in this chapter, because we use story to construct self. It is our stories about ourselves which demonstrate to the world who we are as people (Bamberg, 2012). They also tell who we have become. I suggest in this thesis that the
intergenerational stories speak to who we become over generations. In intact cultural spaces, our experiences and our stories collectively define who we are within a culture. Our individual stories give us a unique identity.

Cultural identity is a matter of becoming as well as being, in the sense of what Aboriginality is and what we have become through colonisation processes. Cultural identity belongs to the past as well as the present. Cultural identities have histories. Traditionally they came from the landscape of Australia as it existed before white settlement. It is not eternally fixed in some essentialised past but is subject to continuous reinvention. Westerman (1997) identified the aspects of Aboriginal resistance to the settlers. She stated that their reactions were about reconciliation and sharing space cooperatively with the settlers. Culture does hold the capacity to change.

While there are efforts at reconstitution of culture to restore identity, we cannot position ourselves within the narratives of the past. Identities have been shaped across this time by the effects of an exercise of cultural power and European normalisation. Aboriginal identity is constructed as different. As argued in the literature chapter, the colonising regimes had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as other. The stories in this thesis seek to reveal this process across time and generations. According to narrative researcher Riessman (2002), stories of culture provide a window into the essential self, which I consider to be identity.

Archibald (2008), as an Indigenous insider, views story in a different way. She asserts that storywork requires respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness and synergy. These Cree components relate to the protocols and respect of Indigenous Australian worldview (NHMRC, 2003). They carry us as listeners along beside them to learn of the journey and remind us that stories are sacred to Indigenous people, because they are in fact the identity of that person and their experience. Stories are much larger than mere data in this thesis, as my storytellers speak their own identity into reality. In doing so, they share the traumatic collective stories that did not “happen to them” but which have shaped who they are. I suggest this may be a colonised identity rather than an authentic or valid Aboriginal identity as much of their cultural knowing is lost.
 Nonetheless, Aboriginality itself remains **other** to the dominant identity. I suggest that by exploring these stories, Aboriginal storytellers may transform how they shape their own identity to understand their colonised space. To me, coming to understand this colonised space was empowering. Colonisation was a process that collectively oppressed Aboriginal people. While much of this thesis honours Western academic protocols and styles, the focus on stories and the storytellers’ identities remains a significant point of difference from more traditional theses.

**Conclusions**

This chapter has explored the decolonising conceptual framework of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999). In her work, Smith described how dominant Western paradigms have perpetuated **othering** research on Indigenous people. Indigenous cultures and knowledge have been impacted by research that was an agency of oppression, colonisation and neo-colonisation. Smith argued that most Indigenous research continues to remain as neo-colonising in its processes. Smith’s insistence on the use of the term, decolonisation, rather than postcolonisation speaks to the ever-present dominant knowledge and research traditions, even in current educational research, which continue to oppress and disadvantage Indigenous children.

This chapter described decolonisation processes which aligned current research practices with Indigenist research, and engaged ethnographic and narrative methodologies. Indigenous ethnography is an insider form of classic ethnography which represents Indigenous researchers’ insider or common cultural contexts. Narrative methodology processes were described as they attest to colonised experience from the view of the native. As such, their voice is privileged and their stories are heard.

Story also aligns with decolonising practices as it allows the construction of worldview and meaning to emerge, as well as constructing identity. This research is not interpreted by an outsider view. As researcher I share the same colonised context of the storytellers. My story and reflexivity is represented in this thesis by use of the auto-ethnographic “I”. Indigenous research is a point of theoretical and ontological difference that contests the dominant assumptions of the academy (Grande, 2005). Decolonisation as a process attempts to represent the Indigene and offer beneficial
and transformative research practice to take communities to a better place than they are now.
Chapter 4: The Indigenist Methodology

Introduction

I came to this doctoral journey as an Indigenous woman with Western university training. In this chapter, I speak to how I had to decolonise my own mind as Smith (1999) suggested. This chapter builds on the decolonising conceptual framework of the previous chapter. It also relates to the foundational theory of Indigenous ethnographic and narrative methodologies introduced in Chapter 3. In this chapter I tell the story of how I gathered the cross-generational stories and the theories which support my methodology. I discuss intergenerational memory, respectful practice in Aboriginal research, and how communication and worldviews can lead to misunderstandings.

I discuss the urbanised setting, and the collaborative research story. I also discuss how I shape the interpretation of the stories around Indigenous and narrative thematic methods. I rely on Indigenous storywork (Archibald, 2008), using the stories to create a portfolio of new teaching stories for the contemporary Aboriginal context. I also align and inform this with the holistic and thematic analysis of Amia Lieblich (1998) to see how ideas cross generations. As stated in Chapter 1, the three research questions which shape the stories are:

- What was the reality of school for different generations of Indigenous people?
- What beliefs and values are held about mainstream education for their children?
- What ideas are communicated about school across generations?

This research project was an Indigenist ethnographic study (Grande, 2005) using conversational narratives across three adult generations of Aboriginal storytellers about their experiences with colonial models of school. Any children who wished to tell a story about school were encouraged to do so. As well as the gathered individual narratives I used group narratives informally and formally in naturalistic spaces (Clandinin, 2007). In order to gather the fragments of information,
I kept field notes and journals which recorded my observations and conversations with playgroup families and community, even if they were not participant storytellers in this project. I gathered historical artefacts, as well as artefacts from the playgroup families and children.

In this journey I kept my own reflective notes, together with notes of Indigenous meetings and advisory board meetings. Indigenous elder wisdom is not typically published, so I was aware of the value of collecting conversations, speeches and presentations of the elders. As an Indigenous woman, academic, and government advisor, the oral information I am privy to from elders was as valuable to me as the academic literature is to Western scholars. The oral information represented Indigenous experience and worldview as well as ways of knowing, being and doing. All of these sources formed the multiplicity of threads which are woven together.

**Generational Memory Narratives**

In this project, the elders’ stories were differently placed in their life experience than for any of the other storytellers. One of the grandmothers also had her own children at the playgroup. Most of the grandparents were actively caring for their grandchildren so still much involved with the daily routines of what we think of as family life. The elders were typically more removed from such daily family business. They were also more experienced as storytellers as they were busy telling stories of their own lives. In effect they were situated closely to traditional eldership because they were storytellers and teachers to their own community and to community groups and mainstream schools.

In the form of life stories, narratives render complex experience understandable. They are subjective, selective and tend to “reconstruct” rather than resurrect the past (Clandinin, 2007). I consider they offer a long filament which runs through fragments of memory and generations into the ideas and ways of the following generations. Stories are reconstructed through telling and retelling (Archibald, 2008; Lieblich, 1998, 2006). A life story is also a reflective story, in that it is reflected upon within the frame of the life, and experiences of life (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I suggest the story itself is a creative process, and by reflection and retelling, the storyteller is making meaning of life itself.
Intergenerational research using ethnographies has been conducted successfully in related areas like education, gerontology, and child development (Clandinin, 2007). The idea of generational memory is also used by mainstream scholars seeking insights on how ideas and patterns of behaviour shape outlook across generations. I suspect foundational work by Mannheim (1952) may well apply today. He noted that older groups tend to cling to the views of their youth and transmit them to subsequent generations. However, it is unknown if such work is universal to all cultures, although from the stories I have gathered here it may be. Younger groups were in “fresh contact” with present experiences as well as being informed by past experience (Bodnar, 1996). Psychologists have demonstrated that narratives are one of the fundamental forms of human cognition (Clandinin, 2007).

American intergenerational researcher and historian Bodnar (1996) looked at how social and political events encountered in early life can permanently shape ideas and outlook across a generation as Mannheim (1952) had suggested. I suggest colonisation events would similarly be remembered across generational groups. Bodnar found that despite lifestyle differences, people in one age group were unified in shared ideas within their generational group. Longitudinal research has historically been concerned with understanding the processes of socialisation and how one generation transfers patterns of behaviour to the next.

“Parentisation” represents cultural evolution within families whereby parents teach their children behavioural rules and transmit beliefs and practices (Goodnow, 1992). Such transmission is not necessarily explicit. If similar early life events can permanently shape ideas within a family, I suggest they may well shape “common” ideas, similarly to common values held across generational groups as Bodnar (1996) suggested. In this research, I chose to draw circles loosely around storyteller generations because I wished to speak to the recollection of the storytellers of their childhood within age groups as well as particular colonisation and policy eras.

**Personal testimony as a counter-narrative**

Decolonising and Indigenist research designs call for reflexive critical narratives that Smith (1999) and Canella and Viruru (2004) considered counter-narratives because they speak back to the dominant narrative. A dominant narrative is constructed and subscribed to by the majority. Counter-narratives offer a way of
hearing the stories that Indigenous people have struggled to tell, or not told. They are typically known within the Indigenous group; however, I have spoken in the literature review chapter of the need for Aboriginal people to pass in order to survive. As such, many Aboriginal people are unaware of their own heritage and history. I also found, after processes of colonisation like the removal of children, many do not know even their country or family. More distant Aboriginal history is inaccessible to them.

According to Denzin (2009), inner-world insights are possible through an understanding of both externally observable behaviours and internal states including “worldview, opinion, values, attitudes, ideas” (pp. 8–9). While narratives are emerging to counter “sterile research” they are criticised as being more art than science (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 1). The testimonio, or testimony, is a form of counter-narrative that Smith (1999) and Lieblich (1998) identify. Grande (2005) identifies native narratives as “un-methodology” in that their existence is opposed to mainstream othering methodologies. Testimonio presents oral evidence and it maybe a monologue to the audience (Denzin, 2009) or conversational narratives. Indigenous testimonies are a way of talking about an extremely painful event or series of events. They are also a technique that respectfully remembers and honours the past (Smith, 1999).

**Seeking permission to undertake this research**

In beginning this project, I sought the permission from the traditional owners where I undertook this study. I also spoke to other leaders as well so the community was informed about my activity in their country. I asked their ideas on the worthiness of the project and asked if they felt it aligned with community priority issues. I requested their advice on how to proceed. Such permission is important within your own country but more so when it is to be undertaken in another country. The saltwater country that was the research site is not my traditional land. This respectful practice is inherent in Aboriginal protocol and lore. I was already known to the respected elders and community people in this area because I had worked with them in establishing the playgroup two years before. They were interested in my work, particularly as education and schools were core to their concerns. They expressed genuine support for this thesis.
I acknowledge this is contested land that the Jinnibirra tribes walked since the first morning. The contestation is related to so few surviving native people. Traditionally; it was common for tribal, language dialect and clan groups to share country. There were also clan groups who lived and travelled together, and language groups within greater country areas. In undertaking this project, I offer my deepest respects to all the traditional people, as well as all elders who live and work on this land today, and thank all for their support.

**Undumbi Country**

The research site is located along the original walking tracks from the Brisbane area to the north of the state. These tracks later became Gympie Road that connects Brisbane to Gympie. Before the motorway was built it was the main road. The town area was also a natural intercourse of pathways and was a traditional meeting place for tribes of south-east Queensland. The area was originally rainforest with heavy rains. Nearby is known for the Bunya tree nut delicacy that grows in the Blackall Ranges in the Maleny area. Tribes once gathered from all over Queensland and perhaps further for the harvest celebrations before moving west toward Dalby for the larger harvests in the Bunya Mountains.

According to one local Aboriginal elder, Aunty Bee (personal communication, May 8, 2009), this land was valuable to European settlers for the huge original hardwood forests. These trees that drew timber-getters and sawmills were sacred trees to the Aborigines and held our knowledge and dreaming spirits. The land of the Sunshine Coast and hinterlands was heavily defended and the warriors fought to the death for their homes, country, and their families’ survival. Very few saltwater people survived those killing times. Aunty Bee also tells of how Europeans poisoned the waterholes during the Bunya festival.

Many killings occurred, but they remain lost to the silent unrecorded history of the settlers. With so few people surviving and documents silent on the massacres, we have little access to our histories. However some stories do remain. At Murdering Creek on Lake Weyba near Noosa, the elders were invited to sign a treaty with local settlers. The elders prepared themselves for the ceremony and crossed the lake on a boat, only to be shot out. White hunters had been brought in from Africa to act as
snipers and “shoot out” the traditional people. The Creek which runs into the lake is the place of the killings. It runs red with tannin through the winter months as if that waterway remembers the murders.

In another incident, a massacre occurred on Tiwi beach one Sunday afternoon when 300 Aboriginal people were killed by mounted police. It is said that the sea ran red with blood for days afterward (Eve Feisel, personal communication, October 6, 2011). A local Aboriginal elder, Nanny June, spoke of how as a five-year-old child she escaped that massacre by hiding in the bush (personal communication, October 6, 2011). She then ran on inland tracks until she reached family in Cherbourg.

Some of the Aboriginal people from this area gave their children to Governor Petrie to be raised. Petrie’s station was the area now known as the north Brisbane suburb Murrumba Downs. He was known because he had lived in the area and as a child spent time with the tribal people. As an adult, Petrie led timber-getters to the locations of huge, sacred, ancient hardwood trees he had learned of in his youth (Aunty Bee, personal communication, May 8, 2009). Despite the betrayal by Governor Petrie, the old people knew where the children were if they were with him. They feared their removal to places and lives and fates unknown. As a result of massacres, waterhole poisonings and forcible removals to inland missions, there are very few Aboriginal families and fewer traditional owners who hold the tribal knowledge of this area. Most Aboriginal people who live in the area now have relocated here from other places.

**An urban rural setting**

The research site, Binibara, is located in an urban community in the rural hinterland area of the Sunshine Coast. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS & AIHW, 2005) describes this community as a “rural-urban town”. It has a population of about 5000 people. The Aboriginal liaison officer in the town estimates that there are about 40 families of Aboriginal people in the town or about 200 people permanently living there. In the broader Sunshine Coast area, the North Coast Aboriginal Community Health Service reports about 2000 Aboriginal people live across the Sunshine Coast region. There is also an itinerant group of Aboriginal people because a major hospital and a men’s prison are nearby.
The town is the hub for a number of mainstream government and Aboriginal services. These include the large teaching public hospital, Centrelink and Medicare offices, government housing, and other miscellaneous services. Many of the town’s homes were built by the Government Housing Commission service in the past. Other Aboriginal services are provided by at least two non-profit associations including an Aboriginal Health Service, Aboriginal Cultural Healing Offices and Aboriginal Employment Services. There are Aboriginal health workers based at the hospital and a jabba jabba program (an Aboriginal immunisation service); a community centre; men’s shed and the Murri playgroup that is the focus of this research. There is also a women’s traditional ceremony and birthing site and healing ground that is currently being reconstituted by elders with bush-tucker walks and traditional cooking days.

The town is located on the coastal end of the traditional walking path to the adjoining Waka Waka country where the ex-mission town of Cherbourg is located near Murgon. Previously, Cherbourg housed Aboriginal people from 47 tribes all over the state. Cherbourg is no longer a mission but is considered a “Deed of Grant in Trust” community, which means it is owned and administered by the community. Many of the Aboriginal residents in Binibara are from Cherbourg. There are close kin connections between the two towns. Many people come to Binibara to stay with relatives if hospital treatment is needed. In order to visit men in the local prison, young mothers with children often relocate here during their partners’ incarceration. None of the Aboriginal participants in the playgroup had traditional connections to this country. There were also no Torres Strait Islander families engaged in the playgroup at the time of this research.

Unlike most Indigenous research, this setting is not a predominantly Aboriginal community. It could be described as an Anglo-Celtic community. It resembles many suburbs of regional towns or cities. The Aboriginal families are spread throughout the town in their own rented or purchased homes. The primary school principal at the school where the playgroup is located described all the students as “typically at risk” because of many social issues related to poverty and low income of the area. Because there is no designated Aboriginal hub or free-standing Aboriginal health service, there is no permanent cultural space within the town. From time to time, there are Aboriginal picnics, football games and traditional events that are well attended. Most
families meet in casual encounters in their daily lives such as at Centrelink offices or the supermarket or hospital.

Education facilities in the town include an Education Queensland state primary school and a Catholic primary school. There is a high school and a kindergarten program operated by the Crèche & Kindergarten Association. There are two long-day childcare centres. There is also a mainstream playgroup running in the town but no Aboriginal families attend. At the time of this research, an Indigenous advisory group to school from the Queensland Department of Education was located in the town but that group no longer exists in the area.

**Urban spaces as Indigenous country**

Aboriginal research is often undertaken in isolated discrete marginalised communities. Benedict Anderson (2002) described “imagined communities”. He wrote about how people are stereotyped and Aboriginal people are essentialised, meaning their “assigned” characteristics are applied to the entire race. While there is a paucity of Aboriginal family research in Queensland, it is typically undertaken in those “imagined” communities and ex-mission communities such as Cherbourg where Aboriginal people live as a defined group and as an ethnic majority. It is unknown if research from other communities translates into urban situations or what different issues and challenges arise. I suggest challenges present themselves in mainstream communities, such as having an Indigenous identity, that are not issues in communities where family networks may exist. Traditional communities often have strong bonds (social capital) through family networks. Aboriginal children may also experience isolation or social exclusion because of their cohort size and their minority status in urban schools.

Currently, the majority of research undertaken in Aboriginal communities may apply to less than 20% of the Indigenous population. The experiences of urban Aboriginal people are not known even though the majority of the Aboriginal population in Queensland lives in major urban coastal centres (ABS & AIHW, 2005). The ABS and AIHW data suggests that at least 75% of Aboriginal people live in urban areas while statistics from the Aboriginal Health Services indicate that the figure could be as high as 85% of our people. This research is set in an urban area and reflects urban Aboriginal life on which there is a paucity of family research, even
though it is the emerging reality that the majority of Aboriginal people live in mainstream urban settings.

The Collaborative Research Story

I have found that Aboriginal people remain distrustful of research and researchers and are not convinced that there is a need for research within their communities, as suggested in Indigenous literature (Smith, 2005). As Indigenous researchers, we position ourselves somewhere “within and between the contrasting worldviews of the Indigenous and the discipline” (Benham, 2007, p. 518). I informed myself with Indigenous protocols and design and reflected upon National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines (NHMRC, 2003, 2005). I continued visiting playgroup weekly and, over time, I explained to the families that they were collaborators and co-authors and guides for the research. They had a sense of control rather than being “the researched”. The research process was not predesigned; rather it evolved with time and patience. It is not a technique which would work well with people who need tight planning and structure.

I found the elders and older participants were happy to tell me their stories. In fact, I had to limit them to school-related stories. So I began my research gathering the stories of elders. I did not gather stories in a strictly generational pattern; rather I worked across generations and with storytellers who were accessible to me at the time. Nonetheless, because each group tended to have friends from their own generation who were included in the study, generational groups did tend to occur within the same time frames. The two elders who were less involved with community were also reflective about their lives, perhaps retelling and re-listening to their own inner constructions of their storied lives.

The elders took a longer view back into childhood. The lens of long lives, distance, and perhaps knowing how their lives turned out, allowed them to assume a stance of dignity and eldership in their stories. The tone was of a trial and survival stance. I found the elders’ emotions remained accessible in their constructions of childhood truths. Painful memories carried feeling even into their old age. It is this level of attached feelings which is “important truth”.

Chapter 4: The Indigenist Methodology
I found that discussing my own story, my own family and what I managed to accomplish despite my difficulties allowed the group to know me honestly and openly. When they understood who I was and my experiences they were more trustful of me, and engaged with me more comfortably. Even so, they offered me part of their story, and then would revisit it later and offer me more. It is not a model which could work well with limited time frames.

The Murri Mums were often on show as a culturally appropriate playgroup and parenting program. In observing the group when outside researchers were present, I was actually alarmed at how their actions and behaviours differed from when it was just the Murri Mums present. I was “one of the mob” by this time. They were distrustful of outsiders who presented as authorities and particularly of people “watching” the children. All the mothers expressed fear about their parenting and children being observed because they all dreaded their children being taken.

I saw that whatever observations the outside researchers took away had little to do with the ordinary reality of lives. It is typically a group of laughter, wisdom and Murri humour. When the outsiders were present the tone changed to passivity and silence. I sensed they expected to be judged negatively by the visitors. The group and facilitator decided to stop outside visits. They took on a sense of playgroup of being their own cultural place, and a place in which they held power. It was a culturally safe place that they owned. It was their belonging place within the mainstream school and community.

The group told me how they would like the research undertaken. They did not want to be interviewed away from the playgroup, or even in an adjoining room. They preferred to sit with me in the setting. I realised by not asking standard interviewing questions, and using conversational narratives, my ability increased to gather deep data within the world of naturally occurring conversation (Mishler, 1999). The mothers liked to yarn in groups and lost confidence if removed from the support of other mothers. Later, the mothers engaged with me on a one-on-one basis themselves; usually when I sat at the collage or playgroup table they would join me to do an activity and chat.

Our process evolved and took time; however, we created, undertook and held our own research ceremony within Aboriginal social context and world as described by Benham (2007). By taking time, I allowed individuals to contribute, and re-
contribute at their own comfort level. I implicitly identified and worked with “their way” rather than by the university prescription. By empowering this group as my collaborators and equal partners, they decolonised the research process themselves and showed me how they did business which Jones and Jenkins (2008) called “rethinking collaboration”. In this process, they were not othered but had their own voice in the research design and stories.

**Immersion in the playgroup community**

For mainstream families a playgroup may be one of many activities that the families “go to”. They do not have to consider if they will feel welcomed or as if they belong. They do not experience othering in such a space. An Indigenous playgroup assumes a different role to that of a mainstream playgroup in a town. Because this was a Murri playgroup, it connected to the community as part of the community. Aboriginal services in many towns are considered a culturally safe and belonging space where they will not be othered, judged, humiliated or misunderstood. It is a less anxiety-causing environment for them (Malin, 2003a). Aboriginal people identify with it and connect to it. In this town with limited specific cultural spaces, the playgroup emerged as a community hub for the Aboriginal families.

I was immersed within the targeted Indigenous playgroup for three years to undertake this research. I chose to be immersed because I had a research goal of “closeness to the people and situations being studied” (Patton, 2002, p. 49) while I gathered the stories or personal narratives of the playgroup community. This closeness or subjectivity is an attribute in Indigenist research because the researcher and researched share a colonised historical, social and contemporary context (Benham, 2007). However, this bias of shared historical, social and ethnic context does “not serve any vested interests or prejudices to arrive at predisposed truths. It seeks “honest, meaningful, and credible, findings,” (Patton, 2002, p. 51).

While I developed a privileged position within the group, I am not sure that I ever became an insider. While I do not fully claim insider status neither was my role one of a Western outsider. I suggest it is like claiming authentic status that I discussed earlier in this thesis. Who is insider is up to the local group. If I was studying fair-skinned Aboriginal doctoral students, I could perhaps claim I was
insider. I believe “the researcher” is always a negotiated role with a Murri group. You become insider only if the group consider you so; it cannot be self-proclaimed. While we shared an Indigenous colonised context, I had many differences. I was much older than the mothers. I had lived overseas and spent my life working in universities. The idea of insider, if applied to me, feels a more Western construct in that insider may be assigned like a stereotyped other. There is broad diversity within the Aboriginal world too.

The naturalistic real-world setting is one in which the researcher “does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 2002, p. 39). Observations are made within the real-world setting and people are engaged in conversational interviews with open-ended questions (if needed) in places and with conditions that are comfortable to them (Patton, 2002, p. 39). Thus, according to Guba (1978), there are no constraints on the participants or on the outcomes of the research. According to Patton (2002) this allowed me to participate fully in the program without my presence being “unnatural” or “intervening” (p. 42). As a Murri researcher, I am also a participant in this story of Indigenous research (Benham, 2007).

During the time of the research, I took no assigned role within the playgroup, although I was called Aunty at times or Robyn by the mothers. I took on an informal role as a storyteller and book reader. Mothers would join me in these contexts and typically join in the activities. The mothers, like the children, completed collages and artwork activities themselves, wrote their names on damp papers, hung them out to dry and took them home “for the fridge”. My role was as one of the mob.

I was called on by the playgroup families and elders to undertake obligations. I am considered an “educated voice” and this is my role of obligation to the Aboriginal community in which I live; I continue to undertake such obligations and I did so during my involvement with the playgroup. I have acted as an advocate for children and families, including attending court and child protection meetings. I write references and statements of character for court. I understand that this is inherent in my researcher role and according to Aboriginal protocol. It is not acceptable for any researcher, Indigenous or Anglo-Celtic, not to offer their services and skills to the community in which they wish to research (NHMRC, 2003).
Gathering Storytellers from the Playgroup Community

The only criteria required to be a participant in this study was to be a member of the playgroup or be involved with the playgroup community. These participants align with Patton’s (2002) definition of “criterion sampling” (p. 39). The older generation of participants attended the playgroup infrequently because they lived in other towns or had full-time work commitments. They would attend for special events, traditional field trips and Christmas break-ups, with other community people. Most were identified by “word of mouth” by other storytellers so that they were recruited in somewhat a “snowballing” sampling strategy as described by Patton (2002, p. 194).

Originally, I planned to locate five families with extended family living nearby because I intended to interview three generations of people across the same family. I found this to be an assumed Western construct of family. While strong kinship groups were a characteristic of traditional Aboriginal families, this is not the case since colonisation. When I began to speak with the Aboriginal mothers who attended playgroup I found that very few of them knew their extended family. Instead, I located five participants from each generation within the playgroup community. As the playgroup was an Aboriginal community meeting place, many local elders connected with it.

Participation in this research was voluntary and people could opt out at any time. I had decided from the outset that I would listen to all the stories so that everyone felt that they belonged to the playgroup “family”. Aboriginality was typically assumed based on membership in the group, unless a person revealed otherwise. All mothers had similar socioeconomic circumstances in that they were welfare dependent. The non-indigenous mother, Jenny, did wish to be included as a participant. She had embraced her husband’s traditional Aboriginality in a very proactive and positive way. Her children were dark-complexioned Aboriginal children. I had not initially sought to involve a non-indigenous participant but her stories alerted me to how they represent trends in Aboriginal family demography, and experiences. After reflection, I believe Jenny’s inclusion is timely and appropriate. It aligns with the current trend toward mixed marriages or dual-culture relationships. Aboriginal people are now more likely to marry European Australians.
According to the ABS and AIHW (2005) there is one non-indigenous parent in the majority of families who identify as Aboriginal. I felt it vital that this mother be included, particularly because she expressed that she had been ignorant and unprepared for what she was to experience with her Aboriginal children.

**The storytellers**

The storytellers came from three adult generations and one child generation of Aboriginal people. Their ages ranged from 83 years to three years old. All participants are Aboriginal Australians with the exception of the one non-indigenous mother of Aboriginal children. In the parent generation, most parents had not completed high school, although several of the parents had subsequently found opportunities to access tertiary studies. In the elder and grandparent groups, there were a number of participants with higher educational qualifications, including a post-secondary school vocational certificate, a Bachelor degree, a Masters degree, and a PhD.

One young father came to playgroup, but was lost from the storytellers owing to his incarceration. It became mostly women’s space except for one grandfather. Only one mother lived with a partner. The others were single parents. One mother remained in a relationship even though her husband was incarcerated for a considerable length of time. A Murri playgroup implicitly is a place of culture and cultural belonging. All families who used the playgroup identified as Murri people or identified their children as Murri. White families with Murri children equally belong to the Murri community. At times, some non-Murri families attended the playgroup. However, non-Murri people were asked to stop coming by the Aboriginal families when issues arose.

In summary, the storytellers who contributed stories used in this project were:

- Five community elders associated with the playgroup (aged from 70 years to over 80 years);
- Four grandmothers and one grandfather of children attending the playgroup (aged from their mid-40s to 50 years);
- Five parents who included four mothers and one carer (aged from 20 to over 40 years).
As well, any children in the playgroup who wished to contribute were given the opportunity to do so by making a picture about playgroup and telling me the story of the picture. This included children who had graduated from the playgroup to school.

**The elders:** As the playgroup took on the role of an Aboriginal place within the community, elders engaged with it on a sporadic but regular basis. They were nonetheless well informed with the activities of the playgroup as community members. Their engagement was typically around reference group meetings with the school Aboriginal council and attendance for celebrations and sacred occasions. None of the elders interviewed were kin to families attending playgroup. In fact a number of elders outside this community contacted me and offered me their stories. Despite determining that I would listen to all stories offered to me, I had to decline many offers at that time, because so many people approached me to have their stories heard. This is testimony to the need to have someone “know” their story. It was an opportunity for their life to matter or be important (Lieblich, 2006).

**Grandparents and Murri mothers:** Only after speaking with the elders, did I speak to the families in the playgroup about this study. The families at playgroup tended to be the mothers or daily carers. Some of the daily carers were the grandparents of children. In some families two grandparents came along, sometimes as well as the mother and sometimes just with the child. Those who were involved in the research self-selected, but not immediately. While the families agreed to be involved, they were hesitant and at times I did wonder if I would ever gather all the stories. It was an evolutionary process informed by the families’ growing trust of me as researcher. I had one grandmother and her adult daughter in the group who told me their stories. They are Eva and Wendy.

**The fathers:** Two Indigenous fathers requested their stories be told. Both were incarcerated in Woodford Men’s Prison at some time during this study, and it became too complicated to gather their stories. The partner of one of the men expressed how important it was for her daughter to know her father, despite his incarceration, so they visited weekly. After his release he would come to playgroup but he subsequently found work and did not continue to attend. Another young incarcerated father, aged 19, was a potential participant despite being in jail. His grandmother was a respected community person and it was at her request that I
invited him and we would visit him in jail. Eventually his circumstances became too complex for him to continue in the study.

The voice of the child

Historically, the child has been much researched and yet their voices are little engaged (Kincheloe, 2005). In recent decades attention has focused on engaging marginalised voices in research including the typically silent “child voice”. Anne Lewis (2010) suggests children are constructed as “objects of concern rather than persons without a voice” (p. 14). Lewis suggests that children are silenced by the mainstream dominant view of adults as well as by the nature of the child and childhood. According to Lewis, this movement to include their voice was also “encapsulated and stimulated by Article 19 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child” (p. 14). The UNICEF children’s forum (Hart, 2009) suggests that opportunities for practice of citizenship should develop from childhood and children’s rights should recognise the children’s abilities to speak for themselves. In current child research it is generally considered important to include child voice to contribute “to knowledge about their own lives, their own space and their own childhoods” (Uprichard, 2009, p. 3). The intergenerational perspective of this thesis aligns with inclusion of children in generational research (Christensen, 2002).

In Aboriginal worldview, families view children as more independent and competent than in Western notions of childhood. Children are seen as young people, rather than living in a separate domain of childhood. Even as newborns they were traditionally considered to be born wise, yet inexperienced (Malin, 1989). In Aboriginal communities all tribal voices including the young were required. In fact, Aunty Ethel asserted in personal conversation (May 28, 2010) that it was not up to older people to speak for the children and young people. They must be asked their opinions about issues which involve them.

Storytelling is identified as important for young children’s development in that it offers a connection of the past, present and future as one of the central processes of the mind in the creation of the autobiographical form of self-awareness (Sigel et al., 1992). The telling of stories is important for children, as it is for adults. Greene and Hogan (2005) suggest telling stories allow children to make sense of their lives, just
as it does for adults. However, Lewis (2010) does suggest that there are issues which relate to engaging the voice of the child, and the contribution made by their voice or silence is unclear at this time. She suggests it is an area in need of more research.

In this study the children were asked to “talk to Robyn” by the mothers, to participate in conversations about what they thought of playgroup and what they thought school would be like. As the children were below school age, it was necessary to consider at what level the child could participate in the process of creating or constructing narrative. Their silence speaks to the culmination of the intergenerational beliefs about interacting with schools. I speak to this in the findings chapter of this thesis.

**Early in the research journey: Group narratives**

As I wrote in the beginning of this chapter, the use of narratives honours oral traditions. They are conversational and feel natural to the participants. They are empowering of the participant because the storyteller is an expert in their own life (Patton, 2002). They are also an appropriate means for gathering records from participants who may be illiterate. During playgroup sessions, group interviews were used as a way of developing trust with the participants. The Murri mothers were more relaxed during group discussions. As suggested by Patton (2002) I used group interviews over time before I re-initiated individual interviews.

The Murri mothers were more comfortable undertaking one-on-one conversations with me after we had all engaged in group discussions. Conversation-like data collection is also considered by Yin (2003) to meet the ethical demands inherent to cultural research, because it enables participants to give voice to their own concerns. This occurs as a process of two-way dialogue (Smallacombe et al., 2006), rather than by posing questions to be answered. From an Indigenous worldview this naturalistic design is important because it allowed participants the sense of cultural safety of an appropriate place and the support of their peers nearby. It also allowed me to hear and record personal stories that provided rich in-depth data.

Opportunities for individual conversations, as well as group discussions, were natural occurrences of the playgroup. Incidental conversations were recorded in field notes. Not all occasions that I spent in the playgroup were identified as “data
collection times”, but data often arose incidentally and was written up as soon as possible after the event. After some time, I could take out a notebook during yarning but not until the parents became comfortable with me doing so. At times, parents and carers would telephone me and allow me to have a follow-up conversation.

**The Process of Gathering the Stories**

Narratives or telling stories is a natural way for people to communicate, and a particular way for them to construct their reality (Bruner, 1991). Narratives are used to gather the lived experiences of Aboriginal people around their schooling experiences. The research tools, attitudes or questions should not appear judgemental or intimidating to our people. To do so, risks the participants feeling “shame” or disrespected. I know the tools of the research should be natural to our way of being and doing business, such as talking to a group, and laughing and yarning.

After making handwritten notes of the conversations, I would immediately sit in the playgroup room and fill out the fuller stories, using the notes to aid my memory. I was confident that I had the full story recorded. I would check with the Murri mother while she was still at playgroup to see if I had the meaning of the story. She could immediately clarify any points so that this was a form of member checking. Often the storyteller contributed more information to the story at this point when I sought to confirm specific points. As this was undertaken within the group, other mothers would offer anecdotes or information that I typically recorded as field notes. I found I had a much better “feel” for the stories when I gathered them with handwritten notes. At home, I typed them into Word documents. This time spent in word processing the stories made them very familiar to me. In this process, the story and the meaning of the story entered my psyche through listening, member checking, rewriting and word processing.

The inherent and inductive meanings emerged as a part of this process itself. This was an unplanned, but a significant part of the inductive meaning making. It was a process suitable for the small number of participants used. The “knowing” of the story that occurred in this close process helped me keep the project meaningful and immediate, and intimate to the process and storyteller. All written and recorded data was later destroyed in respect of their wishes. I have only kept the data that
appears within this thesis. The stories I have used were the ones the participants wanted told. Therefore, it is appropriate and respectful for the stories to be read by people engaging with this thesis.

**Member checking as healing**

Member checking is a quality control process in qualitative research whereby during the course of storytelling participants have the opportunity to revisit their stories and review accuracy (Harper & Cole, 2012). It is primarily to improve the accuracy, credibility and validity of what has been recorded during a research interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Narratives themselves are recognised within the medical and psychotherapeutic world as carrying a therapeutic or healing component (Shklarov, 2009).

Respectful listening may be seen itself as “healing justice” (McCaslin & Breton, 2008, p. 511). Linda Smith (1999) speaks of healing as an aspect of decolonisation research. She calls for “physical, spiritual, psychological, social and restorative processes” (p. 194). Smith also calls for beneficence to all involved, which also embraces this aspect of healing. I found when considering aspects of this research that member checking also may carry healing aspects. In this project I used informal member checking which suited the naturalistic process, and to ensure I had understood what was said. This process also added to the richness of the stories told. Informal member checking occurred in a number of ways. At times it occurred as part of the dialogue, when I would recall or summarise what a storyteller said at the time. As Harper and Cole (2012) suggested, it usually acted as a technique to elaborate on the original telling. This style of member checking also was used in naturally occurring group conversations.

In other situations I would bring stories back to playgroup and read them to the participants. This was always undertaken in playgroup as a natural group conversation. It acted to induce further elaboration of stories. In other situations with elders and grandparents, member checking occurred in individual but informal conversational situations. At times, this was initiated by the storyteller. An Uncle would stop me in the street or telephone me to offer me another aspect of his story that he had later recalled. Member checking did prompt further recollections and memories (Patton 2002). Member checks allowed participants to see whether a
“true” or authentic representation was made during the interviews. Member checks involved sharing all of the findings with the participants and allowing them to comment upon them.

Another important aspect of the member-checking process occurred within this storytelling context for which I was originally unprepared. I was speaking to people who I discovered suffered traumatic lives. After one of my first interviews with an elder, she told me that the process of telling her story was as good as “therapy”. Later, when I conducted group storytelling sessions at playgroup, a number of the mothers would say similar things. Additionally, they also expressed relief when they found other storytellers had similar experiences in their childhoods. Harper and Cole (2012) indicate that in research interviews, participants have the opportunities to reflect, develop self-awareness, find a voice, obtain information, and vent repressed emotions.

**Trustworthiness in Indigenist research**

Trustworthy research is the goal of all researchers. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), “terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability replace the usual criteria of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity” in qualitative research (p. 24). However, Indigenous researcher Chilisa (2011) does refer to the term “validity” in her own reflexive Indigenous research that is informed by both Western and Indigenous designs. Validity within qualitative research calls for more than answering questions.

Guba and Lincoln (2005) suggest that research needs to be “sufficiently authentic” (p. 205). The findings need to relate to how others construct their social worlds. Richardson (2000) argues that postmodern theorists suggest that no method can deliver an ultimate truth. However, some methods, like narrative, are more suited than others to conducting research on human construction of social realities (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). In his discussion of narratives, Jerome Bruner (1987, 1991) argued that narratives told the stories in ways that quantitative research could not, as narratives did allow the construction of the social reality of others. Chilisa (2011) also calls for fairness: “Fairness is balance in that all storytellers’ stories are told and voices heard. To not do so, would be to silence the Indigene once more” (p. 5).
A saturation point is reached when the same or similar themes continue to occur. Qualitative researchers consider this concept to be *redundancy* (Patton, 2002). When this occurs the researcher may reasonably assume that inducting more participants into the sample would be unlikely to reveal new data. In the case of this study, every story does describe unique situations but similar themes do tend to emerge within different stories and different contexts.

**Analysis of the narratives**

Owing to the nature of individual stories, and the complexity of the intergenerational process I have used, there are many challenges to consider in the interpretation of my research. While story technique is an Indigenist technique (Archibald, 2008), it is also an expanding area of qualitative research across the social science spectrum as a way to collect deep and rich data (Lieblich et al., 1998). However, there is less attention paid to how Indigenist narratives are best analysed. Considering the tone of the stories, I feared that there was a risk of trivialising the experiences or being impersonal which can occur through quantitative categorisation of themes (Glaser, 1978, p. 4). Lieblich et al. (1998) argue that interpretation cannot be taught, “... but relies on talent, intuition or experience and defies clear order and systematisation” (p. 2).

In determining how best to interpret these stories I considered how intergenerational stories were analysed in the past. An intergenerational study of the effects of forced separation on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children was undertaken as part of the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey by Silburn et al. (2006). They relied on regression analysis even with the small demographic of the Indigenous population of Australia. Qualitative analysis of intergenerational life story narrative studies is used less often, possibly because of the complexity and amount of the data and nature of stories.

In Canada, a narrative study by Svetlana Shklarov (2009) considered the narratives of Jewish children who survived the Holocaust using a combination of grounded theory (Glaser, 1978) and narrative analysis as described by Lieblich et al. (1998) and Riessman (2002). Grounded theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) was considered for this study, but I was reticent to use a process which deconstructed text.
and meaning as it worked in direct opposition to Aboriginal ways of connecting all knowledge holistically to everything else. All is interrelated in our worldview.

My dilemma is that analysis processes are by nature Western. Indigenous knowledge is interrelated and holistic, not refined into smaller threads of knowledge and meaning. Lieblich (2006) found use of creative storytelling and performance of family narratives another important way to transform data for meaning. Interpretation dilemmas are most recently addressed by creative performances (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008). These are an aspect of new ways of working with narratives in mainstream as well as Indigenist research. Performance, storytelling, poetry, film, plays, and creative fiction and nonfiction are ways in which narrative findings are being interpreted in qualitative Western as well as Indigenous projects, rather than Western dissections (Clandinin 2007; Denzin et al., 2008; Lieblich, 2006). For instance, Lieblich (2006) wrote of her “new family” narrative which was at first a study, then a book and finally a play. Each conception offered new spaces for hearing the voice of the storytellers, and new audiences the opportunity to make meaning of the stories. Internationally, Indigenist researchers are choosing performance as a way to interpret the meaning of their stories (Denzin et al., 2008). I believe my stories as new resources may be interpreted in performance or teaching spaces in the future.

**Emerging themes across stories**

As Indigenous researchers our aim, I believe, is to tell the stories, break the silence and, by speaking the identity, reveal we are better known as human beings. We cannot remain essentialised, marginalised and story-less others. I moved further away from Western ideas when I began to transcribe and read the narratives and become more informed about Indigenous narratives (Archibald, 2008; Martin, 2008). My emotional response to the stories was meaning making itself. I was impressed at how focused the stories were, as if they had long been told and rehearsed within the inner world of my storytellers. I recognised that the stories were teachers. I decided that I would follow Cree storywork as described by Archibald (2008). She suggested that the stories be gathered, as they are in this thesis, as new teaching stories. As such, these stories are creating cultural resources for this time. This is traditionally how Aboriginal societies used and collected their stories across time.
I decided it would also be worthwhile to identify core categories or themes (Lieblich et al., 1998) which emerged within generational contexts to see if these recurred in later generations. Such foci emerged from detailed readings of the text. They are often identified by the space devoted to them in the text, details, or omissions on some aspects of the story. However, I found that the foci emerged naturally and did not require reductionist techniques. The recurrent major themes were apparent, based on reading the stories. This technique was used in each story, each generation, and finally across all stories. The naturally emergent themes were:

- colonial impositions (trauma);
- lack of culture or cultural identity (culture strong); and
- othering and racism.

I looked specifically for ideas about the value of education. I used the full stories and field notes to weave meanings from fragments as proposed by Benham (2007). The stories give voice to the traumatic experiences of the storytellers’ childhoods. Their schooling was not in isolation from other events in their lives and their lived experiences.

**Conclusions**

The design of this research is an Indigenous ethnography using oral narrative techniques to gather stories across three generations of adult storytellers. It is informed by qualitative research designs as well as Indigenous storytelling. It relied on co-design of the process and practice around gathering these stories. I used personal and group narratives to naturally engage the storytellers in the research. After initial group narratives with the playgroup community storytellers, I spoke individually with the Murri Mum storytellers. I gathered handwritten notes of their stories about their schooling experiences.

Elder and grandparent stories were gathered first as I found the young families were reluctant to reveal their inner lives. However, by collaborative design processes and taking time the participants assumed ownership of this project. I honoured their requests in how I conducted the research. I believe the quality of the stories speaks to a successful process. This data would not have been gathered without the input of the Murri mothers.
Because the stories are so powerful I decided it was important to report the full narratives. These were gathered as new teaching stories and considered for core themes which were common across generations. The whole narratives are teaching stories to inform other Indigenous families as well as mainstream readers about Indigenous Australian experience and life. Common emergent themes were then coded from the narratives and are reported for each generation. In the following chapters, I present the stories and consider the commonalities in the stories, within and between the generations.
Chapter 5: Yimbanyiari – Listening to the Old People

Introduction

In this chapter we hear the stories of the elders. The stories present the lived reality of the five storytellers. The elders play a unique role in ways of knowing for Indigenous people. They allow the listener, for a moment in time, to have access to the thoughts and feelings of the storyteller. These stories speak to mission schools, Yumba schools, and town schools. The stories speak to the practices of annihilation of traditional culture.

One of the storytellers speaks of her need to become white, essentially walking away from her culture. Another storyteller speaks to a life spent in hiding, “passing” as white. In all of these stories, the Australian mainstream offers no resistance to inhumane Aboriginal treatment. The most grounded storyteller is the one who lives with her culture and manages to live within culture and the modern world. Her story is testimony to how colonisation could have afforded more respect to the traditional owners.

In this chapter, five elders speak to their lives in Queensland from around 1930 to 1950. Not all of the storytellers hold the community role of elder. Their stories speak to their status. These stories are testimony to the elders’ life experiences of school. All of the stories speak to challenging family and life circumstances because of colonisation policies and practices. Such stories become the teaching stories for the generations who follow. These elders, as children, were victims of inhumane and cruel practices; yet each one speaks of childhood from the distance of a life well lived despite childhood adversity.

The Story Context

We sat informally with a cup of tea outside of playgroup to chat. I allowed the issues relevant to the elders to emerge from the stories themselves. I said to the elders, “I would like you to tell me about your own schooling experiences, and what your ideas are about school and is it valuable to our children”. Typically, the elders would laugh or shake their head as if in disbelief at their recollections. The passage
of time from their childhood has given them space to contemplate their experiences of injustice. They spoke of their stories with a tone of, “Can you believe this?” There was more passive acceptance than anger in their voices.

All of the storytellers speak to educational disadvantage by being constructed by teachers as less capable or intelligent than their white peers, even when their school marks were good. Teachers hold low expectations of our children. Racism features in all of the stories, be it from school, teachers or classmates. While one story speaks to the inhumanity of a mission school, another speaks to the need to live in hiding to avoid the difficulties assigned to life as an Aboriginal. One story speaks to an Aboriginal woman constructing herself as “as good as white”, in order to assume a professional identity. Another speaks to life in a fringe camp school; and another story to life in a city school. All of these stories speak to the need to survive, be it through resistance, resilience or denial of Aboriginality.

The Elder Storytellers

The elders are Aboriginal people from a number of Queensland tribal groups with connections to community. Their birth years range from 1920 to 1940. Five very different stories are told. The first story is from a proud and highly regarded elder who is active in his community and is involved in traditional openings and storytelling. Four elders were keenly interested in participation and spoke candidly and openly about their experiences. The final story is told by an elder raised in hiding and passing as non-indigenous. While she agreed that she wanted to tell her story, a lifetime of subterfuge made it hard to speak. I did offer a number of questions and words of support to elicit her story, whereas the other four elders offered lengthy monologues. The stories have been reduced for presentation in this document because of word count considerations. I have edited them to hold descriptions of their context and to include all their comments about schooling and education.

Uncle Henry

Uncle Henry is an Aboriginal elder who is well known and highly regarded in Aboriginal and mainstream communities. He holds voluntary positions and works with schools telling his stories about his life especially his schooling years on a mission. He is currently 75 and suffers with diabetes. He was forcibly removed with
his family from traditional country from the mid-west of Queensland to Cherbourg. He is actively involved in education issues and youth justice.

**Aunty May**

Aunty May is from western Queensland. She is 82. She was “raised up” by her own parents in Aboriginal camps alongside rivers in western Queensland. She raised eleven children, four of whom were her biological children. She actively participates in her community on Aboriginal health matters. She advocates for, and has introduced, an Aboriginal language program into several schools. She works in a voluntary capacity with a number of parenting programs around health and nutrition issues. She is a strong no-nonsense and straight-spoken Aboriginal woman. She is custodian to her tribal knowledge and language. She divides her time and life across the year between family on the coast and other family members living in a small western town on her traditional lands.

**Aunty Daisy**

Aunty Daisy is 65 years old. She is a traditional owner of this research community. She is seriously ill with heart problems, diabetes and kidney disease. She trained as a nurse when she was a young woman. She worked in health and other community positions in Brisbane until illness in her fifties caused her to retire. Even in poor health, she was involved full-time in Indigenous causes. Aunty Daisy contributes to a number of health and education reference groups including a local education reference committee that offers advice to the playgroup. A number of playgroup families visit her at home since she no longer comes out. She is an attentive elder who loves “the bubs”. In the last year, her ill health caused her to withdraw from most of her community activities.

**Edna**

Edna is 80 and a retired academic who holds a PhD in anthropology. She has retired to this country for the same reasons other people are attracted to the Sunshine Coast region. She is a Koori woman from Victoria but does not identify as such or identify with her tribe. She was educated in a teacher training college before undertaking graduate studies. As an Aboriginal woman and one of a handful of Indigenous teachers in Australia she was told when she was hired as a teacher that she could only teach in Aboriginal communities.
While I was aware of her presence in the community through academic networks, she is unknown to the mainstream community. It took me a number of phone calls to locate her. She was invaluable in assisting me with a number of procedural and business matters to establish the playgroup. She was happy to be of service but I must say from an academic or business position. She was not interested in the community or the playgroup for its social aspects. Eddie, as she is called, has long ago distanced herself from tribal people and old ways. She refuses to be addressed as “Aunty” even in Aboriginal contexts. When I heard her story she did tell me she would like to be involved with the Aboriginal community but she has not done so. When I asked her if she missed her professional life she said, “I miss being important for something”. I believe her words were more than retirement regret. I believe they underpin her self-construction of Aboriginal people as not being considered of value in their own country.

**Patricia**

Patricia is 81 years old. She is the daughter of a stolen child and one of ten children. Her mother, Mary, was removed from a town in western Queensland. As an adult, Mary and her husband assumed an Italian identity in order to pass as non-Aboriginal. They raised their children in hiding, teaching them to conceal their Aboriginality by not revealing anything about themselves to outsiders. I identified with this story as it was similar to my own childhood family situation. Patricia married a fair-skinned Englishman and had three children. She did not tell her children about their Aboriginality and continued to live her Italian persona. Some of Patricia’s siblings continued to “pass” while others lived openly as Aboriginal people. She worked as a waitress in an Italian café, and talked of Italy as if it was her homeland. She specialised in cooking Italian dishes and desserts at home. She did not tell her children of their Aboriginal heritage and refused to associate with Aboriginal people even with her extended family. As an older woman, Patricia refused to acknowledge her Aboriginality and was deeply upset that her children have done so. Her three daughters work in Aboriginal helping professions. Within the last two years she has more openly identified at her children’s urging but continues to be hesitant in doing so. She looks like an Aboriginal woman and is called Aunty by the community in a way that is respectful of her old age but she does not participate as an elder.
The First Storyteller: Uncle Henry

Uncle Henry is a Bungulla man from his tribal lands in western Queensland. His sacred sites are the Carnarvon Ranges, which are also sacred to many other western Queensland tribes. His family was forcibly removed to Barambah Reserve or Mission in the 1900s. It was state-run by the Queensland Government, although many missions were run by church organisations. This mission is now a community town called Cherbourg. Uncle Henry lived on the reserve with his parents although it was common practice for families to be separated into gender and age dormitories. Children were regularly removed from parents and raised in dormitories. Henry attended mission school for the four years of education that Aboriginal children received. At 14 years, he illegally walked off the mission to return to country. When I asked him how he avoided capture, he pointed to his light olive complexion. He passed as white to elude capture.

Today, Uncle Henry is a respected elder, traditional teacher and proud Aboriginal man. He takes his elder status as an extremely important responsibility and obligation. He epitomises an Aboriginal elder to all people, both Aboriginal and Anglo-Celtic. I can envisage him in earlier times holding tribal council with wisdom and honour. His story is characterised by the hardships of mission life where there was little food, kindness or medical attention. He also speaks to the abuse, cruelty and inhumanity that he suffered. There were no expectations of achievement at school, rather he speaks to how his school humiliated him and taught him that his Aboriginal ways were to be despised. Nonetheless, his parents and siblings maintained cultural and personal resilience. He held to the family connection and to his cultural beliefs and ways. He had cultural resilience because he lived with his family and cultural teachers.

In his story, Uncle Henry speaks to life in a mission school as a young boy. He was forcibly removed with his family from his traditional lands. At school, he was humiliated by the teachers as they used schooling to justify inhumane treatment. His schooling was a colonising experience. Nonetheless, he emerged and survived to advocate for Aboriginal families and their children, supporting and encouraging their children’s education. He sees education as the one tool that will give opportunity to Indigenous youth. Education has been the key focus in his and his family’s life. In
his time, the goal of education was to provide a basic education to the Aboriginal population for their employment in labouring or domestic duties.

**A mission education**

I was a victim of forcible removal. We were moved from our country and where we belonged and sent to the mission. We lived on Barambah Mission. That is where I went to school. You only went to school until Grade 4. It was a basic education only so we could be labourers or domestics for the girls. I lived with my family, though plenty of kids didn’t. They lived in the dormitories and their families were who knows where. My mother wanted me to go to school so I could write a letter. She valued it so much because she could not read or write. She wanted me to write, so I could write her letters. She dictated her letters and I was just a kid printing out the words. She valued communication. Her kids had been taken and were all over the state and it was the way she could keep in touch with them. Keep them in her life. Dad was self-taught. He could only write his name. If you couldn’t write your name, it was a thumb print you used for a signature. It was a point of pride to write your name.

The teachers were cruel to us. We were treated as despicable human beings even as kids and taught to be filthy and despise our culture. I called my school days truly awful days and I won’t forget them ever. Talk about being degraded day in and day out. No wonder many Aboriginal people feel worthless. You were told repeatedly you were never good enough. You were never as good as the white people and never would be. They told us we were slow learners and we were filthy. They told us we belonged to the filthiest race on earth. It was the filthiest culture and we should just go away and forget about it. Just hurry up and die out. They shamed us about our own old people and culture. They said, “Oh your people, naked men and women would just jump around nude and say that was dancing. That is your culture.” They shamed us from wanting anything to do with our culture.
Filthy! We wrote on slates in those days. We had to lick our slates clean or spit on them. There was no wet rag or sponge to wash them. We’d have a different slate every day and they smelt disgusting in summer. Tuberculosis was rife on the mission and you’d get put in the infirmary. The kids got it too. There was no hygiene with those slates and we knew it. They taught us to be filthy. But we never missed school.

The teachers constantly degraded us. Humiliated us until we cried and if we didn’t cry, they would belt into us. We never expected any kindness. If you were not suffering or living in misery it was not a normal day. There were never enough supplies or food in camp. We all just went hungry and survived as best we could. We were really punished heavily. The teachers could really lose it. They’d take off their shoes and belt you anywhere, even around the head. There was physical punishment that was cruel. We’d get bent over the table, the girls too. Just little girls in their dresses, and belted with belts, or canes or whips. They’d hit us until there were welts on us. And there was nothing our parents could do about it. We would go home and our parents would see the welts but they couldn’t go up to the school or challenge authority. You couldn’t challenge white authority. They’d end up with incarceration time if they did. All they taught us was how to read and write and how Captain Cook discovered Australia. We were taught to read by repetition of poems. Like London Bridge is falling down. We had no idea what London Bridge was but we said the poems and read the cards with them, over and over again. There were no tests for us. The teacher didn’t care if we were reading or learning anything. We just stayed there till 4th grade and then we were finished with school. We were only supposed to be educated enough for labouring work. About 11, you got sent out to work. By 14, I took off and walked home to my country. We were taught in these big halls with all the classes in together. It was really loud, noisy. All the teachers would have their class in the hall. The teachers didn’t care if another teacher was punishing a kid, being cruel to us. It was just business as usual. No one ever stepped up to help you. I got just a minimum of literacy, just a little bit. But I kept learning later. I learned by observation and I listened
a lot to our elders and white elders. I wanted to know what they knew too.

My mother and father spoke language at home but you were punished for not speaking English. We were taught to be so ashamed of our languages that we did not speak it anyway. The teachers told us it was “gibber gibber”, and as filthy and dumb as the rest of our culture. I remember my father talking about ceremony. My father told me about the last women’s business ceremony. He was just a little fellow, a toddler. His mother had him on her shoulders and all the women were dancing in the middle. They had eagle feathers and a woman came up and touched him on the head with it. It was a ceremony to arrange marriages. He was promised to that woman’s first girl child and she was not born yet. That woman was my mother. They were married for 60 years.

If you were not suffering it was not a normal day. We have endured this and it is our strength today but our youth don’t know that. My mother was illiterate, dirt poor, but strong. One day we will get out of these third world conditions and have the same lifestyle and opportunity as other Australians. Education is the thing that can level the playing field. Our kids have the same dreams and aspirations as white children in schools. I’ve had a successful life despite what they tried to do to me. I achieved a lot of things. I became a published author of two books. I’ve educated my family. They all went to university and some of them have done doctorates. Times have changed; you can do these things now. I sit on the Murri court now and I ask the youth who come before me: “Who are you?” “Who’s your mob?” “What are the family names?” I can usually work it out when I hear the names and you know what country those names belong to. But they don’t know who they are. They have no idea about their culture. They have no sense of identity or belonging to a mob. They are completely illiterate as to their clan groups and forefathers. They are interested. You see it when you start to talk to them about it but they have no idea and no connection to their culture and clans.
Insights on Uncle Henry’s story

There are many insights offered in Uncle’s story, and I cannot speak to all of them in this document, but I do know that Uncle internalised the teachings of that school for a long time. He was humiliated about his culture by the teaching, but importantly he knows those teachers and colonisation processes were unjust and wrong. Uncle tells his story simply and mostly chronologically in the narrative voice of an accomplished storyteller. In my early reading of Uncle’s story I reacted to him calling himself “a victim” and the helplessness, disempowerment, suffering and survival that are justifiably common to stories of “mission-bred” Aboriginal people.

Yet, as I reconsidered his story I found it carries no sense of being a victim, despite his description of his helplessness and suffering on the mission. It also carries no assignment of blame which I find generous. Perhaps it speaks to his ability to forgive for the healing it offered him. When Uncle speaks at conferences, he introduces who he is, where he is from and then says “I was forcibly removed”, just as he says in this story. The tearing words, “forcible removal” establish the loss of self-determination, natural justice and human rights of a conquered people.

The traumatic removal from his country and home could be the defining experiences of his life. But while these experiences define his early circumstances, they do not limit who he is. He is a man who is self-identified by his success in life. It is where his life and story start and this is where it ends in his eldership and old age with the distant lens. I could not differentiate Henry from his story as he continues to live the story as an elder, wise and a testimony to his own ability to endure, survive and offer a living illustration. He loved telling his story and told me he has written his autobiography.

In my later readings, I saw that he asserts more than a life story of hope. His story is an example of how life can be well lived despite what happened historically. It is constructed from his perspective as a heroic story that is a cultural teaching story. He was one of the “strong ones” and this is the major script that defines his life. As a child he is already courageous. His story begins with his childhood trauma, as he speaks to how it began in demeaning hardship, and ends with him being respected and invited to an important party given by a government official. His “head
held high” is an important theme in this story that says, “I never surrendered my dignity”.

While Henry sees the vindictive punishment that he experienced at school as unjust, it did not destroy his sense of himself or the valuing of his Aboriginal identity over time. He says that he felt humiliated by the teachers telling him that he and his culture were worthless. He had a strong sense of identity by knowing his homeland, his family and his lore. Away from the mission, he was able to maintain his sense of identity and a valuing of his culture. By his eldership today, he assumes the obligation of a cultural knowledge keeper. He is the person who must preserve and cherish the memories and lessons of the past, along with the knowledge about the communal values that gave his people the strength to survive and cope. Thus, it is so important to tell his story. He holds testimony to what it was like to be torn from country and “missionised”. *You can still make a good life* is the undercurrent of this story.

Henry speaks of schooling with strong, negative words like *horrible, truly awful, abusive, punishment*, and *suffering*. Aboriginal author Aunty Ruth Hegarty (1999) speaks of this too in her book on schooling on the Cherbourg Mission where she was whipped with a cat-o’-nine-tails. Henry’s schooling story is about blatant cultural genocide and inhumanity, which would be unknown to the mainstream at the time as the mission was located away from other towns and the line of common vision. He does not speak of what he learned other than the nursery rhymes and white history of the discovery of Australia. He certainly abhorred his mother’s suffering and his helplessness to assist her. As a little boy he did what he could by printing out her letters in his child’s script. It is a telling image.

Uncle Henry knows his land, and eventually walks away from the mission to go to “back to country” where he belongs. He has an Aboriginal understanding of the importance of cultural belonging and knowing who you are. He holds great pride in his culture, and the amount of time he spends in schools and at meetings speaking about his culture attests to its importance. In fact he does hold a sense of his cultural maintenance (Halloran, 2004) in that he lived with his own parents as cultural teachers. He says this is what he asks the young men who come before him in Murri court. He has also told me in conversation he has taken car loads of such boys out
west to show them their sacred country and where they come from and speaks to them about their lore.

Uncle Henry speaks of his schooling as “absolutely awful”, yet at times he speaks of it as if it happened to someone else. He had finished school by the time he was 11 years old, so the punishment of being hit around the head with a shoe or the little girls being whipped on the legs with a strap are moments in which he is emotional. While he has endured his own suffering he does not mention the times he was whipped or hit. He bears witness to it occurring to helpless little girls. He does not speak directly to the reason for this treatment, but at some level he has internalised the teachers’ messages of the “shame of being an Aboriginal”.

It is also evident in his story when he speaks of the hardworking mother desperate for her child to write so she can write to her family. While the family attempts to cling to their family and culture, he faces humiliation at school for his Aboriginality. Although he has constructed his heroic story, he is not well lately with depression. I cannot help but wonder if the trauma of that early life can wait in you for the time when the strength and courage to push forward lessens and post-traumatic depression grabs hold.

The Second Storyteller: Aunty May

Aunty May is a Gungarri woman from south-west Queensland. She is in her mid-eighties and lives with a carer. She lived most of her married life in a country town that is her husband’s traditional homeland. It is an adjoining homeland to her traditional lands. At the time of the interview, she lived between her home out west and the Sunshine Coast where her family is located. She made significant contributions to shaping the playgroup and the parenting program to incorporate culturally appropriate practices.

Her interests are around language education, native title, and leadership. Until recently she taught in parenting programs for young mothers with babies. She had much to offer as a volunteer teacher in the early days of the playgroup but age has seen her cutting back on her involvement now. She says she is proud of her children but very, very proud of the grandchildren, in part, because they have all undertaken tertiary education. I sense by the amount of “teaching projects” she takes on she
would like to have studied to be a teacher, although the opportunity did not present itself to a rural Aboriginal girl in her younger years.

Aunty May attended two different schools as a child which allows her to compare the everyday school life of the Aboriginal camp school with a mainstream country town school. In the camp school, she was not in a marginalised position, and says school was a joy. It is the only expression of happiness around school in all fifteen of the adult storytellers’ testimonies. However, she finds even there she suffered a “dumbed down” education. In the state school she attended in a larger town, she speaks of how she strategised to become invisible in the classroom to get her education.

Despite May always coming top or near top of the class, the teacher offered her neither praise nor notice. Low expectations were assigned to her by the teacher. She loves learning as she is a curious and intelligent person. No opportunities were extended to her as she was constructed as deficit by the teacher and the broader social context. However, at that time (1940s), it was common for children to leave school after the scholarship exam and take a job, so she had the same level of schooling as other Queensland children. Later, in her fifties, she studied political science at university because she claimed she “did not know what they [politicians] were on about”. It occurs to me that this is an example of an Indigenous view of knowledge. It is acquired when it is needed.

As a child she was exempt from removal because her father was contracted to a cattle station. The local policeman in his role as “Protector of Aboriginal Children” came to view their situation after the sudden death of her grandmother. He wrote in his report that he considered the children well looked after by their father, the house was clean, and the children attended school regularly as well as working on the property.

A rural education

_The teachers seemed to equate our skin colour to our intelligence. If you were dark they considered us too dumb to learn and just didn’t bother with us at all. I spent most of my time standing in the corner, if I was causing the trouble or not. I learned to just sit there (in the classroom)_
and not to be noticed. That way you got the lessons and you didn’t get into trouble.

Even when I was a child growing up, there were already fair-skinned grandmothers. Who we are is about our culture not our skin colour. A lot of people don’t get that. But I’m black from the inside out. We are all liquorice allsorts at this time. I raised 11 children. Not all my own. No. None of them married Aboriginal people. It’s better if they marry white because we don’t know who is who anymore. You could end up marrying your own cousin (if you’re Aboriginal). We don’t know the families or the skin colours anymore, so many were taken and don’t know who they are. So to be careful we tend to marry white.

In school the teachers didn’t call on you they just ignored you. I always came within the first three of the class but it didn’t matter because the teacher had no expectations of us to do anything. I suppose it was right too because after scholarship I went down to the hotel and got a job as a laundry maid. No teachers ever gave you a word of encouragement. I had one [teacher] and she was not as awful as the others. She was kinder but for the most part they were dreadful to us. If one of the parents went up to the school it was my mother. She was an Aboriginal woman but she was fair-skinned. She was always immaculately dressed, all ironed up.

The racism was just awful. It was what they said to you. Those scars I will take to the grave. It was constant. You were treated by the teachers like you were worthless. My kids had to deal with it too (racism). It was terrible in the state primary school and it still existed when we took them to boarding school in Brisbane. The boarding schools had ways to deal with it so it wasn’t as tolerated but you can never get away from it. It’s not so bad now for the grandkids and my great grandkids are in school now. You just had to take it and I had to tell the kids to take it, or not go to school.

My youngest brother wouldn’t go to school because of how they treated him. You couldn’t blame him. My older brother wouldn’t go either. He’d wag school because it was so awful. The best school we went to was the one in Mitchell. It was the (Aboriginal) school outside of town near the
Yumba on the creek. We all (the Aboriginal people) lived on the Yumba. They didn’t want us in the town yet lots of the kids running around on the Yumba were white kids. You had to hide your kids, but they would get them anytime anywhere. The school was a one-room school and a one-teacher school. Every face in the school was black except for the teacher. She was white. It wasn’t so bad there, in fact, it was a pleasure to go to school.

There was no racism there so you didn’t have to worry about being called names. It should have been like that everywhere. There is only one race on earth, the human race. We didn’t learn too much when I think about it, the curriculum was really non-existent. We were just kept busy and taught a few basics. When we moved back into town I was not up to standard for the scholarship class at high school.

I credit my success with good parents. They taught us that no one was better than us. They might be as good as us but no one was better even if they had white skin. Dad would say, “There is no bugger better than us.” And he was not a man who ever swore. He knew the old ways, about the spirit and ceremonies and elder councils. It’s all gone now and we don’t even have the language to do the ceremonies. You go to smoke places still; they can stir up things (the spirit). You know my mother and grandmother spoke language at home. I was taught to be ashamed of it at school. We couldn’t speak it or you’d be punished. You had to speak English. Too bad if you couldn’t.

Didi (my mother) and Granny both spoke language like we are speaking English now. They spoke it until the day they died. People hereabouts say they have the language and a lot of people have some words. What they don’t have is the way it goes together, links up, like the grammar and tenses. I have tapes of my mother speaking language and the state library copied them. You’ve got to start with the inside to educate our kids. You got to hold the parents accountable. You got to get the head right, the self-esteem, the confidence, the knowledge about education. You got to get them to have the right values and beliefs.
It’s the parents you’ve got to work on so they know why it is so important to take care of their kids and send them to school. You can’t tell anyone how to raise their kids but you got to let them know they have to value education and why. We’ve got to raise our kids with love, support and courage. Our parents can’t balk at the first hurdle or at the racism they cop. Mum and Dad have to take ownership of the education and realise this is important. Then you get the family support structure built in around the child. Blackfellas can be their own worst enemy. The parents have got to be involved. They’ve got to get those kids to school, make them lunch, do their work. They have to value school. The parents have to value school and teach the kids to value school. And if there is racism, they’ve got to get the school to nip it in the bud. The kids have got to have courage and go to school anyway. It’s courage they need. Things will change, but you got to get the education to change them. They’ve got to put shame aside and be proud.

Insights on Aunty May’s story

Aunty May’s story speaks to her intelligence, insight, wit and awareness. She refuses to believe she is less worthy than any other person of any colour despite what experiences she has endured in school. Her resilience is due to her strong sense of identity and self-worth. She is a child who has grown up with her family and her cultural teachers. Her awful experiences of racism at school have scarred her “to the grave”, but she does not dwell upon it or give examples of it in her story. Nor does she assume she is a victim. Instead, she pragmatically gets on with the job at hand. She is a woman with a vision that she is just as good as anyone else who she has met. She refuses to accept the negative messages given to Aboriginal people.

There is an innate sense of dignity in the way she tells her story, just as there is in her being. This was also evident in how Uncle Henry was in the world and when he spoke. Both are offended as the lack of respect for Aboriginal kids at school and object to their treatment at school. These are attributes of traditional eldership. May has assumed her role as tribal elder, wise woman and leader. Her lifetime has been spent traditionally but within contemporary contexts. It occurred to me that her strong sense of self-identity is authentically Aboriginal. She knows her culture and
her interconnected place in the world. Colonisation has affected her in many ways but this has not disrupted her as fully as many other Aboriginal people who speak with such stories.

She holds her sense of cultural maintenance through knowing her stories and traditions. Her family is known to her for the most part, as are their stories. She could speak to her great grandparent which is not the case with most Aboriginal people. The stories of the younger generations attest to this. She is a tribal woman who has grown up with her tribe on their own lands. Her sense of identity is legitimately two-way because she knows what it means to be Aboriginal as well as how to function in the mainstream world. The stories about her daughters and grandchildren, trace a chain of intergenerational connections that connect the family as her extended network of kin back to her country. She is always ready to take up, offer love, care and education to a child if it is hers or not. She is mother to all children. She lives as an example of what Aboriginal people could be had they not endured the processes of traumatic colonisation.

Aunty May attributes her success to her parents. I found this interesting because she is so self-motivated and disciplined that she could well have attributed it to herself, yet she honours traditional ancestor context. However, it speaks to the presence of her parents in her life and being raised with a loving home base as well as the maintenance of culture. She is spared the trauma of forcible removal or being a stolen child. She has grown up learning from her traditional cultural teachers. It speaks to the values and belief in herself that her parents have taught her.

Her parents have sent her to a school that makes her days challenging. She has been strategic even as a child in that she worked out how to not be noticed within the classroom context. She speaks to how happy school was at the Aboriginal school but realises she was not challenged academically. This speaks to the experience of marginality and racism that Aboriginal children still endure in mainstream schools. She regrets her potential that was not met as teachers assigned her low expectations. She aptly recognises that the teachers equated intelligence with skin colour. The social construction of intellectual inferior annoys her because she knows that she was an intelligent child.

Many Aboriginal children do not have her resilience and accept the messages conveyed by teachers that they are of less value and ability than white children. In
the next story, Daisy expresses this same disappointment. The sense of “know your place and keep to it” applies. Yet, May recognised her real educators were her parents and tribal teachers who instilled strong values in her. It is nonetheless a powerful telling that speaks to strong moral character and integrity. She is a woman who does not wear excuses when there is work to be done.

Aunty May calls for young Aboriginal parents to be accountable in their care and parenting of their children. She is calling on them to be responsible for their families just as she was. She presented parenting programs to families in her town well into her seventies. She has raised children by calling on them to value education and live with good character. She demands other parents do this too. This is an example of teaching from a tribal elder. Her eldership, and her leadership by example, gives her the right to make such demands of young parents. In a tribal group, all members have obligations and responsibilities to each other. Her straightforward way of teaching may not be acceptable in any mainstream parent context, but it would not be inappropriate in cultural contexts.

She feels it is too easy for schools to blame the children and parents. Her call for responsibility from the parents is timely. Change is needed for Aboriginal children in schools, and it seems schools cannot transform themselves with top-down policy. People are developing the capacity to create such change themselves. Often they need to assume power by using it. Change needs to originate with the parents. Aunty May calls on them to stand up with courage for their children. She calls for strong leadership to empower Aboriginal people as agents of change. However, if they take on their responsibilities then they can hold the schools accountable. She calls for change “from the inside out”. She means this, she told me, for every aspect of character and responsibility. It is not a deficit view of parents, rather it is one to take back leadership of our families and children and reduce the government involvement in Aboriginal lives. She understands that it is partnerships of parents and schools that will lead to good outcomes for Aboriginal children. Most of all she calls for courage. She implies it is courage that has directed her success in life. This is what her parents gave her along with her values and cultural teaching. She lives with courage every day from the “inside out”.

I believe what I take most from her is that, no matter what has caused the current poor position of Aboriginal education and achievement, step up and get on
with it. She lectures the families the same way. She is practical: take your own power and make the difference in your children’s lives. This is a teaching story I shared at playgroup. The mothers considered it at length.

The Third Storyteller: Aunty Daisy

Aunty Daisy is the traditional owner of the country where this research is located. She takes great joy in coming to playgroup and seeing the “bubs”. She is a small, wiry Aboriginal woman with quick, intelligent eyes and with deep insight into all Aboriginal matters. Her family and people have lived in this (Undumbi) country since the first morning. Her parents were traditional owners just as her grandparents were and all her lineage before her. As a child she learned to catch fish the “Aboriginal way” with her father and grandfather. They were fishermen. She lived in Caloundra where the north end of Bribie Island creates Pumicestone Passage.

As a little girl her father taught her to swim across the passage to Bribie Island to hide and avoid being removed as a child. Her life is not framed in the Aboriginal cultural context. She says her parents thought they were old ways and not relevant to the new times in Australia. Instead, her life is shaped by the need to survive and to be courageous. She was prepared to be these things and work for her education. Nonetheless, she has an innate sense of her eldership and power within the community.

Daisy attended school in Caloundra and Brisbane. She left school as soon as she could because of the racism she endured there. She continued to study for her Junior Certificate at night while working at a pineapple cannery in the daytime. Her dream was to be a registered nurse. She told me her story during our road trips to visit her jailed grandson. Her story speaks of disheartening times for her; she says she always felt like a “second-class citizen”. She speaks to how schools continue to make Aboriginal children feel excluded.

A fringe dweller – the dump Yumba

I am an elder of this community, not just because I am old, but because the community accepts me as the traditional owner and show me the honour of calling me Aunty. I have worked for my community all of my
life. My father was an elder too and we always lived here. Our people lived here on the coast since the beginning. We were fisher people and our food came from the ocean. We grew up here and it was Undumbi country always, and now they say it is Gubi Gubi country because that is what is written on a map. I never heard of Gubi Gubi in this part. They were up north more and a bit inland. Or maybe they were a family group, but this is Undumbi country. It means saltwater. I lived with my mum and dad and my three brothers. We all lived at Caloundra. We had a tin shed near the garbage dump. Other Murri families camped on the garbage dump. You lived on the dump or in the cemetery or by the river bank otherwise the whitefella hassled you and the bully men (police) ran you off.

We only had a shack with dirt floors but my mother kept it immaculate. She also made sure we went to school and did our homework. My father was a fisherman and so was my grandfather and so were all the men in my family since the beginning. I learned to fish too, Aboriginal way. They would take me along fishing and I learned to fish with them as their little helper. My father taught me and my brothers to swim across the passage to Bribie. We would swim over there and wait there for him to come to get us in the boat. Sometimes we would stay over there fishing and would camp on the beach for days if the government people were around looking for kids. We’d catch fish to eat, and wait till it was safe to go home. Dad would come over in his little boat to get us. It was just part of your life. All the families were like that, trying to hide their kids.

My father got a job with the postal services. They laid telephone lines and he must have been pretty good because they gave him a promotion to be a head man. He had a team working for him and we went to live in Brisbane for his job. It was just after my mother died, and I was about 11. They (the government protection officers and police) pretty much left us kids alone then, perhaps because my dad had that job. We went to school in Brisbane. Up the coast, we were always taught to respect other people and we would have got a flogging if we’d called anyone names.
All the kids were like that here, but in Brisbane we found out what racism was alright. Never seen anything like it and, boy, did we cop it. The teachers did not give you any help and if you were behind no one helped you catch up. We were always treated as second-class citizens and I don’t think that has changed today.

The worst of the racism, as I remember it, was from the kids. We got it from the teachers but it was what the kids said that hurt. These boys used to follow me home from school shouting names at me. Nigger, black bastard. I heard them all, every day. There was one really nasty boy with a mob who would follow me home calling me names all the way. One day I hid on the bush track. He couldn’t see me and I belted that kid up. I was the one got into trouble for it at school but he never bothered me again. I had one teacher who was nice and she was not ashamed to be seen with a black child. She would take me to nice places on Saturdays because she knew I didn’t have a mother. She took me to the ballet and the theatre. She was very kind and she gave me hope, I suppose. She took an interest and it made me feel important.

I went on to train as a nurse at the hospital after school. They treated me bad there too. I had twice as much work as the white girls but you just accepted it. It was how it was. You were talked to like dirt but I loved nursing anyway. My brothers wouldn’t go to school because of the racism and the other kids calling them names and they ended up in all sorts of trouble. It’s not how I wanted it to be. School was still terrible for black kids then and they would not go. In the end they dropped out. My son went back later and he got a business degree and he works in Brisbane. One of my daughters is a teacher’s aide. It’s hard for her because she is the only Aboriginal person on the staff where she works.

The grandchildren have an easier time of it at school but they miss a lot of days. They have to take it in turns to help me out since the stroke and the wheelchair. The schools still don’t want our kids. Our kids don’t feel like school is for them. They are always looking for excuses not to go. They reckon they get into trouble all the time even if it’s not them in it. If there is a fight because a kid calls our kids a name, it’s our kids in
trouble. The kids still don’t feel they belong there. They get too behind with the work when they’ve got to help me get to doctors’ appointments and take care of me. No one helps them catch up and they just get blamed for being away. I don’t know who will help me if the young healthy ones can’t.

Insights on Aunty Daisy’s story

Daisy’s story is sad as she feels a lack of success for her grandchildren. Several are in jail. She has struggled to educate her children, yet she has not found a partnership with schools. Schools have not made her children or grandchildren feel important or as if they belong in school. The previous story from Aunty May spoke to a similar situation. Daisy’s own dream of being a registered nurse was denied her despite working during the day and doing Grade 10 schooling at night. She once confided in me that while she had studied to be a nurse the hospital authorities would not allow an Aboriginal girl to be a registered nurse. It was denied because either she was constructed as intellectually incapable by her skin colour, or it was a discriminatory act, over which she had no recourse. She was taught to value education by her parents and work hard, but racial attitudes prohibited her progress. The broader mainstream construction of her, her Aboriginality and her place dictated what was available to her. As an Aboriginal other, she was denied achieving her dream to be a registered nurse.

Daisy speaks at length about racism and “not belonging” in schools. Her parents valued education and saw it as providing opportunities for success in the contemporary context. Sadly, her parents had not taught her many of the “old ways” although her father did teach her to fish the Aboriginal way. Her parents attempted to focus more on the knowledge that was valued in white Australia. When that white education is denied her, she is aware of being adrift. Her parents’ idea that her education will allow her equality is a disappointment. She has goals she is prepared to work for, but they are denied her. Daisy describes schools as unsafe for her and her brothers; and she thinks that this continues for her grandchildren in current times. She does not mention racism in the context of night school. Many Indigenous people gain their educations later in life because they were so disengaged within the school systems.
Storytellers in the next chapter also speak of this. It attests to their intellectual capability and persistence to gain the education that school denied them. Aunty Daisy’s story speaks of the trauma with which Aboriginal parents and children lived and how racism impacted their school life on a daily basis. She speaks of racism from the school, the teachers and the other children. She is aware that the teachers offered her no help when she was behind the other children. In discussing schools, she often uses words such as “unfair”, “not right” and “second-class citizens”. She also regularly would say about schools that “we are not wanted there”.

While Daisy has a strong sense of identity as an Aboriginal woman, she has little knowledge of her own culture. Her parents and grandparents would have still known their cultural ways but, sadly, they did not teach them to the children. Her family was still prepared to work within a system that attempted to remove their children on a regular basis. In a way, the lack of cultural knowledge may have created the “fighter” in her. When she is othered she has no strong cultural identity to allow her the dignity to shrug it off. She is shaped by the unfairness of racism. She is situated in a place of cultural trauma. Sadly, many families thought it better not to talk about the “old ways” because they felt there was nothing to be gained in a world where they were despised and othered. Perhaps, had her mother lived longer, she may have known more of her culture.

She has been cast as a “second-class” person. I was aware of this when in her presence. The limitations assigned to her by the dominant discourse and the mainstream racist values defined her life. It is the recurring theme in her story. She wanted to be important and to matter, but paternalism and racism dictated her destiny.

**The Fourth Storyteller: Edna**

The following narrative is different to the others in that Edna has a different vision about her Aboriginality. From the outset, she was determined to construct herself as a white woman. She speaks at length about appearing white and about white values, and has different sensibilities to any of the other storytellers. She constructs herself as if a middle-class white woman. From her childhood, she is
aware that there is another life that is lived by the non-Aboriginal world. She identifies education as being able to offer her this life.

She others Aboriginality and told me that she found that the church was prepared to offer her a scholarship to escape her family life and world. Her story is offered very unemotionally. She has a way of thinking that seems logical and strategic. I suspect that she has demonstrated this since childhood and it shaped her life path. Aboriginality is not central to her life; rather, it is something from which she felt she must move away. She refers to sacred stories and lore as folktales. She speaks as if she is not Aboriginal at all. This storyteller does not speak of the dread of racism as the other storytellers do. If racism and othering occurred in her own experiences, as I suspect it did, she does not speak about it. While she indicates how racist her town was when she attempted to return to teach there later, it is not mentioned in her focused childhood recollections.

**Acting white**

*My family always lived in rural north-west New South Wales. As far as I know they lived on one of the stations and the station people looked after them. My mother and all her siblings grew up on the station. They were good people, you know, they didn’t exploit them to the extent that the Aborigines were exploited elsewhere. They had a little school on the station. In those days there were lots of one-teacher schools dotted around before they were, you know, school buses come in. So my mother got a good education and there was a lot of mixed blood way back then. You know, there were white grandfathers and half-caste grandmothers even then. My mother was the whitest in her class. She went right through and she got what they called the QC. It was a qualification in New South Wales called a Qualification Certificate and if you got that you could become a pupil teacher and you could teach a class. My mother would have liked to have done that.*

*So right from the start my mother was very lucky and my mother and my aunt knew how to conduct themselves and how to be white. They took on all those values. My mother could spot good breeding a mile off. She’d say, “She’s not very well bred that one”, and she’s very critical of white*
people who didn’t have that breeding. She wanted us to not mix with low-
class whites and we were taught the value of education and I went to
school. I was the brightest in our family. She grew up on a station, and
there would have been white station people as well as Aboriginal
workers and they also had a lot to do with relatives. There was a big
kinship system going then, so she knew all the relatives. She knew all her
kin lines but she did not know her cultural ways or language.

I didn’t realise the subtleties of racism. There was never, you know, when
I was growing up, kids called us names and we knew we were black and
we lived in a blacks’ town, although we had a rugged home, it was a
good sturdy home. We were a respected hard-working family. In that
time, Aboriginal people couldn’t teach in a white school back then. I was
too bright and too well educated to work as a servant in a home and my
mother didn’t want that anyway. So the church stepped in and I trained
as a teacher at Melbourne Teachers College and I taught in mission
schools. Really what kept me going was that I wanted to better myself. I
knew where I’d come from and I didn’t want that. I didn’t want to live in
a racist little country town. I wanted to get out of it. So really education
was my ticket out of that town and if I had to be rescued by the church,
well so be it. I knew there was a better way than living in that sort of
poverty. When I went [home] on holidays I would leave with an
enormous sense of guilt, leaving them behind, knowing I was going back
to something better, and more inspirational.

I just had this ambition right from a little kid that I wanted to do better.
Even as a tiny little kid I knew the deprivation around me. I could tell
and it’s some of the things that have motivated me to want a better life
for myself. I wanted to improve life for my mother and my Aunt Minnie,
you know. My mother and father separated and she struggled. Aunt
Minnie was married to a white man and it was his property where we
lived ... where we had the cows and the vegetable gardens. I taught in
Anglican Church schools and mission schools. At the end of my five-year
bond with the Anglican Church, I felt free to leave them.
I had a friend in Melbourne who was a feminist in the 1950s. She never liked missions, she never liked Christianity. She wasn’t a Christian anyway. She wasn’t a communist but she had a lot of communist sort of ideology and one of her greatest triumphs was to get me away from the missions. She said I was only educated enough to teach in missions and I should be educated enough to teach anywhere I chose. So then I came back to Sydney and I improved my education and I taught in metropolitan schools. Everything was fine in metropolitan schools. I tried my luck in a country school near home and encountered dreadful racism. So then I went back to Melbourne and stayed there. Aboriginal education was a disgrace. Up until then it was deplorable.

After the 1967 referendum and then Labor was in power, things started to heat up. It seemed Australians were really onside. We used to lobby and talk to ministers and it was a very exciting time; and convincing university to have support systems. We enjoyed it. We thrived on the battle, you know. We were very articulate, we knew what we wanted, and it was great. Most teachers, when I’ve talked to them about it, they still see Aboriginal kids like as a problem. Like they don’t even see them on a level playing field with our kids. They do see them as lower.

The old people, like my mother’s age group, would be disgusted with the parents now, the way they’re neglecting their children. Anyway, there’s been a relapse, going back. They’ve got to fit into modern life. A lot of our culture is lost and we often only have the folklore left. But traditional culture doesn’t fit in with modern life. If you want a modern life you’ve got to reconcile with that. You’ve got to take on the white stuff to survive. The Aboriginal kids are having such trouble in school and, of course, they’re considered the naughty ones and troublemakers. I think they’re seen that way by teachers just when the kids walk in. You know, they don’t have a chance. It seems to be the Aboriginal kids that come off worse in that situation.

You know, these are the questions you’re asking me now about our kids and how teachers treat them were asked by us 20 and 30 years ago. So
surely the Queensland Government should have come up with some answers by this [time].

Insights on Edna’s story

Edna says to me that my questions are the same questions that she asked of Education Queensland 20 or 30 years ago, and that surely they should have got it right by now. Her frustration is one that Aboriginal people share that education systems seem unable to transform practices that lead to change. When we look at educational policy documents from 30 years ago, the knowledge was there to bring about change and to improve the outcomes for Indigenous children but it has not occurred.

While Edna was an activist for Aboriginal rights in the 1960s and 1970s, Edna’s narrative has a much more distant or Western sensibility to it than the other stories. Edna states that from her childhood she knew there was a better way to live than living in poverty, as many Aboriginal people did. She speaks of her aunt who was “married to a white man”, and thus lived a better life than Edna’s struggling sole parent mother. She attributes her own success to being lucky to understand and to see how to be white.

Edna speaks of the class consciousness that her mother had acquired through working in white households. Edna uses the terms, “married white” and “married black”. These terms imply issues of social status and that being white carried certain advantages. She does not speak to racism in her own schooling. As a child, it seems her focused aspirations gave her resilience. I sensed a strong and ambitious mother determined to give her daughter a better life. Edna’s mother constructed her child as white rather than wanting to see her child without education and skills and employed in domestic work for white families. Her mother was responsible for the work ethic and the tenacity that Edna exhibited in her own life.

Edna believes that Aboriginal families are not doing the best for their children if they are not educating their children. She has educated herself, despite the system, and she is not tolerant of families who don’t. She has not experienced the value of Aboriginal traditions and has put them aside for the white world. She has assimilated herself into white society and the Western world of the university.
Typically, at this stage of her life, Edna could have contributed more strongly to her community as an elder. Such an educated elder could have much to offer for the betterment of her people. When I went to leave her house she showed me a picture of her adult grandsons, all of whom have dark skin and hair, and said “I don’t know how they know the words but they all use Aboriginal language expressions”. These are different times. I could have said to Edna, “It’s safer to be Aboriginal now”. Edna had given up much of her culture because she believed that this would lead to a better life. I looked at the smiling faces of young Aboriginal adults in the picture who were looking to find where they belonged.

The Fifth Storyteller: Patricia

This storyteller was referred to me by a member of the playgroup who knew Patricia’s adult daughter when both worked in Indigenous health. When I explained my project to Patricia and how important her story would be to include, she agreed to speak to me. She was gracious and wanted her story included.

However, she did experience difficulty in voicing it. She spoke as if she was releasing just one word at a time into the world. The story did not flow as a monologue like the other storytellers. It was as if, for all that she wanted to tell the story, she feared it being heard after all these years. She hesitated to answer my questions as if she feared who might hear her answers, but I did not cajole her. Despite my explaining about her anonymity, she did request her identity was kept anonymous “in my book”. She was the only one of my fifteen adult participants who made this request. She did not seem to sense the complexity, pain and trauma of her story; perhaps because she had lived it so long it was normalised.

Many Aboriginal people assumed other ethnic identities to survive the processes of colonisation and the treatment of Aboriginal people (Paradies et al., 2008). After a lifetime of denial and passing as white, Patricia still finds it difficult to discuss her true ethnic identity. She is an Aboriginal woman who is the daughter of a stolen child. Her mother, Annie, was stolen as a little girl despite the family being exempt as workers on a cattle property. Annie was in the wrong place at the wrong time. She was in a nearby town buying groceries when a general round-up of
Aboriginal children occurred by a group of protection agents. Annie was put in the jail and with several other children was sent off to a mission.

Annie never discussed her experiences with Patricia. When Patricia’s family members did an archival search of Annie’s life they discovered that she was stolen. Annie was sent out to domestic service from the mission at 11 years old. When she turned 21, she was allowed to leave the mission and was issued a Certificate of Exemption by the Queensland Government. This exemption certificate allowed her to live as a white woman. In order to maintain her white status, there were three conditions to which she had to adhere. These were: never to speak her language, not to associate with any Aboriginal people including her family, and not to drink alcohol. Thus, Annie constructed another life to spare her children and family from the trauma of being an Aboriginal person in Queensland. While this is Patricia’s story of a life spent passing as white and denying her identity, this is a common story within the Aboriginal community.

**Living in hiding: Passing as white**

I knew my mother was Aboriginal, but we just never talked about it. Mum was an Aboriginal woman but her skin was not very dark. No, I don’t know her tribe or anything about it. She never mentioned any of that. It was never talked about at all. She never talked about being stolen. She would have told me if she was; just that she went to other people after her mother died and she grew up with other girls. She called those other girls “sort of sisters”.

We were enrolled at the state school at Quilpie, way out west, at the end of the train line and we said we were Italian kids, though we used the name Smith. My father had an Italian father who came out from Sicily. We were no different really to any other bush kids at that time.

When I was 78, my cousin from out west told me that my mother was a stolen child. It was news to me. I never wanted anything to do with the mob who lived out west but my sisters and my brother did mix with them so I did start to see them. But I was raised away from all that and did not tell my kids about it.
I remember once I was dancing the maypole, so mum twisted up my hair in curls and put a big white bow in it. She’d made me a new white dress to dance in. She was up at the school with the baby in the pram. She was there with all the other mothers. I don’t remember any other Aboriginal people at the school, so she just fitted in with the rest of the mothers.

When my younger brother started school he was a “sookie” kid. He’d be crying for mum or want to go home so his teacher would send for me the big sister and I would have to go and sit with him in the Grade 1 classroom. Every day it went on. Eventually Mum wrote to the teacher and told her I was not to go down to the Grade 1 class as I was missing out on my school work. Bobby was really fair with white skin and freckles and red hair.

My brother Billy was jet black. He was 4 years older than me. Once when we were at school, he was called a “black bastard” by a white kid. Billy was the only one in the family that was really black but he was treated the same in the family as the rest. Pop went up to the school to talk to the headmaster and Billy and the other kid had to come to the office. The other boy got the cane for calling Billy that name. I don’t remember us having any racism directed toward us at school. We were usually the only Aboriginal family in the school and we just fitted in with all the other kids. As far as I remember the teachers treated us the same as anyone else. My mother was very respectable when she came up to school.

She told me I should hold my head up high. I had a white father like everyone else at school. Pop was Italian and we have his birth certificate from Italy. I have a copy of it. I had nothing to be ashamed of. No one ever told me I was different. No one treated me differently.

My mother was a reader, and she encouraged all of us to read. She’d won book prizes when she was at school. Once we were going from Brisbane to out west and she wrote to her sister, June. They arranged to meet as if it was accidental at South Brisbane train station where you changed trains. They had about ten minutes together. She didn’t want anything to do with Aboriginal people. We were not allowed to talk about
our lives or family to anyone. No one was to know anything about us. Once her brothers came to visit and Pop went outside and ordered them to go away. I remember that.

She wanted us to have a good education like the other kids. She would learn by watching the other mothers. After primary school, I went to high school in Brisbane for a year. Mum went down there and enrolled me. She knew those ways. White ways really.

Mum had bought the school shop near where we were living. She worked so hard. She did all the laundry too for the American GI’s when they were camped nearby. My brother would go around to their camp with the horse and buggy and collect all the washing. He said one day, the GI’s called him “Boy”; he said he hated that. After I went to high school for a year, I told mum I didn’t want to keep going to school. So she said there were jobs in the paper and I went for a job in a dress shop. I got the job and mum took me to the second-hand shop and bought me some black dresses to wear to work. I looked just like the other girls.

**Insights on Patricia’s story**

Patricia looks Aboriginal and one of her brothers is a very black-skinned Aboriginal man; but she refuses to acknowledge her Aboriginality. Her family’s survival was based on denial and the necessity to pass as white. Of my storytellers, she is the one reluctant Aborigine. I sense that had her children not identified and become well known as Aboriginal people in the community she would never have told her story. Her mother Annie raised her children ignorant of her own stolen history, but they knew they were Aboriginal children and they must hide it at all costs. The family’s need to pass as white is testimony to how horrific life could be for Aboriginal families. It was an action by Annie to protect the children from what she endured when she was taken.

Because Annie was not taken until she was eleven she would have known her tribal language. Patricia says they did not know they were Aboriginal children, yet immediately acknowledges that she did know by saying they were taught to discuss it with no one. As a child, Patricia and her siblings were registered at a Queensland state school in western Queensland under a false name and passed as European...
children with an Italian heritage. In fact, because their father was white, they would not have come under Aboriginal Acts of Parliament. They were essentially a white family but the fear of Annie had no logic. It must be a difficult and unquiet place in which to live internally.

Patricia states her mother never spoke of being removed or talked of her experiences in the mission. I did wonder how much of Annie’s behaviour was a result of fear related to honouring the conditions of her Certificate of Exemption. Annie was fearful of being seen not adhering to her exemption conditions or remained traumatised by what had occurred in her young life. Patricia knew none of this as it was never shared or known until after Annie’s death. Much of Patricia’s knowledge of her mother came from documents located after her death by her sister’s son. Even when documentary evidence was shown to her, Patricia continued to deny any of this happened.

Patricia was visibly upset at times when referring to her past and Aboriginal heritage. During the time Patricia grew up, many Aboriginal people attempted to pass as non-indigenous fearing government intervention in their lives. They would claim olive-skinned heritages, such as Italian, Indian or Greek. Pascoe (2008a) noted that, even in Aboriginal communities, people who could pass as white were encouraged to do so. It was common at the time that families who could pass for olive-skinned European did so. However, this was also criticised by other Aboriginal people who claimed that those who did avoided what others had to endure.

Many Aboriginal people consider this period to be a time reminiscent of the Jewish holocaust in Nazi Europe. The ability to pass as non-indigenous meant Aboriginal people could live with the same dignity and rights of mainstream Australians. They lived without the threat of being removed to a mission or having their children taken. It was imperative not to be discovered for fear of having your children removed. However, they lived in constant fear of exposure. Patricia has learned to deny her Aboriginality and her people, culture and race.

Patricia has very little to say about her schooling experiences as it appears her life focus was her denial of Aboriginality and fear of exposure. Her mother valued school in that she valued her children having the same experience as “other children”, meaning “white children”. Patricia’s created recollections of schooling experiences are very telling, perhaps by omission as well as what she does offer to
the story. Her stories are all of “lovely things” that happened at school. Her mother came to watch and was just one of the mothers, like “the rest of the mothers”.

Some months after I had met with Patricia formally we were speaking again. She said, as if in passing, “Sometimes I think maybe there was nothing wrong with Aboriginal people after all”. I think she was exploring a new psychological context as if trying out this new way of being. I do not know if she seemed happy to finally have some sense of inner release about her recognising heritage.

I suspect at 82 she was looking anew at her world and her lifetime of beliefs. I wondered how difficult it would be to have to reconsider one’s whole life framework. This research has been somewhat transformative for her, but I could not say if it was positively so. It offered her a sense of self-worth through discussing her Aboriginal identity but most of all I noticed that she seemed confused. She had lost the constructed life she had lived and, perhaps, I had done her a disservice. When she said, “I think maybe there was nothing wrong with Aboriginal people after all”, I felt that she had meant, “Perhaps there was nothing wrong with me after all”.

Ideas from the Elders’ Stories

This chapter spoke to five different Aboriginal experiences of reality and schooling. In this section I consider the core categories or themes as teaching resources. All of the elders’ stories are teaching stories. They were all given boldly and articulately by the wise and long-lived elders they are. So, in this section I identify the core themes that emerged for me across narratives. The themes that I write to are all teaching resources about: being strong in culture; identity; and othering. I also consider the ideas of the generation about the value of education.

Elders are our cultural teachers

A person’s identity is established by late adolescence. When trauma occurs in childhood the experiences are more likely to affect identity formation and the consequences may be carried into adult life (Atkinson, 2002). Collective and communal trauma refers to traumatic experiences of a group of people. Such traumas may manifest as psychological, cultural, physical, spiritual, social and mental distress (Atkinson, 2002). When people are exposed to violent devastation and death, they
experience grief and loss. They also feel dehumanised and victimised by the attitudes and actions of the officials who disrupted the social fabric that connected people to each other. Childhood experiences of violence are traumatising events which may have serious impacts on development and these traumatic experiences continue to have a serious impact across generations.

The stories in this section are teaching stories. Perhaps the most important story for me is how much our culture is lost. Without it our people have survived to offer new stories which one day will weave into reconstituted culture. It tells me it is important to save what languages and fragments of culture remain. We will never have those traditional resources back, but we can take strength from the stories. Although I had no idea about the stories before I listened to each elder, I found each had a different story to tell about the same time. I had not anticipated the sheer range of stories, which speaks to the extent of colonisation across the country. The experiences of suffering horrified me, but the strategies and strength inspired me. While there is much to take from the stories to use as teachings, I have identified a few key areas as resources (or themes) below. They have emerged as major themes in this generation.

**Culture strong**

I suggest all the elders are “strong” in their culture in that all know of their culture, family and country connections. However, not all of the elders chose to identify with it or could take resilience from being Aboriginal. Their culture has shaped their personalities and sense of identity and self-worth in the world, either by being a buffering strength or by the strength of their denial against it. Edna chooses to create an educated academic life and live in what she calls “white ways”. She does not deny her Aboriginality, rather self-casts it as “not as good as Anglo-Celtic”. Patricia knows of her Aboriginality, but relies on denial to construct her reality. The other elders know their culture. Henry and May are strong in their cultural identities, lore, and ways of being. Henry was taught in mission school to be humiliated by it. Nonetheless, he is raised in his culture at home. It gave him a cultural context and his ethnic identity.

Cultural knowledge provides a strong framework for living and personal strength. It is through a position of strength that three of the elders frame their
identity. It gives those who claim Aboriginality a sense of belonging. The degree of the accessibility of culture and cultural belonging directly relates to colonisation. Not only is Henry strong in his culture, he is strong in firsthand experience of colonisation. Similarly, Aunty May is the custodian of the family history and knowledge as well as knowing tribal ceremony, language and lore. She has openly championed her causes in her life including teaching Aboriginal mothers in parenting classes. She considers the young mothers are the ones who will make the difference for our children and their children. Currently she works closely on restoring and revitalising her language. She is strong in culture and wishes to offer that strength to the children of her tribal group as its cultural teacher.

**Identity**

Identity is a highly complex issue that was made more so by how it is assigned and constructed by non-indigenous Australians. In the 1900s, life for Aboriginal people was at best difficult. Killings still occurred, and Aboriginal people lived in daily fear of their lives. Aboriginal people were forced to choose to pass as non-Aboriginal in order to escape the discriminatory treatment and laws. Two of the five elders interviewed speak of passing as white or acting so in their stories. For Aunty May, she lives so strongly in an authentic Aboriginal space that she does not need to deny Aboriginality. She has the strength of traditional Aboriginal life and she lives it. Uncle Henry is strong in his culture while Patricia has a more complicated identity in that she learned to deny her own ethnicity and culture and hide away from reality. I did wonder where the line between denial and internalised racism was, but I could ask it.

Edna’s narrative speaks to other aspects of identity. She is aware of her Aboriginality but prefers to locate herself in a space that allows her to use it in different ways. She was an academic and this allows her to live in an educated cultural space. Her narrative suggests her awareness, even as a young child, that she is disenfranchised by being Aboriginal. However, her academic self has filled that void. May learns to use her Aboriginality in different ways and this allows her to “get an education” but she does not give up her strength in her culture. Daisy’s life is perhaps the saddest story. In her old age, she feels she has achieved little. She was denied opportunities to become a registered nurse and despite pushing her children to
go to school and be educated this has not occurred. Her grandson, like her brothers, is caught up in the justice system. Her granddaughters will not go to school. For all her battles, she has lost hope for her family’s transformation through education.

**Racism**

There are many components of *othering*. Components of *othering* in these stories are discussed by all the storytellers. As a member of the Aboriginal group, Uncle Henry is assigned the essentialised characteristics of all Aboriginal people. Racism and discrimination is the core issue for all the storytellers. Uncle Henry suffered horrific racism and inhumanity at the hands of his teachers in the mission school. Such stories are difficult to listen to and it is harder still to understand the cruelty directed at little children. He experienced cultural genocide at the very least.

May is essentialised as an Aboriginal girl who must therefore be less capable intellectually. Even the evidence of her successful completion of scholarship does not allow the teacher in a mainstream school to overcome her prejudice. However, Aunty May also speaks about other experiences in an Aboriginal school in which racism was not an issue. There was considerable difference between education in an environment where she felt she belonged as one of the Aboriginal majority and the environment in the mainstream town school where she felt unwanted. However, the teacher at the Yumba school also had low expectations about the ability of the Aboriginal children.

Patricia suffered from the most insidious form of racism, an internalised racism by denial of her own Aboriginality. Aboriginal people did not have the agency to present themselves as Aboriginal because they understood that Aboriginality did not afford them protection and freedom to live their own lives or to raise their own children. Disturbingly, this assignment of *other* is based on power and dominance by white Australians.

**Ideas and beliefs about the value of education**

Elders spoke by recollection of their childhoods and then had the distance of life experience to contextualise these childhood and educational experiences. In this chapter, none of the elders speak about their school experiences in mainstream schools with affection. The ideas they have taken from their classroom experiences
are traumatic. Their culture has been humiliated. They have not been culturally safe but endured racism. Constructions of subterfuge in passing as white, and constructing other white realities have occurred to escape the horror of Aboriginal life.

The prevalence of racism, discrimination and of being less valued than white children shape all these stories. Essentially, all the storytellers speak to how their culture was humiliated to the colonising agents of schools and teachers. In the mission story of Uncle Henry we see unconscionable racism, inhumanity and cruelty. Anyone would deplore the teachers and their actions and the inhumanity toward little children. Consequentially, it is Uncle Henry who is most involved at this stage of his life in teaching the value of education and in telling stories in schools to encourage Aboriginal children to stay in school.

Perhaps it is because he has lived through a time of such inhumanity and inequality that he claims the value of education now. “It is the one thing that gives us a fair playing field”, he says. I wonder if what he means is that it is the one thing that can lead us to equal rights. This surely is the playing field he aspires to for his children. Uncle Henry relates to education as the tool for equality that it should be. He does not speak of curiosity and the wonder of learning. He is more pragmatic than that. The elders have re-positioned their school experiences, with knowledge from the current context. They do see the value in education. So much so, they advocate for it and encourage Aboriginal children to get an education. They use their life stories as teaching stories which speak to the inhumanity of the past but how their personal strengths have allowed them to survive. As elders, few have lived as long as these people. Whatever strategy they relied on has ensured their survival.

**Conclusions: The Ideas of the Elders**

In this chapter, five elders were storytellers about their education experiences. The most enduring images that formed for me in these stories were those of mission education and the physical mistreatment of young Aboriginal boys and girls and licking their slates clean. The storytellers looked back on these experiences and determined courageously that this was a positive experience in the way suffering built resilience for the ones that followed. The elders learned and espouse many different strategies to cope with the complexities of being an Aboriginal child.
Culture does exist for this group as a basis for living but, for the most part, culture was deeply fragmented as people were removed from their country and spiritual home and the landscape in which their knowledge and existential beliefs were built and localised.

The elders still lived within some cultural framework, albeit a depleted framework of cultural maintenance. This is perhaps the real strength of this generation. They lived with or had the opportunity to learn from their cultural teachers, but it is only Aunty May who lives the cultural life. She also presents as a grounded and emotionally well woman who has dedicated her life to educating responsible parents and equally to restoration of language. She spoke to me about the need for the urban children to come out to country and spend time on their land. She is strong in both cultures. She sees no contradiction in being strong in school, and being strong in culture. In fact, May offers an example of how grounded people could be if they had the maintenance of both ways.

By contrast, Edna knows her culture but views success with being white. It too is a position of survival. Mainstream Australians would typically view her as a successful Aboriginal person because she has achieved a level of “whiteness”. This too is a result of colonisation and its impact on the self-worth of the native identity. Edna sees school and education to be of value because it can overcome “Aboriginality”. I believe it is a traumatised mode of thinking too.

The teachings in this chapter speak to the most culturally grounded having more resilience in life. Their remembering did not seem to re-traumatise them, rather acted as a statement of their ability to survive. It allowed them success in both ways of being. Current beliefs of the elders about education have not just been shaped by their own experience expressed in recollected stories. Their ideas about education have been reconsidered across the lifespan, and are still affected by current context and knowledge. They are aware that children need an education. In the elders’ time, they were anxious for and active agents in seeking education. They saw it as a way of equalising life trajectories. Nonetheless, they did experience unfairness and inhumanity at school, and while they value education none expressed their ideas about white teachers or officials. I did not consider this, until I had read all the stories across generations.
Chapter 6: Us Taken-Away Kids

Introduction

This chapter considers the stories of the grandparent generation of Aboriginal people. It is important from the outset to understand how Indigenous people view grandparents within biological and cultural dimensions. All of the participants whose stories are presented in this chapter are grandparents according to the Western construction of the term. However, the term has different meanings to Aboriginal people. To situate these stories in context, there must be a shared understanding about grandparents from an Indigenous perspective.

In stories from my tribal group I understand that all girls are born young grandmothers. If the girl looks like an ancestor, we believe it is likely to be an ancestor reborn and the stories of that ancestor run in her veins. The traits of ancestors seen in our young children suggest that they also carry the ancestors’ wisdom and knowledge. Therefore, they are offered respect as young grandmothers. They are seen as born as ancestor to the next three generations. A baby is viewed very differently from the Anglo-Celtic understanding of a helpless new life; rather, the child is born already wise, just inexperienced. These worldviews do not align with the Western idea of childhood.

In this chapter, we hear stories from stolen children. I was not prepared for how disturbing these stories would be. They occurred for the most part out of the sight of the majority of Australians. While the Bringing Them Home report (HREOC, 1997) spoke of these events and the intergenerational impact on parenting and health, the stories have not been considered in relation to educational opportunities. From reviewing the literature on the stolen generations, it is clear that there is a need for cultural healing and understandings within schools and educational systems. I am unaware of human rights or healing-based programs in mainstream schools. These stories are powerful in that they speak to the removal of children from families to homes and situations that were not benevolent. The children had no family or cultural maintenance and at this point in the colonisation story, our children become lost.
The Storytellers: The Grandmothers

Traditionally, women were considered equal to the men in all matters and held lore and knowledge. It was colonisation that conveyed a sense of the lesser value of women, particularly Aboriginal women (Kidd, 1997). British settlers placed little value on the rights of European women and even less on “black gins”. Kidd also notes that the amount of sexual violation of Aboriginal women and girls perpetrated by white men led to numbers of fairer-skinned children.

Knowledge was gendered to establish what lore and activities were innate and sacred to women and what was sacred men’s business. Such divisions were taken very seriously with repercussions if they were not met. The most sacred women’s business was about creation through birthing, nurturing, and education of young children. This dimension of gendered sacred knowledge came to us through dreaming stories as part of women’s business. Parents were very careful with their children and the dangers of the bush. In order to keep children from wandering away from their parents they were warned with stories of the Jilliburu man, a mythical “bogeyman” who stole children away from their parents who loved them. Traditionally such mythical characters were used by families to ensure their children stayed close and obeyed lore.

Traditionally, grandmothers went with the mother to the birthing trees where babies were born with the mother standing supported by the sacred tree. Below the tree the grandmother would dig a hole. The maternal and paternal grandmother of the baby would assist with the birth and then determine if the baby was viable. Live births of healthy babies were welcomed. However should the baby be stillborn, unhealthy or ill formed it was up to the grandmothers to dispose of the baby and bury it in the hole they had dug. Today, grandmothers have a significant caring role with children.

*Grandmothers are just as important as the mothers. They raise the children and love the children and grow the children too. If the child needs something, like money for school, the whole family all put in. The kids are family business.* (Aunty Margaret, personal communication, December 14, 2010)
Traditionally, families were socially structured very differently to Anglo-Celtic families. Within the Indigenous family, there were many roles and obligations. There were as many as 700 words that spoke to the relations and relationships that one could have within a nation. All carried lore and obligation. One Brisbane elder (Uncle Sandy, personal communication, November 20, 2011) spoke to me about his traditional obligations to his wife’s family. He said it was a husband’s responsibility to share the hunt kills and care for his in-laws; but he did not speak to them once he was married to the daughter. It was a law that allowed for no conflicts of interest. It was important for all people, including outsiders who entered country, to have a relationship determined so that obligations could be fully assigned and understood by all. Such lore functioned as the protocols or social etiquette that kept societies functioning respectfully and harmoniously.

**“Aboriginal way” playgroup**

As Aboriginal education workers, we knew why many other playgroups and programs had not been successful. Though well meant, they were run like mainstream models. When our families did not come along, they were usually constructed as not taking advantage of the programs offered. However, from an Aboriginal worldview there were issues that kept them from coming along. At the beginning, a strong cultural model was needed to establish trust and partnerships with the family. If families feel democratically involved and do not feel they are being paternalistically “told what to do” they will assume ownership of the playgroup and become the most supportive advocates and recruiters for the group. In such group development, the families feel valued and it will succeed because the community will support it.

“In our culture, we have no very important people because all people are considered important”; one elder told me in personal conversation. “Everyone is a strong teacher in a different thing. Traditionally, we don’t educate all children in the same things.” If children appear strong leaders when they are young, they are taught by the adult leaders in the community. If they are seen to be strong in healing or dancing or storytelling, they are put in the company of those who have strengths in those areas in the community. Aboriginal families are often fearful of involvement of their children in programs, especially if the children do not stay with the mother.
Such programs are often typical to white models. Such non-indigenous models where mothers are removed for a “parenting” program make parents fearful and they do not engage. If they come once, they may not return once they see they are separated from their children. This fear stems from the experiences of stolen children historically as well as child protection services in the contemporary situation. An Aboriginal elder stated, “They just take our kids so easy”. Aboriginal people do not trust “professional” or “gubby” (government) people around their children. Yet, facilitators of such programs interpret the non-attendance as a lack of interest from the families.

Context of these stories

I was at the Yumba in the 1960s and when I looked out I saw a mob of white kids running around. I was really worried. I knew they’d come and round these children up and take them. They looked too white to be left alone by the police protectorate. Too white to be left with their families.

(Aunty Ethel, personal communication, August, 2010)

In the late 1800s the Anglo-Celtic government realised that Aboriginal people were not dying out as had been expected. Yumbas or fringe camps were growing up near towns. Not only were the numbers of Aboriginal people increasing but so were the numbers of fair-skinned Aboriginal children. The children were characterised as “half-castes” or “quadroons” by whites. These names were and remain unacceptable to Aboriginal people because they are assigned as “percentage of blood” by a colonising race. They are not terms used in the Aboriginal community.

The storytellers in this chapter are aged from their mid-forties into their sixties. Their birth years were the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. While I did request that their stories related to schooling and education, the trauma of their childhood existence overwhelmed their schooling narratives. After I listened to the stories, I named this chapter “us taken-away kids”, a term used within the Aboriginal community. I had not set out to find stolen children narratives and despite knowing of the policies I had not anticipated that all of my participants were directly involved. All of the participants were removed with the exception of one grandmother. She was the daughter of a removed woman.
It occurred to the Anglo-Celtic powers that these children looked white but if they remained with their parents a race of “half-castes” was developing. If the children were to be de-socialised as Aborigines and re-socialised as whites, they would have to be removed from their parents. Narratives in the previous chapter demonstrated that while the children were at school for a European education, some parents remained culture strong in their homes. These parents were teaching their children their own culture in their everyday lives.

If the children were to become white, they were to be removed as early as possible, thus they may never know they were Aboriginal people (Kidd, 1997). The intention of the government was to create a situation such that when the old people had passed away, their progeny would be absorbed into mainstream white society. This was the time of assimilation. Historian Rosalind Kidd, in her published doctoral thesis, *The Way We Civilise* (1997), cites historical documents that reveal that Aboriginal women and children were taken from the time of first settlement. However, this was not at the level of the numbers taken after official legislation enabled the practice to occur legally. It was sanctioned in 1916 under the amended *Aborigines Protection Act* 1909.

This Act allowed the (Aboriginal Protection) Board to assume full custody and control of the child by any Aborigine Officials who had the power to remove any child under any pretext. A new *Child Welfare Act* in 1939 signified the wholesale removal of Aboriginal children in the decades to follow. By the 1940s Kidd (1997) reported that negative attitudes toward Aboriginality were so deeply entrenched in mainstream thinking that separation seemed preferable to any divergence from the European nuclear family structure. Welfare officers had instructions to send any children “light enough to pass as white” to mainstream child welfare homes not to the Aboriginal homes. Presumably these children should never know that they were Aboriginal.

During the 1950s, when the most children were removed for assimilation reasons, the psychological literature was clearly emphasising the importance of familial and maternal attachments. At the same time, the Australian Government was a signatory to the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (United Nations, 1948) that came into force in 1951. One of the core definitions of genocide in this convention is: “the forcible transferring of children of
a group to another group”. Nevertheless, in Queensland, children were actively removed for at least another twenty years (Kidd, 1997).

The Storytellers

The five narrators in this chapter represent how the removal and assimilation policies were enacted and the consequences for the everyday lives of Aboriginal Australians. Across these stories, the effects of the forced removal from homes and culture are striking. All the storytellers were a part of the regular group of playgroup grandparents. Aboriginal people report children were stolen from almost all families. Certainly, as these stories suggest, all families remain affected. The five storytellers are briefly introduced.

Eva

Eva’s story is one of traumatic removal from her intact family living on a riverbank in western Queensland. She was raised in the institutional system. Her childhood was one of foster homes and girls’ institutions and finally a reform school. She was removed from her Aboriginal camp as a five-year-old child. She recalls the homes she was placed in afterwards. She experienced sexual abuse from her first non-indigenous home at five years old. She was labelled a troublemaker at both the home and the school and was sent back into the child protection system and institutions including being sent to the notorious Hay Reform School. At 18 years, when she left Hay Reform School, she says she was educated “for nothing”. She has mental health issues and has worked as a sex worker. She became a heroin addict. She has birthed many children but does not know them all. She has no idea who or where five of her children are.

Brenda

Brenda is a fair-skinned Aboriginal woman. She has no knowledge of her family, tribal group or country; she only knows she is Aboriginal. She was removed at birth for adoption. Fair-skinned Aboriginal children were removed at birth so they did not know their birth parents or culture. She was sent to school by her adoptive parents but she found the regulations and expectations too difficult. Instead, she spent her days at the creek behind the school, although she would attend for lunchtime and sports days. She remains opposed to any official or government
involvement in her life and she will not interact with medical services. Brenda has spent most of her life looking after herself and has lived on the streets. She considers this her real education.

**Esther**

Esther is a dark-skinned Aboriginal woman who was abandoned by her white mother as a child. Her father was an Aboriginal man who worked on the family property of her mother in North Queensland. Although the family liked the young man, they would not give permission for their daughter to marry an Aboriginal man when she became pregnant. They believed a mixed marriage would be too difficult on their daughter. Esther’s biological mother raised her until she was nine months old and adored her. However, her mother became engaged to a non-indigenous man who refused to raise a black baby. She took the baby to a Brisbane orphanage and two times went back for her. Eventually, the fiancé said it was not going to happen.

**Keith**

Keith is a practising medical doctor. He believes his children and grandchildren are not as exposed to racism by living with some degree of cultural safety in a town with an Aboriginal population. As a newborn, he was removed at birth from his mother. He lived at the hospital where he was born for nine months without a name. Because he was a very dark-skinned baby, he was difficult to place with a white family. He was adopted by a white upper-middle-class family who raised him as one of their three sons. He attended a private boys’ school in the city but he was aware that he never quite fitted in there. He knew he did not belong and would fight any children who called him Aboriginal.

**Valda**

Valda was raised by her own parents in North Queensland. Her mother was an Aboriginal woman and her father was from the South Sea Islands. Valda completed high school and was given a Commonwealth scholarship to undertake a university Diploma of Indigenous Public Health in New South Wales. Valda’s mother was a stolen child and she says she was raised with over-strict discipline by her very controlling mother. Her mother feared she would lose her child and needed to know where she was at all times. Valda is a confident woman in most areas but prefers not to engage with schools. She is aware of her cultural heritage although she has chosen
not to learn much of the knowledge her family could offer her. She feels it was “old knowledge” that she does not need nowadays.

**The First Storyteller: Eva**

Eva is an olive-skinned Aboriginal woman. She was a stolen child and has only recently, at aged 50, managed to find her mother. She is a painter and has contributed art to decorate the playgroup as her way of connection and involvement. Before I offer Eva’s story, I will situate her as a biological grandmother to a 10-month-old boy in the playgroup. This grandson, David, is in the care of a foster mother who lives in the next street to Eva. The foster mother is Kate. David comes to playgroup every week with Kate and his biological aunt, Wendy. Wendy is Eva’s daughter and lives with her mother. Eva has some kin care time with her grandson but suffers such severe anxiety and agoraphobia that she does not leave the house. When Wendy spoke to her mother about my research at the playgroup, Eva telephoned me and invited me to her house.

Eva is very attractive. She wears immaculate make-up. She is dressed as if going out to somewhere special. Her daughter, Wendy, tells me it takes Eva two hours to get ready every morning. She only leaves the house if she must. The family are welfare dependent on disability pensions. They have no car so all outings require public transport. The house is immaculate. It is cleaned top to bottom daily.

Eva and Wendy both suffer mental health issues and have attempted suicide a number of times. Because they do not qualify for kin care because of health issues, they only have some visitation time with David. Eva was raised in a number of foster homes and institutions. She was repeatedly sexually abused from the time she was placed in the first foster home at age five. Her final home was the Hay Reform School for girls from which she was released at age 18.

While Eva birthed nine children, she does not know where five of them are because they were removed at birth. She knows that she has a daughter in Ipswich and one son in Victoria in jail. Wendy is a storyteller in the next chapter. During Eva’s childhood, she had no schooling. She was illiterate when she was released from Hay Home to fend for herself on the streets. As an adult, Eva taught herself to read and write with the assistance of a public librarian.
A stolen child in the institution

I will never forget the day they took us. I don’t know if I was six or five I think. I was living on the Amaroo River. I lived with my brothers and sisters, a lot of cousins and aunties and uncles and we were living in tents and caves on the river. These big black cars pulled up and my mother was screaming and trying to hold onto me but these men pulled me away. That was the last time I saw them. My mum was a white woman. She came out to Australia from Scotland and she married my dad. He was Aboriginal man. We lived there with all the kids, family, uncles and aunties. There were lots of kids at the camp, all rounded up and taken that day. I was five or six when I was taken. It didn’t matter if your mother was white. If the father was Aboriginal, you were Aboriginal.

On the river, my dad used to teach us about the animals, the snakes and what ones not to go near because they were poisonous. Dad would hunt and show us how to cook. Kangaroo, porcupine, stuff like that. I can’t remember everything because I was little. I do remember the kangaroo and porky. I don’t know the name of my people or any of our ways or stories. I remember the day they came to get us. Big car pulled up and talking to parents and then bully men (police) just came over and grabbed us. My brothers wouldn’t go. They were chasing them and grabbed them. We got pushed in the car, we were all crying. We didn’t want to go.

I was so angry at my mother for letting them take me. When I grew up I got my state ward file and there were letters in there, just stored still in the envelopes. No one even read them. Letters telling them they had no right to take us and to give us back but we didn’t get given back. She just drank after we were taken, almost to death. My dad died just after that. He pined away when he lost us. I didn’t get to see him again. I went searching for him and found his brother and he told us all about it. He died young, died of a broken heart. Mum, well she started drinking and drank herself to bad health. She’s got blocked arteries; she smokes all
the time and has become a nervous wreck. She said she had nothing to live for. I don’t feel any sort of bond. We talk on the phone once a week. I only found her a little while ago. I have not been to see her yet. I want to.

The damage to me was so horrific I don’t know how to show love. I can’t show the emotion of love. It’s not that I don’t love my kids, I just can’t show it. I can’t show it and I can’t accept it back. I have no emotions inside. I just feel cold inside and sometimes I just feel like I am dead walking. I stopped feeling anything to survive in those homes. The brutality, hidings, bashings, isolation you know locked in, humiliated over the years by foster families, the humiliation of how I was treated locked up most of those times and I was only a girl. I was raped and touched and made do things. I have attempted suicide many, many times because I feel what I am here for?

Even though I have had my own kids and had years and years of welfare taking those kids taken away. Here I am in my fifties and now I’ve got to fight for my grandkids going through the same cycle. Years and years of having the welfare taking my kids away like I repeated the cycle. I wouldn’t recognise some of my own kids if I saw them in the street. Two grandkids in care, one has been in about 15 different foster homes they’ve had him in and passed around like pass the parcel he’s like me inside. He’s got the same feeling like I’ve got inside because of being as badly damaged as a little boy. He doesn’t know how to take the love, or accept it back and I feel sorry for him. But he is doing the wrong thing how he treats his wife. He’s really screwed up.

In the homes I was denied education. I hate the government for that. The only education I had was when I went to a foster family first thing after I was taken. I was being assaulted, fully raped every night. That is why I couldn’t settle down at school because I was getting raped every night. The school complained that I was too disruptive. So they put me back in the home because I was too much trouble. In Hay there was no school, just cleaning. I still have problems being in public. I have problems as a grown woman if anyone looks at me sideways I feel like I want to pick ‘em, and want to bloody punch them out. They are looking at me because
of the colour of the skin. My husband didn’t even realise this country was so racist. I mean he was in the shopping centre with me. Some bloke says to me, “Hurry up you black bitch”. They wouldn’t say that to a white woman.

Wendy wants me to show her love but I can’t. I was told all the time I would never amount to anything, I was a dumb black idiot, getting told I was useless; I am a dumb black, that was grounded into my heart. That is what I’ve carried with me all my life. When I got out of Hay, I got into the drugs. I could not get a job, so I got into prostitution and used the drugs to cope with the prostitution.

I got into a life of crime and drugs and I turned into a heroin user and developed a habit and it took years and years to get out of that. There should be help and there should be ways for our people in this day and age and not have trauma so severely and to the point where it is going to stuff them up for the rest of their lives. That is what I want to do for my little grandson. I know when he leaves Kate’s (white foster carer) he’ll be traumatised because he will go to another strange mob, another white family. I want him to stay with Kate.

In Hay, you had to keep your eyes down and your eyes were always down. If you looked anyone in the eye they’d bash you with the hose. You had to learn the army drill and they used to drill us all the time. Your eyes had to be down 24 hours a day and I have trouble looking at people in the eyes now. And you were not allowed to talk to any of the girls there. And we used to clean all the time. The state government ran it. Men and women were in charge and we had to line and stand naked in front of them. You had to show them your dirty Modess pads when you had your monthlies. Some girls didn’t cope and they did themselves in, one got out and she did herself in right after she got out.

**Insights on Eva’s story**

This story speaks to the helplessness of a people forced to live without rights. Her Scottish mother’s letters in which she begged for her children to be returned
went unopened by the authorities. Her parents were helpless to have her returned. As a teenager she was involved with prostitution and drugs because she had no skills and was not literate. As an adult, she was helpless because her children were also removed. It is a story of desperation, and tragedy, and trauma laid upon trauma. The tragedy of this life story is that it was caused by colonisation and her Aboriginality. Stories like this are often unknown by mainstream Australia.

Eva relates that she does not know how to love her own children. She cares for them. They are well fed, housed and have medical care. Stolen children are often considered unable to parent because they did not experience parenting. I suggest they parent instinctively. However, the severe trauma visited upon them gives them a life based on fear and not of love. The cycle continues. She was just a little girl alone facing abuse on a daily basis. She did not even have school as an escape from horrendous conditions in the institution.

Eva has had no education. When she was sent to school the trauma of sexual abuse in the foster home has her crying out for help at school through her disruptive behaviour. None comes. She was returned to the orphanage and the cycle was repeated. This story speaks to a life without rights. She speaks about her life from a distance in a monotone voice. She has not come to terms with the injustices. Outside of her house is an Aboriginal flag.

The Second Storyteller: Brenda

Brenda’s was the most difficult interview to do of this group. While she agreed to be included, it was difficult to engage her in conversation. Her life seems to be shaped by an air of resistance to any authority. She drives her car although she does not have a licence. She has lost it due to speeding offences and she still prefers to speed. In light of her attitude to authority or conformity she was particularly resistant to me. Her answers to me were toned as if she was being “smart”.

There is a resistance from her to any sort of regulation or expectation to conform. I believe her resistance to me was to my perceived “authority”. Whatever shaped her contrary personality I am not qualified to know. However, I do not know about her early experiences and what she endured as a toddler and a young girl. This story is also of a child who was removed from her mother at birth. She lived in an
orphanage until she was adopted by a white family when she was two. She has no knowledge of her biological family or tribe. She was simply told she was an Aboriginal girl. She has not looked for her family. She says that she will one day when she has nothing else to do.

Brenda has primary school-aged children and grandchildren she brings to playgroup. Their mother comes too. Her grown-up sons still live with her with their partners and children. They live outside of town in the bush in a rented house. She seems to prefer being out of the view of any gaze. She converses very little at playgroup, but sits on a couch to one side near the door. She watches all that goes on without really joining in.

A stolen child in a white home

I was adopted as a toddler about two. No idea who my people are and I’ve got no idea where I am from. I just got told I was adopted and I was an Aboriginal child and nothing else. I didn’t ask and nobody told me anything. I’ve never tried to find them, because I’ve always been busy enough just trying to get by.

I am not sure if my story will help you. I never went to school but my parents tried to send me but I took off. I took off down the pipes behind the school. I’d go up to the school sometimes at lunch to play with the kids. But most of the time I just stayed by myself down the bush. I took off from Grade 1, right from the start I didn’t want to be there. I hated how they made you sit down at desks and just listen and do what they told you. I hated that, to do what you were told.

All these kids sitting stuck in these little desks. I didn’t want to do that. My parents belted me for not going. So I’d get belted, but I would just take off again. I had a mate down there; her parents didn’t send her to school, so she’d meet me down the pipes. We built dams, played with the tadpoles, played in the water. It was a good way to spend the day. I’d go home when the bell rang at three o’clock. I don’t think the teachers cared enough to keep telling my parents. Those teachers were so high and mighty. They didn’t want me there when I did have to go. I was always
different, never good at fitting in. I played up too much. I knew when I wasn’t wanted. I used to go if something good was on. Like I always went on sports days. I like sports.

I can read and write so maybe I went more than I remember going. I can’t really remember anyone teaching me to read. I guess someone taught me that, though a lot of it I learned later. And God knows you need it if you got to go to Centrelink. My whole life is about filling in forms. I’m good at filling in forms (sarcastically). I didn’t go to high school either. I went for a term and I really liked my maths teacher. I was good at maths. I picked it up real fast. I got moved out of his class so I stopped going then and I didn’t ever go back. Black kids were different. Teachers didn’t want us there so I was not taking any bullshit. I took off.

My parents really cracked up about that and so I took off altogether. I must have been about 14 but I wasn’t taking that life anymore. I didn’t feel like I belonged to those people (parents). Not sure I belonged anywhere. So I took off and got my real education on the streets. I went to Brisbane and lived on the streets and then I went to Sydney and Melbourne and Adelaide. I saw a lot. I lived like that for years. I liked the moving around and no one telling you what to do. I learned how to look after myself on the streets. I learned to survive. I figured out I didn’t need to take no crap from anyone. I didn’t need an education. It would have made no difference to my life because I didn’t fit in. I went to work sometimes. Work wasn’t like school. No it was nothing like school. I got treated okay. It didn’t bother me one way or the other.

I did send my kids to school, except for Harry but he got expelled. He’s been expelled for two years now. He’s trouble. Fighting and all sorts of trouble. He’s got mental issues that one. He’s not right. He is allowed to go one day a week now. Some education that is going to give him eh? These schools and all the rules, make you sick. But you gotta send them, it’s the law. He can go to school, but he can’t go to the tuckshop. He can only go to class and he has to take his lunch. You think they would do that to a white kid? No, they would listen to the parents wouldn’t they? Not that an education does much good I reckon. Nah, waste of time. It
didn’t do his brother any good. He went to school and he got an
apprenticeship. Panel beating and he worked at the panel beaters and it
went out of business so now he is concreting just like his other brother
who didn’t get an education. Didn’t do him no good.

The grandkids, they got a better chance. Yeah, I want them to go to
school. It’s different nowadays; they need an education; they need to be
able to use computers and that stuff. They are smart those kids. I make
them go to school. School is not like it was back then. She
(granddaughter) just plays at prep. It’s good. That is what school should
be about, lots of playing, lots of fun for the kids. They’ve got to want to
go. Not all that sitting down at desks and working. They have to do it for
years.

I never go up to school even when they want me to come. I don’t go.
Never. No, I never go near the place. No way. Bloody bullshit. I am not
going anywhere near a school. I don’t go to any of those teacher
meetings or interviews. Those teachers just call you up because they’ve
got more bad news. They can call all they like. I’m not going. If the kid is
playing up at school, it’s their problem. They need to make it fun. I
suppose they can learn and have fun too. I guess so, that is why it is
different now for the grandkids. With me, it was just sit there, shut up, do
this. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what the teacher wanted. I
felt stupid and she made me feel stupid.

My big kids didn’t have playgroup, so I don’t know if it would have made
any difference. I drive down from town and it takes 45 minutes to get
here every week. Playgroup is all right. They learn things here, eh? The
kids like to come and they watch Connie (playgroup leader) and they just
know stuff. They watch everything you do.

At least they don’t try to teach culture in schools. They’d make the kids
sit down and shut up and listen about that too. Our kids would hate
culture too if they taught it in schools. You can’t teach it anyway. You
live it. That’s it. You live it. I know more of it than I realised. You just
know it, and you do it without knowing where it came from. They can’t
bleach it out of you, not all of you even if you grew up in white homes. You know you are different, and when you hear about culture it makes sense. It’s about how we think and live. We are doing it anyway, despite making us live white.

**Insights on Brenda’s story**

Brenda is not an easy person to be around because she offers no “approachable” social cues and does not make eye contact or smile. Such behaviour may have been evident as a child and this led to her difficulties in complying with the norms and regulations of schools. She has an air of defiance and non-cooperation about her but she also demonstrates wonderful kindness to the playgroup children and babies. She is also very insightful. Her outward personality seems a kind of bravado. It says, “Don’t mess with me”. Her way of being in the world is unattractive at first glance, but the reality of Brenda is below the surface. I suspect she uses these characteristics as protection, just as Eva uses agoraphobia as a coping mechanism.

On one hand, Brenda says that she values education very little; yet she makes the long journey of a 40 kilometre round trip to playgroup each week. Perhaps her pronouncements on its value are part of the bravado too. Perhaps she likes to be in the company of the Aboriginal women in the playgroup. She answers my specific question about this as, “Yeah, it’s all right”. She has taken her son to work at a truck yard to wash the trucks. In time, they gave him a job and because he works so hard, they have told her he can drive once he gets his licence. He is not literate but the playgroup supervising teacher has found Brenda a literacy program to that she can take him. She feels her other son’s apprenticeship was useless because he lost his job anyway. She relates school specifically to its practical use of getting a job.

Brenda knows little of her culture and I do wonder what finding her family might mean to her. She has nothing to do with the adopted family who raised her until she “took off”. She is very focused on what childhood should look like which makes me wonder how disciplined her own was. It’s all about play. She wants school to be fun for her children. My impression is school is not for her or her children. She does not engage with the school ever. In fact, I had met her before with the Aboriginal liaison officer. When the school asked her to come up to speak about her son’s behaviour she would make an appointment but never go to the meeting. Over
time, the liaison officer would pick her up and take her to the meeting. She would go when he came along because she felt someone was on her side. She felt out of her depth at the schools and would avoid going in at any cost.

**The Third Storyteller: Esther**

Esther’s story is that of an Aboriginal child raised by an Anglo-Celtic family. She is the biological daughter of an Anglo-Celtic woman and an Aboriginal man. She was voluntarily given up for adoption because of her Aboriginality. Nonetheless, the adopted life was horrific with ongoing sexual abuse from a father figure and difficulties at school. Esther is both grandmother and mother to children in the playgroup and her story reflects both roles. She is respected in the community but does not engage with her Aboriginality. While she is interested in her culture, the knowledge is inaccessible compared to the relative availability of American popular spiritual teachings discussed on television talk shows including *Oprah* and *Dr Phil*. Her home is decorated with tribal American popular motifs like “dream catchers”. She wears layers of silver bracelets decorated with new-age symbols and healing gemstones.

Esther left high school at 16. She was pregnant so married quickly. She has been in three relationships; all with white men. She has birthed children to each of the men. She jokes she has children every decade of her life and asks with humour: “How is that for spacing?” She comes across as intelligent and insightful with deep layers to her but these remain unrevealed. She is reflective about her life. Her usual work was as a caregiver in a nursing home but she has not worked during the years that I have known her through playgroup. She tells me she has ongoing mental health issues with depression and anxiety and can’t handle working.

When Esther was nine months old, her mother became engaged to a white man. He refused to raise a black child. Esther was handed to an orphanage in Brisbane and given up for adoption. At 14 months, Esther was adopted by a white couple with their own biological children as well as other adopted children. She was the only Aboriginal child in the family and in the town. Esther cries as she speaks of this experience. She was abused by the adoptive father throughout the years she lived
there. Despite Esther attending playgroup weekly, she asked me to come to her home to hear her story. A number of her family members, daughters and daughters-in-law attend playgroup. She is a private person. I believe that she preferred to tell me her difficult story privately.

**An abandoned child**

*I knew I was an Aboriginal child right from the word go. The woman who adopted me would call me the “little Aboriginal” or “my little chocolate baby”. She said she always wanted a little chocolate baby. I didn’t know what any of it meant. I knew I was different from the start. I was the only dark child in the family and they all looked alike. They were blue-eyed blondes. I didn’t look like any of them. I also knew I was adopted. They told me that too. I don’t remember a time I didn’t know that. Later she adopted some more children. They all had disabilities.*

*I wasn’t a removed child. My biological mother, Marjorie, wanted to keep me. I’d have been a black bastard in those days and she was a single mother. So they handed me up for adoption to a home in Brisbane. I was nine months at the time, and I got adopted at 14 months. It must have been hard for my mother too. She took me to the home. She didn’t leave me there. She came back and got me twice, but in the end she had to leave me there. Her fiancé said, “Well it is just not going to happen”. She chose him. Since I found her... I talk to my biological mother about that time and she just tells me little bits. We have not had a real conversation about it. She says she would have been a single mother and a white mother with a dark child and it was just not accepted as much in 1959. It was different then.*

*Yes, I met her when I was 31. A lady I knew at church went away. I didn’t know where she was. When she came back I asked her and she said, “I went to Bonham”. And I said, “Oh, that is where my natural mother is from. I was born out there.” And she said, “What was your last name?” I told her and she said, “Yes, I know them all”. So 24 hours later I knew who my mother was, just like that. She was just half an hour down the road all that time.*
When I first found her, she didn’t want to know. She cut me off for a
decade (till I was 40). She was very half-hearted in wanting to stay in
touch. But now she does stay in touch (after the husband died). She
writes me letters and sends me a present for my birthday and things like
that. But she won’t talk about anything. I don’t even know what time I
was born. It’s like a big blank to her. She is a white woman. She looks at
me, this middle-aged black woman. It’s all a bit much for her.

But my father was different. The very weekend I started to find him, he
came to find me. He travelled up to Bonham and he walked into his
Auntie’s house without knocking. So he called me and I talked to him.
Then I met him right away. And for the first time I could really see where
I came from because I was nothing like Marjorie. I looked like him, same
black curly hair and same big black eyes. And my oldest boy looks just
like him. I guess I feared finding him. I feared he might be a drunk on a
park bench with a bottle. That was my biggest fear. He is a Christian
man. He has a job and he’s exactly what I wanted. It’s just so lucky, so
unusual that I found both parents. But with him, it’s totally different.
He’s told me all about my blood line and who I am related to. And all
about Aboriginal things. I’m not sure of the name of our tribe. He told
me but I forget now. He grew up on a mission, down in Wooden in New
South Wales. That is where they took his lot. But he had his mother. She
always travelled with him when he moved around for work. He looked
after his mother.

My adopted mum said I was a very hard baby. She said I was stand
offish. Very hard to cuddle. I just did not want to cuddle. I am still a bit
like that today. I find it very hard to give anyone a hug, even my kids. I
am getting a bit better. I can’t tell anyone I love them, even my husband.
It changed when I started school. Like these big boys in Grade 5 or 6
would chase me all the way home calling me awful names. I was so
petrified of them. I never told my mother or the teachers about the boys. I
kept a lot in. I just stayed quiet. I never talked about anything.

My mother was a very strict lady. We were taught to not tell anybody
anything. I’ve never really told anybody anything until I was about 40. I
never wanted to be noticed I think. I never thought I was good enough, so I just kept quiet and to myself. I get depressed and that makes me quiet too. All through school, I just wanted to be like the other kids. Primary school was okay, but high school was the hardest. The racism got really bad in high school, not just from the kids. A lot of the teachers didn’t want an Aboriginal kid in their class. This one teacher would always blame me for whatever was going on in class. I was always in trouble, even though I was never game enough to do anything. I never had any teachers who were supportive of me or would offer me a bit of extra help. I never got any praise or told I did anything well.

My (adoptive) mother and I were never close. He (the adoptive father) sexually abused me and she shut me up talking about it. She said, “They’ll take all the kids off me and where will you go then?” And my sister was only little so I couldn’t do that to her. So I didn’t tell anyone about it. It was ongoing from when I was 11 to 16. At 16 I met my first husband and left.

School has been better for my kids because they know more about Aboriginal things nowadays. Not my first kids, they did it tough. The kids now have Aboriginal dancing and painting at school, so they can feel they have some things of their own there. This school is real good about that; there are a lot of Aboriginal kids there. They don’t feel so left out. It wasn’t as easy for my eldest kids. When they were at school it was still hard. I was so poor too. I couldn’t buy them the things they needed and wanted. I remember once feeling so sorry for my son. He had to colour in this map and we had no colouring pencils and he just had to go to school the next day and get into trouble for not having his homework done.

I tell my kids to enjoy school and enjoy their friends. I don’t know why the boys (grandsons and sons) get in trouble so much. The school is always getting me up because they are fighting. I tell them, you just have to go and get through these years and then as soon as you can leave school you can get a job. No, I don’t think education does that much for our kids. Our kids don’t seem to be able to get a job even if they finish school. The boys are out of work most of the time, and my girl well she’s
married and got kids now. If you go to school you should at least be able
to get a job I reckon.

Insights on Esther’s story

This is a traumatic and complex story of abandonment and childhood sexual abuse. She presents as a strong woman when you first meet her but over time there is a sense of her living in a magical reality. It is a life constructed by denial; then reconstructed in unreality. I suspect this has been a survival mechanism that she has used since she was a very young child. Her adoptive mother interprets her fear and bewilderment as “stand-offish” behaviour.

Her trauma is sidelined by her crystals and tarot readings that she uses to create her identity and place of belonging. I felt there was far too much pain there to deal with, so it is excluded from her inner life world. It was a storytelling with long silences. She cried often but refused to abort the meeting. She wants her story heard and says, “No, it’s good, I want to tell you this story. It’s better than therapy.” She often reaches out to spiritual readers and new-age counsellors. She puts on a “brave face” when speaking of the hardships. It allows her to survive the horror of her childhood and the difficulty of her current unhappy marriage with a verbally abusive husband who physically punishes her boys.

Esther has many lovely stories about her Aboriginal Christian father who is “exactly what I wanted”. Her belief that her biological parents were in love and wanted to marry appears as a fairytale story; or the life that she would have liked. She says how lucky she is to have found both her parents. For an Aboriginal woman that is the truth. She has found where she comes from but her mother looks like any other older white woman and she has no sense of connection there. Her adopted mother has also betrayed and abused her by allowing the sexual abuse to continue.

She is interested in her cultural roots, but does not have the language and cultural memory to place the words when she hears them. Her Aboriginal father tells her the name of her tribal people, but she is unused to the sound of Aboriginal words and cannot recall it. It offers her no sense of cultural safety or strength. Esther’s school life provided her with no sense of achievement, pleasure or challenge. Her
drama classes and singing talents have given her acknowledgement and achievement as have her sporting abilities.

School was simply something to “get through”. She passes this attitude onto her children when she states she tells her children just to go to school and enjoy the time with your friends. It speaks to how school may have been a safer haven for her than her abusive home environment. Even though she experiences othering and racism at school, it was not as horrific as her adopted home.

The Fourth Storyteller: Keith

I have included the narrative of Keith who is a playgroup grandfather. He is always keen to be at playgroup to interact with his grandchild. Despite what he endured, he understands his academic ability and as an adult went to university to become a doctor. He lost the years of parenting his own child because of what he calls his “demons and an alcohol addiction”. His ability to grandparent presents as an atonement on his own life.

He is known to me through the playgroup and through community organisations. When we met at the time I was establishing the playgroup, we sat and discussed our families as is the way with Aboriginal people. It is a conversation most Aboriginal people have when they meet. We discovered we had some of the same kin line although we could not determine exactly where we are related.

Keith attends playgroup with his grandson and is very focused on ensuring the child knows his family, his culture and has a good experience at school. He speaks often with the little group of children about Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. He did not have a successful or happy school experience in an all-white school. Keith left school as soon as he was old enough. He ran away to find his Aboriginal family about whom he knew nothing. He went to university to complete professional qualifications.

His daughter and grandson live with him for much of the year. His daughter was less often at playgroup because she was at university on playgroup days, training to be a nurse so she can work in Aboriginal health. Keith moved out of the area to a different job shortly after this interview and when his grandchild had left playgroup. I met him recently, four years later, and the first thing he asked me was had I talked
to the old Gungarri Aunties to find out who he was related to. He is still looking for his family. At nearly 60, he is still looking for where he belongs.

A stolen child: A “privileged” life

It’s no accident I am a doctor, but I never really thought it through. I just wanted to make a difference. I just knew I could handle the study, as I learn things very quickly and easily really. I wanted to help my people, but most of all I wanted a position of authority if I am really honest. I think I wanted the authority to control my own life. Anyway, I just decided to do medicine, even though I hadn’t finished high school, and I got on with it. I wanted to have a say so the sort of thing I went through would stop. I didn’t know my mother and she never knew me. I was taken at the hospital, stolen from my mother at birth. I never met her and when I looked for her as soon as I could, she was already dead. No one really knows what happened to her but I suspect the worst. Poor thing, she was just a girl. It was common practice those days, taking the Aboriginal babies at the hospital. If they could get us as soon as we were born they thought we could grow up white.

I went back to the hospital where I was born to find out who I was. One (worker) told me my mother came every day weeping and wailing. She wanted her baby. She came every day until they got the police to drive her off. She had no one to stand up for her, no one to help. They did tell me she was from out west. I always just knew that. Your country calls you I think, at least it called me. I felt I was from the south-west, and I was. No idea who my father was. My mother was living in the city, so no one out there knew. I feel like I am all Aboriginal.

At the hospital, there was no one to adopt me so I just lived in the hospital for nine months. The nurses looked after me. A well-to-do family adopted me. I guess I was their little good deed, and they were the white saviours all right. I am not angry at them, they were actually good people. I am just so angry at the situation. I didn’t understand why I didn’t deserve to grow up with my own mother and my own people. We are all human beings here.
Even as a child I would wonder why were the boys in my adopted family allowed to be with their own mother and I wasn’t? I just longed to know my own people. The adopted parents had two sons of their own. They (the parents) kept in touch with me all my life. It was not the parental care you give to your own, not that sort of love but they looked after me, so I was fed and clothed and went to school. I never had a hug or really felt any love, but they were good people so I was one of the lucky ones. A lot of our mob has had it so much harder.

There was no doubt in my mind; I knew I did not belong there. I was black as and they were white. We lived in an exclusive suburb on the river. There was not another black face anywhere to be seen in the town. I didn’t fit in, and I didn’t want to. I went to a private boys’ school near the city. They dressed me up in the uniform. I was the only black kid at home and now I was the only black kid at the school. Obviously my own mother couldn’t raise me so we must be some bad fellas us black mob. That is what I thought but I didn’t really believe it. I didn’t think I was bad. I was just a kid.

The other students at school tormented me. Talk about racist, they wanted nothing to do with me. I was not one of that crowd. I was the little Abo from nowhere and not going anywhere. I hated school, just loathed it. I don’t know if I was any good at the work it was just pure hell. It was hard not to go when the other two were sent so I just went, got bullied, got belted up and called every name. I just shut up and endured it and never dobbed anyone in. I would never have told those parents it was horrible.

The teachers in class ignored me like I was just not there and were condescending if they had to interact with me. My parents didn’t worry too much, not that I told them any of the problems. They sent me thinking what a wonderful thing they were doing giving me this expensive education. No one had any expectations of me doing well. I just remember them signing my report card, but nothing was ever really discussed about it good or bad.
The day I turned 15 (when you could legally leave school) I took off and headed up north looking for my own mob. I kind of worked it out a bit. I knew my mother was from Queensland and that is where I went. I just kept talking to blackfellas and getting what information I could till I ended up out west in country. I didn’t keep in touch with the adopted parents then, but years later I did. We keep in touch now. We even see each other from time to time. I do appreciate what they did for me, considering the times. It was not their fault what happened. We all see it for what it was.

I don’t think my mother told anyone she was pregnant or that she had that baby in the city. I heard she died under a train, I reckon it was all too much for her. I must have been about seven when she died. She didn’t even make it to 30. She was a drinker. I wish she’d taken care of herself so I could find her but she didn’t know I would come looking. She was only a girl herself.

Insights on Keith’s Story

Even though Keith was placed in a “good” home, his innate cultural knowings disrupted his world. He wanted to know and be where he belonged. He too was a stolen child. Even as a child he sensed injustice and wanted to be with his own kind. Keith did not grow up with any grounded identity in his adopted home. He carried the trauma of being taken from his mother. He is a very intelligent man with a strong intuitive sense.

Throughout his time in the city school, he is simply biding time. He reflects that he was cared for but the love he received was not the love a child needs. He speaks to this when he speaks about his grandson, and how much he adores the child. He lost his youth to alcohol, along with his marriage and his daughter’s childhood. Nonetheless he seeks redemption with his daughter as an adult and seeks to heal the rift between them and to give her the education and skills to empower herself. He seeks human rights for his people from the most powerful position he could create for himself.
He too has not known love or been able to love until he was old enough to analyse it for himself. With maturity, he understands he can construct his own power through his qualifications and professional position. His intelligence and insight lead him into transformation through education. He is overwhelmed with love for his grandchild. It is in giving this love that he has learned about what he did not have. He has learned much across his lifespan.

The Fifth Storyteller: Valda

Valda is the only storyteller in this chapter who was not taken as a child. She is the daughter of a stolen child, which carries its own weight and issues. Valda often describes her fears of being taken as a child. It even impacts on her when she goes to school as she fears she will not see her mother again. Valda lives with her own family until she finishes high school with a senior certificate at the end of Year 12. She is given a Commonwealth scholarship to study for a Diploma in Indigenous Health. She said she had no interest in health but took the opportunity. She has worked in Indigenous health until recently. She is not working at present. She is 57 years old.

Valda is the maternal grandmother to children who attend playgroup. Their paternal grandmother is Brenda who was an earlier storyteller in this chapter. Valda has recently stopped working because she felt “burnt out”. While she needs to return to work she is hoping to do different work. Valda has two daughters and is a very hands-on grandmother. I watch her scoop up her granddaughter to change her without waiting to be asked. She seems to assume a co-parenting role. Valda is a quiet woman. Her other child at playgroup is her intellectually impaired son. He is 18 and lives at home. He is now too old for the special school that he previously attended and she is trying to find him a program to go into. She brings him along to playgroup too as a family outing. Playgroup is an extended family outing for the whole family.

Valda grew up in North Queensland knowing both her Aboriginal and South Sea Islander families. Both cultures are different, but she actually seems to live in neither culture. She identifies as Aboriginal and must know both ways. She follows a more Western and middle path. She does not express any knowledge about her
cultures unless I specifically ask her. It may be a way of passing, by acting as white. Her daughter is dark-skinned while her son is very fair. This is not unusual in Aboriginal families. I get the impression from Val that knowing her culture offers her no strength.

Raised by her biological parents

I do remember my first day at school. It was the most horrific day of my life. I thought I was going to die. I was just so stressed I didn’t know if my mother was going to be there in the afternoon. I thought I might have been “taken” and no one would be there when I got back home. I worried for weeks, waiting for Child Protection to come take me when my mother wasn’t there to hide me. My mother had been taken and she was always so scared I would be taken too. She had to know where I was every minute, all the time. I think it turned me into an over-anxious child. I still deal with anxiety today. We were always scared at home, fearful of the bully men taking the kids away.

But after a time I got used to school, I didn’t mind school. I was a good student. I completed Year 11 and Year 12 then the Commonwealth Employment Service found me a course. I went to study a Diploma in Indigenous Health Studies and I worked in Indigenous health. I was too young to notice anything about how the teachers treated me. If they did treat me differently I don’t really remember. I was scared of them, that I remember. I kept real quiet and did my work. I watched the other kids. It was always real emotional. I was always afraid I was about to get in trouble. I guess I knew I was different, being so black and there were no other black kids at school in those days. These days it’s a piece of cake because all colours are at school. In high school it was very different. It was bad. There were teachers who looked down their nose at you. Some of the teachers didn’t really like coloured kids or teaching coloured kids. They were abrupt to us, talked to us like we were dumb and ignored us. All the black students were treated like we were all dumb and troublemakers. In school it could be okay but if there was a mob of us we would get into trouble.
Not so much the girls, but the boys got singled out a lot. Like if two or more boys sat together it was assumed it was a gang and they could have been cousins just talking. We got paranoid about it and kept watching out. We couldn’t stand together too long. You couldn’t sit together or stand around and talk to your cousins or they’d think we were up to something and chase us off for “ganging up”. Lots of the kids were related and we couldn’t talk to our cousins without being thought we were up to no good.

Yet they wouldn’t have said a thing to a group of white kids. We were just obvious because we were the black kids. They stereotyped all of us – like one bad apple and we were all considered bad because we were black. Yet I don’t remember any of us being bad or causing trouble. It never occurred to me you could be anything – like a profession or that sort of job. I got sent off to do the Indigenous health course and that was it. It was okay. It’s funny how sometimes you are just good at things that you are not even interested in. I’m 57 now. That’s old for our mob, we don’t live to be too old you know.

Yes, I wanted her to stay at school but I wouldn’t push them to stay at school. They got to learn by their own mistakes. I learned by mine. She’s doing okay. The grandkids go to school. I tell them to go to school so they don’t have to pick fruit. I tell him he can be anything if he gets an education, not the street sweeper. But he isn’t interested in school.

You still have some teachers that have the racial degree. The teachers at the kids’ school say it’s too hard to teach all the kids, and there are about 30 kids. They say they don’t have time for extra attention. Just a bit of notice to feel important. I never got any praise at school, ever. Kids need that. Every kid needs that eh?

I still don’t feel like I belong in the schools, even with the grandkids. No you feel different all right unless it’s a school with lots of Indigenous kids. You get the feeling you shouldn’t be here – everyone looks at you. It’s different if there are other Indigenous kids there. Like my granddaughter is so white and they see her with this old black grandmother and they look really shocked and stare at me. I hate going
into the school. I don’t go if I don’t have to. I did go in on Mother’s Day because they had an Indigenous dance group. I said to my daughter, “You sending me to the child’s school where the kids don’t even know me”. I don’t want those teachers and kids to think different about her, because they can be cruel if they know you are an Aboriginal kid.

My parents are Indigenous – my dad’s mother was raised in country till she was taken. She’s a part of the stolen generation but she was raised long enough by her own mother to be taught her ways. She knew a lot of the old healing ways. She knew a lot of black magic. It was very powerful stuff and you have to make sure in your heart that who you handed it on to could handle it or you couldn’t hand it on. It was taken very seriously, that knowledge. Only the kids that could handle it could be given it, and she said it was old ways now and not to be handed on and said she would take it to the grave. And she took it to the grave. All that knowledge was lost. But I am happy the way I am.

Insights on Valda’s story

Valda reveals a very different childhood experience to the other four narrators in this chapter. Her story related almost entirely to her education and schooling and she speaks of her children’s education. Her life does not have the overriding severe traumatic experiences of removal or abuse. She does reveal a high level of anxiety, from living with a parent who has been removed. This is a typical response for the offspring of removed children who live in fear of removal. Valda does present as a very anxious woman and stories of this anxiety are interwoven throughout her narrative. Her earliest memories of her childhood and schooling relate to anxiety.

Valda’s mother typically would be over-anxious, controlling and over-protective of her children, causing Valda to be anxious about going to school and fearful that she would be taken from school. This anxiety stays with her and is testimony to being an offspring of a stolen child. These are characteristics assigned to children and at times grandchildren of stolen children. In school she recognises she is othered by the teachers and her strategy is to be the quiet and good student. The elder story of Aunty May spoke of this also. Both expressed “not being wanted” at school, so acted so as not to be noticed to achieve their education. Both May and
Valda also spoke of being good students and wanting to do well. Both women, while separated by thirty years, had a similar schooling experience based upon racism and teacher expectations. Another similarity is their focus on speaking to their education as both were raised by their own parents and in culture. Valda also recognises the injustice of discriminatory practice toward her cousins at school. The children are essentialised as problematic and their gatherings are seen to be “gang-like”, when the children are simply mixing with their friends and family. Such constructions are not ones Anglo-Celtic Australians ever have to consider. There is no logic to this. Who are the Aboriginal children supposed to associate with, if not their friends from their own culture?

Valda has led a relatively “normal” life. She has had to opportunity to live and be loved within her own family. She is well educated and employed. She knows her culture and has made choices about what to take from her culture and what to leave as “old ways” that do not suit her now. She has strength and resilience and operates well in both cultures. This is not the case in any of the other interviews. The previous participants have struggled with serious attachment, abuse, racism and cultural poverty. In fact Valda, who was not removed under the Act, is the most assimilated socially of all the participants in this group. She is a woman who is confident and at ease socially.

She speaks very little about culture. I do wonder why she was dismissive of traditional knowledge as a young woman or if this sensibility has come to her during her working life where her old ways of knowing and healing are considered “black arts”. She explains this old healing knowledge away saying they were the old ways as if that meant they belonged in old times. Perhaps it is a sentiment she has acquired through working in the arena of modern Western health. “I am better off as I am” she says, suggesting she has left the old ways behind her. I get the sense she would like to leave her identification as Aboriginal behind too.

She does not like to go to the school where her white-skinned grandchildren are because she does not want them identified as Aboriginal. She fears how they might be othered. She does not feel she belongs at the school. She does not want to point out the Aboriginal heritage of her white grandchildren and she feels out of place in the school. She enjoyed going when the Aboriginal dancers were at school and there were other black faces. She does recognise the need for Aboriginal teachers
and workers in schools who do not other Aboriginal children. Valda’s life journey is not nourished by her traditional culture. Nor has it been shaped by severe trauma. She is a stable person and has held down a job and had an education. She has made choices about her Aboriginality from a point of strength in her life. I feel she simply accepts it as “her lot”, but chooses to live in the modernised world. She identifies her cultural ways as being old fashioned. She lamented to me that she would have preferred to be in a mainstream health course because the Aboriginal course was seen as “special” by non-indigenous students at university. She gives me the impression she has grown tired of being “noticed” or othered as “different” when she is simply trying to get on with living her life.

**Ideas from the Grandparents**

This generation of grandparents lived mostly without traditional Indigenous culture because this generation was removed from their traditional cultural teachers. All the storytellers of this grandparent generation report mental health issues including depression and anxiety. I would suggest a life living in fear would manifest itself in this way because of the lack of mental peace. My presence did not cause the anxiety but the issues that they recollected were difficult to revisit. All expressed their desire to tell their stories and it did not cause anxiety to them. They reported it was beneficial. Like the elders’ stories, racism, discrimination and othering were common. However, the elders retained cultural resilience and told heroic-style survivor stories. None of these grandparent stories suggested heroic themes. While the elders’ themes I identified such as othering and racism apply equally to this generation, I identify the following themes to discuss for the grandparents: being strong in culture and valuing education.

**Culture strong**

The children in this generation have lost the traditional maintenance of their culture by losing their cultural teachers. They have no sense of tribal or cultural knowledge, resilience or connectedness to country or ways. However, all of the storytellers knew of their Aboriginality. While at least two of the children were removed at birth, they were aware that they were innately Aboriginal and different from the white families who raised them.
These stories suggest that people can be bi-culturally strong when both cultures exist and are respected. However, your own cultural sense remains within you as a deep knowing. If it can no longer be fully known, it is a traumatised space because it carries a sense of grief and loss. As Keith said, “Your country calls you”. All of the participants actively sought out their connections and culture. Brenda, who presented generally as “uninterested”, is nevertheless living in culture as she knows it. She wears Aboriginal colours, displays the Aboriginal flag on her car and at home and attends the Aboriginal playgroup with her grandchildren. She has connections to kinship groups and traditional ways. Her sons are in the town’s Aboriginal football team. With the exception of Valda, this is a group of people who have been removed from culture, country, and the interconnected ways of being with family.

Each of the storytellers felt isolated as children and had to endure whatever circumstances were assigned to them. Their lives have called for personal resilience merely to survive. Traumatic stories of child abuse, abandonment and not belonging are carried by these storytellers through their lives. Such experiences tend to be the model of parenting the abused children learn and know. They are inclined to repeat it with their own children as well as seek out partners who will continue the abuse. The cycle continues across generations. All of the grandparents’ stories speak to psychological impacts from the consequences of their early experiences.

Valuing education

These storytellers do not assign much value to the education that they received in their childhood. The purpose for removal of children was twofold: first, to remove children from learning their culture and, second, to teach them to “be white”. However, the children all knew of their Aboriginality, which caused another layer of trauma. In schools they were constructed as intellectually and ethnically deficit and exposed to racism. Valda coped better with the situation because she had the strength of family and sees the injustice of how she is treated at school. Like Aunty May, she speaks of strategising to be invisible and she is also a good student. She does not go on to a tertiary education because she aspires to it but rather because she is given a scholarship.

Keith is now the educated man. He has acquired his education later in life. It is not an outcome of his early schooling. He has taken an adult Indigenous entry into
university because he did not complete high school. He recognised after he recovered from alcoholism that he is a highly intelligent man. He easily completes his medical qualifications. He has sought education as a tool of empowerment. It offers him a way to protect himself and his family, including his grandson. He does not wish to be in a helpless position again. The traumatic life he led did not allow him to do this earlier; in fact he told me his alcoholism so damaged his health that he was not expected to live. As a doctor, he is defending helpless children, just as he would have wanted someone to defend him.

Brenda disengaged from school from her first year. She wishes school was more fun for her children. I suspect she may have spent more time at school than she suggests. It was time enough to learn that she did not belong there or did not want to be there so she abandoned it to “play in the water pipes” behind the school. She refuses to go into the schools now. Her older children are often at playgroup with her so it appears that she does not send them on a regular basis. Significantly, she does not see education as related to training or jobs. She interprets the ability to secure a job to be based on self-efficacy. This is what she teaches her children. She teaches her illiterate son the value of working harder than you are asked. She does not make any association between school and work. Nonetheless she does want a better educational experience for her grandchildren. It may be that she wants them to fit in and be happier at school.

Valda went to school where she constructed herself as the good student. She is offered a scholarship when she seeks out the Commonwealth Employment Office when she finishes school. She finds she is good at her course and her job, despite it not being of particular interest to her. This speaks to her real abilities had she been guided toward a career at school. Instead, the teacher had low expectations of her. She does not relate learning or achieving at school to any longer term goals for her grandchildren. She wants them to enjoy school and be happy and fit in there. Her early home life speaks to the experience of maternal over-protection and fear; controlling and authoritarian parenting that stifles children and recreates anxiety in their offspring’s lives.

It is likely that all the children of parents who were the stolen children may also have experienced such childhoods. I have experienced it as the granddaughter of a stolen child. Stout and Peters (2011) discuss the legacy of removing children to
residential schools in Canada and the impact on the offspring generations. I suggest the findings around trauma and fear transfer into the Australian setting. None of the removed children whose stories are told in this chapter reported loving homes or happy childhoods.

Conclusions: The Stories of the Grandparents

The most significant difference between the narratives in this chapter and those in the previous one is the lack of familiar belonging and engagement in culture. Four of the five storytellers were removed children and the fifth storyteller is the daughter of a stolen child. All of the participants have experienced the direct impact of being a stolen child or experienced the consequences of such events. Their lives have continued to be framed by trauma and fear and helplessness. The one storyteller who was not stolen leads the least dysfunctional life, although she too speaks of her difficulties with depression and anxiety. She has had her family but has rejected the cultural teachings along with any resilience and healing it may have offered.

This generation of children was more vulnerable than the last generation because they were raised without traditional Indigenous culture, identity, or without any protection of stories. The shape of their childhood was survival. I feel after the conversations that they have only achieved physical survival. Overall I left these interviews feeling these were “child survivors” and as adults these individuals had had no cultural healing restoration of their culture for them. Their stories speak to significant psychological difficulties.

Overall, the teaching stories of these storytellers were not shaped by education and their reports of their education are very negative. Fear is also spoken of in this section that was also present in the elders’ stories relating to teachers and authority figures. Mostly, these grandparents were “lost” children who continue to struggle with the consequences of traumatic childhoods. The one child raised by her own family is more successful. She became educated and lives a relatively stable life. Because of the life experiences of this generation, school and education were not major concerns across their lives. Their stories usually do not speak to a valuing of education. This generation signals the end of significant cultural supports for most Aboriginal Australians in that so few lived with their cultural teachers.
Chapter 7: The Murri “Mums and Bubs”

Introduction

This chapter speaks to the current generation of Aboriginal families. It includes the voices of parents and children who attend the playgroup. I introduce and tell the stories of five mothers; four are Aboriginal and one is not an Aboriginal woman but has married an Aboriginal man and has children with him. The stories contain the mothers’ experiences in their education as well as their current experiences with their children’s schooling. While many of the stories speak to schooling issues mentioned by the storytellers in the other generations, they also speak to changing practices. The stories attest that change is occurring but it is not top-down from the school itself or the education system; rather, it is initiations from the Murri parents.

The playgroup story is a strong positive teaching story to take from this set of stories. It became an entity of its own, and it has journeyed beyond its original expectations and acted to empower and build social capital within this group of Murri Mums. This chapter is one of hope that transformation can occur for the education of the next generations of Aboriginal children. These stories are testament to the self-efficacy of a group of women who have become more empowered through their community connections and the playgroup. On playgroup days many family members attend with the children. As the playgroup has developed into an Indigenous community hub many community fathers, foster mothers, aunts and carers, and grannies attend regularly. In one family, both the maternal and paternal grandmothers attend weekly. As an Aboriginal hub, it is everyone’s business to see to the education of the children.

However, the group of mothers interviewed here were instrumental to the development of the playgroup. They acted as the collaborative drivers of this research project. They are a core group of mothers who attend most regularly and who were central to the decision-making, operation and ownership of the playgroup. The mothers are the group with whom I interacted on a weekly basis. This group refer to themselves as the “Murri Mums”. These families also carry the intergenerational burden of Aboriginal trauma and history, as described in the
previous chapters. They also continue to contend with racism and the dominant deficit discourse about Aboriginality. Each of the participants has been impacted by the types of issues described by the previous storytellers. The playgroup offers a simple place of meeting, belonging and being, within a mainstream school; yet, it is an important space of cultural safety.

This group of storytellers are at the culmination of the generational stories. This generation of storytellers are modern urban people; many have never stepped on country. Few of them know their culture, or what it means to be an Aboriginal person. As Murri Mums, their actions of establishing and interconnecting through a Murri playgroup were never overtly political or transformative acts but rather acts that were envisaged to prepare their children for school in a social cultural atmosphere. Their lives speak to issues of identity and loss of Aboriginal cultural maintenance. Their lives also give a testament to the urban Murri experience. This chapter is a story of playgroup and its young people. It is an urban tribe.

**The Playgroup Context**

The stories in this chapter are contextualised within the social urban reality of the young Murri families’ lives. Socially, this group would be constructed by the dominant majority as marginalised. Their ideas are current, and speak to wanting fairness and justice for their children. Sadly, the impact of emotional traumas remains in the present for this generation. Many of the mothers spoke openly in the group about their health issues, and many expressed difficulties with depression and anxiety. In Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis I discussed some of the contemporary issues facing Indigenous families. These issues include over-representation in prison populations for both men and women; over-representation of Aboriginal children in children’s services; dual-culture marriages; and fair-skinned Aboriginal people as well as issues around identity and urbanisation. While their lives are impacted by these issues, Aboriginal people remain constructed negatively. In this section I write to many circumstances such as incarceration, child protection interactions, and schooling issues that remain common to Aboriginal lives and family contexts.
Our missing Aboriginal fathers

In this chapter, I had planned to include the voice of one Aboriginal father because I had one male voice as a storyteller in each of the previous chapters. There were only three Aboriginal fathers “present” in the families of these playgroup children. One was incarcerated; the second was living in western Queensland on a fly-in and fly-out mining job; and the third, Ben, was an unemployed 19-year-old who was also the grandson of one of the elder storytellers. At the time I began collecting his story, Ben had spent two years in juvenile detention. He was illiterate despite having reasonable attendance at school throughout his childhood. He now had a 20-year-old girlfriend and an infant daughter, Luna. He did not have a driver’s licence. He told me that he could not get one initially because he was illiterate and he could not read the road rules manual for the test. By the time he found out you could take an oral test, he already had driving convictions to prevent him from qualifying for a licence. As his grandmother was an invalid he drove her, his wife and baby to the playgroup which was a distance from where they lived in a rural area.

Shortly after I began to listen to Ben’s story he had a court date, and was re-incarcerated. He told me it was for driving without a licence. He told his grandmother he was happy to continue to tell me his story from jail, if we could visit him. Granny applied for me to be a visitor. A character check was undertaken of me, as well as a check on my personal details. I was instructed to wear enclosed shoes and told I could bring nothing in. It took a full day to drive to see him, spend a two-hour visit, and return to the north coast. A visit meant leaving all detachable accoutrements like belts, scarves, jewellery, handbags, and belongings in a locker.

The women in the waiting room were helpful and happy to share tips with me as I was a “newie” on a first-time visit. Several spoke to me about the procedures. One told me to take the clips and combs out of my hair: “Just last week a woman was found with drugs hidden in her hair. She was sneaking them in to her boyfriend and now she is in jail too. It’s not worth it”, I was told. I combed my fingers through my hair. The waiting room women told me that “the police showed up and took her away to charge her”. The fact I carried no contraband did not really console me as I felt guilty and intruded upon by just being in this depressing room. Somehow I felt powerless, as if the police would show up for me too.
A guard appeared a few minutes later, just before the exact visiting hour, and told us to line up. The line was so long it trailed outside. The smokers went to the outside end of the line so they could have a last smoke before they entered. We were allowed to enter a small room, one by one. Granny and I were the very last as there were issues around access for the wheelchair. We went into a small room one by one to be sniffed by a drug-detecting dog. I was “wanded” in the search for traces of firearms and explosives. There were a number of doors to pass through, and close security to enter the visitors’ area. Some visitors, who I assumed were seeing low-risk prisoners like us, were allowed to physically visit and interact in one outside area. Other visitors were put into a caged glass area, so there was no contact with the inmates. They had to speak to each other by phone.

As Granny was in a wheelchair, it was an even more complicated process to enter. Many doors were double doors and were too closely spaced to accommodate the wheelchair. Other doors did not open widely enough for the wheelchair to fit. You go in one door; it is sealed behind you; and the one on the other side is opened. The final door was a revolving door, which the wheelchair could not fit into. Granny was taken through another door out of my sight. She was let in, but not out. Eventually, I asked for someone to find her, and the outer side door was opened. Granny’s facial expression was stoic with resignation about all of this process. I felt that none of this was new to her.

The visitors’ area was an outside concrete area; even the tables and chairs were made of concrete and anchored into place. There was nothing comfortable in the space. A number of vending machines sat along one wall. The prisoners were allowed to bring dollar coins into the area for the machines but visitors could not bring in anything, so they could not even buy a cold drink. Ben bought himself a can of soda, a chocolate bar and a packet of chips. We were surrounded by inmates of all ages. Some had young families visiting and other men sat with elderly parents. The space was sombre and no laughter or lighthearted chatter broke the mood. Even children who were noisy in the waiting area were constrained and still. I thought that this was the saddest place I had ever been because it felt so futile and cumbersome in ways that punished whole families. It had a smell about it which I could not place; perhaps it was a cheap disinfectant. Despite the presence of people and children, the whole area felt monotone grey and lifeless.
I felt utterly dehumanised and I was a visitor who would leave in two hours. I wondered how traumatic this was for the inmates. However, Ben was upbeat and happy to see his grandmother and pleased to see me or I suspect any other visitor. He spoke with real joy about his partner and baby girl. They had visited two days before. His partner had moved to a town nearby to be able to see him because she could use the train as transport. Shortly after this visit he was moved to a jail further away that had a Murri-only unit. On a visit to him there, he told me he had not seen his girlfriend or baby since he’d moved because she had no way to get there. He said he liked the Murri-only unit, and told me that one prison guard had been difficult and he had said to the guard: “Well you only work here. It’s just your job. We live here. This is our home.” I was saddened by his anecdote, because it indicated to me how normative incarceration is for young Murri men.

I made three visits with Granny over the next three months and watched him as he grew more depressed. In a telephone call, his girlfriend had told him that she had another boyfriend. He had received no further contact from her or seen his child. Granny begged him to stay calm and keep out of trouble so he would get out soon. He was involved in a serious fight at the prison with a South Sea Islander man and was put into isolation. We could not visit him. His grandmother was distressed about his problems and unhappiness. Her greatest fear was that he would get out, find the girlfriend’s new partner and cause so much trouble he would end up back in jail. Ben was in too fraught an emotional place and we did not venture any further into the story-gathering process.

While I do not include Ben’s narrative, I have included this story about him because of how it touched on my process to gather a Murri father’s story. I believe the circumstances written about here needed to be noted because they are so typical of Aboriginal experiences like early death, high suicide rates, poverty, poor health, illiteracy and the over-representation in jails. While Anglo-Celtic people share many of these social issues, they do so without the additional complexity that comes with being Aboriginal. This teaching story speaks to how those Aboriginal incarceration “statistics” translate into ordinary lived reality for families. It is a legitimate part of this thesis journey because it relates to so many contemporary Aboriginal family lives. Many of the men and some of the women in the playgroup mob have been in prison.
I offer one brief final anecdote about Granny that speaks with humour to the issue of missing Murri fathers. It was recorded in my field notes. One Friday morning, the playgroup mums yarnd at length about the lack of positive male role models accessible to the children. They considered it a real problem, particularly for the boys. Neither Granny nor I had any real advice to offer. We were lamenting this absence while sitting at the low playgroup tables, watching the children and their mothers playing on the outside equipment. Finally, Granny looked at me and said, “Well, where are our men? I am beginning to think all these kids are sexually transmitted Aboriginals”.

Aboriginal ancestral context

In Aboriginal Australia, it is the young mothers who are raising the ancestors or grandmothers to be. In traditional society they would have had extensive kinship lines to support them. Now, they typically live in Western models of families or as single parents. When Aboriginal people look into the faces of their children, they see the features of the ancestors. If one child has the deep gold-brown eyes that look just like a late granny, they may say, “She has Granny’s eyes.” This does not just mean her eyes only resemble those familial characteristics; rather, that she may carry the spirit, the soul, the knowledge and the wisdom of that old person.

 Aboriginal people believe that our ancestors never leave us. Even after death their spirits are present in the everyday and our children are born with their wisdom. The ancestors make their presence known in many ways. They share wisdom in messages through nature, intuition, dreams, and visits from the animals and birds. Such knowledge is considered legitimate to Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. It is cultural belief and assumption. Wisdom also occurs within as intuitive knowings which are considered sacred or a divine message or way of knowing. It is how nature alerts us to our interconnected place with everything else be it natural or spiritual. Any unusual behaviour from birds and animals is to be paid special attention, for they are also the teachers as well as the messengers.

 The visits from birds and the wind in the leaves are reminders of the interconnectedness of Aboriginal people to the animals and the world in which they live. Aboriginal children are precious gifts to their family. They are so attached together to the family, that the family unit is one attached unit which belongs on the
country the Wagalak sisters gave. Families are not a group of separated individuals. Attachment is across family groups and all are equally bonded to sacred earth. Young baby girls are considered young grandmothers from birth. The teachings they receive from their ancestors and tribal teachers will be taught by them to their children and grandchildren. A child carries the responsibility for three generations of teaching. Souls may choose to be reborn so the ancestor’s wisdom is carried through the descendants.

The Murri Mums

A number of playgroups in Queensland refer to themselves as Murri playgroups, or Murri Mums and Bubs’ groups. Young Aboriginal people do not identify with archetypes of the ancient primitive Aborigine, as they consider themselves “Murri”. For Aboriginal people in Queensland the term, Murri, means more than a geographical definition. It also distances Aboriginal people from the essentialised stereotypes assigned by the Anglo-Celtic mainstream. The term, Murri, can encompass many complexities and identities.

At the time of this study, the Murri playgroup had a cohort of 14 families attending regularly, although as many as 24 families were enrolled. Not all attended all the time but a core group of about eight families tended to come every week. The others came regularly, just less frequently. At one time, the numbers grew so large that a second group on a second day was offered. As Murri playgroups were opened and accessible in more towns, the numbers reduced and the group returned to one formal scheduled meeting each week. Often a Murri Mum who attended the research playgroup would be recruited as a leader to open and facilitate another Murri group in her own area. The playgroup community grew to a socially linked network of Murri groups. The groups remained local but were interconnected within a “cluster”.

In my original plans I intended to interview only Aboriginal people. However, the Murri Mum collaborators spoke to me about including Jenny’s story too, although she was not an Aboriginal woman. They considered her story important to tell because of the experiences of her Aboriginal children at school. She had discussed the matters at playgroup and the group suggested her stories needed to be told to me for my project. Unlike the Aboriginal mothers, Jenny was happy to speak
with me from our first introduction and immediately voiced her concerns. She said that she had been totally unprepared for what had happened when her daughter started school. As a white child and woman, she had not encountered racialised issues and racism in her own schooling. I realised that the issues her family was experiencing were common within contemporary urban Aboriginal family contexts. Therefore, her voice is included as a storyteller.

**The story of the new white playgroup teacher**

This story is also included in this chapter because it relates directly to ordinary school experiences of Aboriginal families. This story is an example of how Western and Murri ways of doing business can collide and distance Aboriginal families from schools. Such incidents often prevent Aboriginal programs from being successful. The lack of program success is typically assigned to lack of interest or lack of attendance from the Aboriginal families. This creates a cycle of “blame the victims”. When non-indigenous people attended our playgroup uninvited, the mothers objected silently by not coming again or by not engaging. They felt invaded in their own space. It is not because it is an exclusive place but it is one of the few culturally safe places where they are the majority and they feel a sense of belonging that is often unavailable to them in other places. It is one of the few non-judgemental spaces in their lives lived within mainstream Australian society. It is a place where all the other mothers will have common life experiences and understand each other’s issues.

This story is about a new teacher and how her implicit Western ideas impacted the playgroup to the point where many families stopped attending. This situation occurred after the fieldwork for my research was completed, so I was unaware of it until the facilitator telephoned me to intervene on their behalf. The teacher was assigned by a non-indigenous manager to oversee the playgroups and supervise the facilitators. We accept that the supervising teachers are usually non-indigenous because the numbers of Murri teachers are so limited.

The new teacher was enthusiastic, genuine and delighted with the playgroup and her new job. So much so, she invited her friends with young children to come along to “her playgroup”. Two non-indigenous friends of the new teacher came with their children. Both had families of young active boys and both mothers did not join in with the playgroup mothers or with the children’s activities. The facilitator felt
undermined and unable to speak up because of her less powerful position. She told me that the new teacher was in the position of authority, and had claimed the Murri Mums’ playgroup as her own. She invited those families to “her playgroup”. “ Doesn’t she know this playgroup belongs to us Murris? The Mums are very upset and not coming along.”

I attended the next playgroup session. Very few of our families were in attendance, and the facilitator indicated that they had been slipping away since the new families came. Previously, there had been white families in the group. One mother who had grown up in New Guinea had respectfully approached the group and asked permission to attend because she wanted her children to have the multicultural experience of the playgroup. Her family was included as “one of the mob”. However the presence of the new families had not been so tactfully managed. The playgroup room was usually noisy, full of yarning, laughter and activity. This week the room was silent and the Murri Mums sat stone-faced in the back of the room.

By this one act, the new teacher had alienated the Murri mothers. It was an example of invisible white privilege. The teacher had assumed her position of authority and not asked the mothers first. The mothers’ power base and the self-determination of the playgroup were lost this easily. After playgroup, I discussed the situation with the new teacher. I explained about it being the mothers’ only space of cultural safety and belonging. I also pointed out to her it was funded as a targeted Murri group with the purpose of improving the transition of Aboriginal children to school so that she had a face-saving way of un-inviting her friends. I encouraged her to speak with the facilitator and the mums about how important it was for them to have a “belonging space” where they did not feel marginalised or different. It was important that she be in open dialogue with them. It was also important that they be seen as equal partners in the playgroup. After all, this playgroup was their only urban tribal space.

The Storytellers: The Murri Mums

In this section I introduce the storytellers for this chapter. As previously noted there are no fathers’ voices in the generational stories of this group. Four participants are Murri women and one mother is a non-indigenous mother of four Aboriginal
children. It is that family who live most strongly within traditional culture. The breadth of these stories speaks to the diverse identity of urban Murri families.

**Wendy**

Wendy is the biological daughter of Eva. She is not the mother of David but the biological Aunt on the father’s side. The biological mother and father have left the state. The mother is pregnant with another child, and the father is in jail. David is under a child protection order and living with a foster mother who brings him to playgroup. Wendy accompanies them each week. In the previous chapter we heard Eva’s traumatic story. She spoke of her removal and being raised up in institutions. Wendy was recently released from a mental health institution after a suicide attempt. Wendy has attempted suicide on a number of occasions. She lives with Eva and comes to playgroup each week with her nephew, David. Wendy told me that the family were not considered mentally “well enough” to be the kin carers of the baby. David lives with foster carer, Kate. Wendy comes to playgroup to spend time with her nephew David, so Kate picks Wendy up each week.

**Rosie**

Rosie is an Aboriginal woman with dark skin and Aboriginal features. She has been raised by her own parents in a small town in western Queensland. At 23 years of age, she is a single mother of a son and a daughter who are twins. They attended the playgroup for three years before the twins started school. The children have an Anglo-Celtic father who is not involved in their lives. Rosie is wise in her cultural knowledge, insights and understandings. She lives very much between two cultures and is astute in both. Rosie has a long commute to the playgroup from a small rural town inland from the coast but feels it well worthwhile to have the children with other Aboriginal children. Rosie was a full-time university student at the time I gathered the stories. She has since graduated from university and has moved to a town in the north-west which is her traditional country. In part, this move was so her children could be raised in country as she was. She was also worried about racism in her current mainstream community. She wanted her children to be in a predominantly Aboriginal school population. She told me in a recent telephone conversation that moving home to country was the best thing she could have done for the family.
**Jenny**

Jenny is a 30-year-old non-indigenous mother of three girls who identify as Aboriginal. She is married to a traditional Aboriginal man from western New South Wales. It is apparent from looking at the children that they are of Aboriginal heritage. As a child, Jenny and her sisters attended her local town’s Christian school. Jenny said she loved the school so much she wanted her children to go there too. She anticipated their schooling experiences would be similar to her own. As a non-Aboriginal Australian she was unprepared for the issues her Aboriginal children would face in school. The family spend a lot of time with the father’s extended family on his country. She says his mob live near town where they live in a “modern but Aboriginal way”. She qualified this by saying that they ate traditional foods but cooked inside on a stove.

**Elizabeth**

Elizabeth is a young Aboriginal woman who was raised by her white single mother. She shares her mother’s European facial characteristics, with deep olive skin and dark hair and eyes. She did not identify as Aboriginal when growing. It was never mentioned that her father was Aboriginal. She knows nothing of her father now, other than that he is Aboriginal, because her mother refused to speak about him. She was raised white with an Anglo-Celtic stepfather. She says she always felt she was different, and people would ask her if she was a Murri, but she did not know what they meant. She thought they were asking, “Is your last name Murray?” She said she would answer like “No I am a Smithson”.

At eighteen Elizabeth became pregnant to and married an Aboriginal man 25 years her senior. His story is well known to her and she shared it freely early into our first meeting. Her husband was taken at birth, so did not know his mother until he found her when he was middle aged. He was raised in a number of private homes and institutions and orphanages. On one occasion when he was eight he was adopted but the family returned him to the home because of his misbehaviour.

She has only one child, who has very dark skin with golden brown hair. It is obvious that she is an Aboriginal child. Elizabeth’s husband was incarcerated for an extended period of time but was released during this project. After his release, he came to playgroup for a time while he was looking for work. He now works in a fly-
in fly-out job and is not often at home. Elizabeth looks after all the domestic issues. She lives very independently by renting her home in just her name, working as an aged carer, and studying university classes in social work by distance education.

**Lily**

Lily is an articulate, educated, fair-skinned Kamilaroi woman. She describes herself as an “urban Murri”, and has never spent any time in her country. Her mother was raised on country but now, after a divorce and a university degree in business, lives a sophisticated professional life on the Sunshine Coast. Lily was involved in serious drug use in high school and dropped out of school at 15. In her thirties, she went to train as a teacher. She is now a mature-age graduate student and well aware and vocal about discriminatory laws endured by Aboriginal people. She is passionate about her Aboriginal identity and has tattooed the name of her tribal group on her inner wrist. She has one son to an ex-husband who was non-indigenous. The son is fair-skinned with blond hair like his mother. He does identify as Aboriginal. He has aged out of playgroup and now attends Year 2 at an independent school offering alternative programs. Lily moved him from a more structured school because she found the classroom environment too constricting for her active son.

**The First Storyteller: Wendy**

Wendy is an unofficial part-time kin carer for her nephew, David. I am told by Wendy that child protection services will let neither her, nor her mother (Eva), have the child at their house overnight. (Eva was the storyteller in Chapter 6 who was raised up in an institution.) Wendy participates in his care during the day and comes to playgroup with him and his foster mother, Kate. David is six months old at the time that Wendy tells her story and is in full-time foster care. He had a broken arm from a parental tug of war over him during an argument. Wendy interacts with David at the playgroup and cares for him during the session. Kate keeps an interested but distant eye on David during the playgroup allowing Wendy to run after him.

The foster mother attended the Indigenous playgroup initially at the recommendation of the Department of Child Protection as a way to give David “exposure to his culture”. I am told by Wendy that her nephew David’s biological parents moved interstate, allegedly to avoid drug convictions or a drug dealer’s
wrath. However, the father (Wendy’s brother) was picked up by police on an outstanding bench warrant and is in jail. David’s biological mother also lived in another state at the home of her father who served jail time for murdering his wife. His late wife would have been David’s maternal grandmother. I have provided this contextual information about David’s family to speak to the trauma and confusion intrinsic to the lives of many of Aboriginal families with young children. Wendy wishes to be appointed as the kin carer to David and take over his care. However, she told me that Child Protection would not allow this because of her mental health difficulties. Wendy currently lives with her mother, Eva, and her stepfather.

Because there is no likelihood that the child will be rehabilitated with his parents in the foreseeable future, the family fear is that David will be “in the system” which means moved from foster home to foster home. He is currently in a safe and loving non-indigenous home. He visits his grandparents and Aunt Wendy almost daily because they live so close by. However, Wendy tells me that Child Protection will not consider the recommendations of the grandmother (Eva) or community elders to leave him nearby with Kate. It is their intent and policy to relocate him to be closer to his parents in the state system where the father is in jail.

The daughter of a stolen child

I always knew I was Aboriginal, although I am fair-skinned. My mother moved up here to Queensland when she found her sister. They were both taken but didn’t grow up together. She (Eva) wanted to know her sister when she found her. My mother and her siblings were taken and all separated out. She never found her brothers. Mum’s mother was white and a Scottish immigrant who married an Aboriginal man but there was not much she could do about it (the children being taken). My grandma was outraged that her children could be taken by the State. My grandfather was Aboriginal and in those days it wasn’t easy to get kids out. If your father was white you were considered “whitefellas”. My mum was in homes till she was 18. My mum used to move every three months so I didn’t live in one area. She couldn’t stay in one place for long. But because we moved so much I am not really from anywhere. Moving has been difficult for school. It’s why I ended up dropping out after Year 7. I
started school at 7 years old in Year 1. I don’t know why I didn’t start earlier, probably because we were always moving. I didn’t go to preschool because I wasn’t socialised with other kids so I couldn’t be there. I couldn’t be around other kids, I didn’t want to be with them, and I was really shy. Mum tried to send me to preschool, but I didn’t want to be with the kids when they tried to send me. So the teacher said I didn’t have to come. It wasn’t compulsory. Sometimes I think it was because I didn’t play or have toys at home. I was doing the work, the grown-up things like Mum. Just the things Mum did. Cleaning mainly, I don’t like a dirty house.

I do remember my first day at primary school. I’ll never forget it. I started school in Brisbane and they made me sit outside the classroom until my mum came to get me. It was a horrible day for me. I had an accident. I wet my pants and the teacher humiliated me and made me sit outside all day. That first teacher was mean to me. I remember that.

It really turned me off going to school because I had to sit outside from morning till three in the afternoon until my mum could get me. Mum was really upset and she yelled at the teacher. So she pulled me out of that school for three months. Then I started again at a different school. And I liked that school better. The teacher was really nice. She didn’t single me out from the other kids. I was targeted at most schools for being the Aboriginal kid. I always copped it from other kids and they’d called me names, like “nigger” and stuff like that. I always had trouble at school, though I think I am smart enough.

My mother would send me to the library for books for reading. So I would go to the library and hire out children’s books and later books written for adults and I’d do that sort of work in books and like that at home with Mum. She taught me to read really like she taught herself. She didn’t get to school so no one taught her.

I went to school for a while at xxx. The teacher there was discriminative. She knew I was Aboriginal because of my mum, she’s dark-skinned. The teacher was awful to me. She said I was not trying hard enough and she
made me sit up the front with her and I wasn’t even allowed to be with other kids.

At one school I told my mother not to come up, because that is how they knew I was an Aboriginal kid. But I felt bad. I didn’t want to deny her and not deny that I am Aboriginal. I am not ashamed of it even if I am Aboriginal. I don’t want to reject being Aboriginal, that is part of who I am. I just wanted the name calling to stop. I just don’t want it to be so hard, being Aboriginal and being hated. I tried to kill myself after the high school thing. I was 13. I went to hospital for my mental health issues. I knew I couldn’t fit in at school. It would all start again, the name calling, the teachers ignoring me. I didn’t feel anything. I just wanted the pain to stop. I was the sort of child who wants to be shown love and my mum doesn’t hug me. I am the sort of kid that needs it. She hugs me if I go up to her but she never just does it. I have to start it. She’d grown up in the homes and no one ever hugged her.

Mum did as good as she could. We were always fed and even if we were homeless she went to a shelter with us. She’s lost us a few times (to child protection), because she was homeless and couldn’t afford a roof over our heads. But we always got back together. She never took off on us. Though she had other babies taken from her and we don’t know where they are now.

I come to playgroup to see my nephew. I love him. I want to be his kinship carer, if they have to move him from his foster mum. Child Protection won’t consider me to be his carer because of my mental health issues. They give him to strangers but not his family. It’s too hard dealing with them and all their rules and regulations. David loves Kate eh? Look how much he loves her. Look at him staring at her. Kate does it right doesn’t she? She knows how to show that little boy love. She’s a really good mum.

Yes I am going back to the Flexi School so I can get my Year 10 at home. I can do it all at home. I just want to get my Year 10. I want to stay home
and take care of kids. I love kids. Yes, school and an education are important, if you can cope with it. But if you can’t you can’t.

Insights on Wendy’s story

Wendy manifests severe anxiety even in our conversation. She has a hand which constantly shakes, she wears a sense of sadness and hopelessness surrounds her. I felt sad simply spending time with her. She wears the sorrow of her life, and after hearing her story I fear how it may unfold. She is a fragile girl. Her mother’s trauma has shaped Wendy’s life in every aspect. She has had no environment to protect her. Her mother’s fear has kept the family hiding, and on the move. It has not offered Wendy any sense of a safe place. Schooling has been sparse and sporadic; it could not have been otherwise considering how the mother has needed to keep moving and out of sight of the authorities. She shares her mother’s mental fragility just as she shares her mother’s stories and thoughts as if they were her own. Wendy is a deeply empathetic human being who is deeply concerned about her mother. She has not attempted to “take off” like her sisters did, but she has tried to suicide to escape what she feels is her hopeless life. Her and her mother’s home is filled with stray dogs and cats. They have saved them all and filled their home, and arms, with the love of pets. Wendy asks her mother for love and affection by requesting hugs. Wendy does not blame her mother but sees them as collaborators in this traumatic life. The mother lived with such horror that she attempts to protect her daughter by withdrawing her from situations. When Wendy was treated badly on her first day at preschool, the mother withdrew her from the preschool. Eva offers Wendy what protection she can but it is a protection which also perpetuates the cycle of poor education and life chances. Eva is a woman without the resources to stand up to the teacher. She has spent her life judged by her skin colour, so she takes to hiding away.

No one was worried about Wendy at school. It seems that she was left to sit outside the room all day. These are issues not typically considered by teachers when teaching Aboriginal children. There is much that is disturbing in this story; however I find the actions of the preschool teacher unconscionable. Wendy presented as an Aboriginal child and may well have been constructed as too problematic. The little girl was in dire need of a welcoming and safe preschool experience. Preschool may have given Wendy an opportunity of a safe loving place to be. Wendy may well have
viewed school differently if her first experience was a positive experience. Instead, her first message about school was that she did not fit in.

Wendy presents as a fearful, mentally ill young woman who cannot cope at all. Her health issues are so overwhelming that she did not have the resilience to cope with her education. The only pleasant schooling experience she recalls is when she speaks of a school where her mother was part of the reference committee and many Aboriginal families were at the school. However, Eva’s need to keep moving prevented Wendy remaining there. These traumatic issues were not a part of the elders’ stories where cultural and family maintenance gave Aboriginal people emotional support. The trauma of her mother’s life does visit across the generation upon Wendy. The enduring impact is that Wendy is now not educated.

Wendy and her mother have endured the worst of child removals. In the mainstream context, I often hear the sentiment expressed that removed children “don’t know how to mother” as they did not experience it. I believe the depth of this lived reality is underestimated by the mainstream. Wendy is mothered by Eva. She is fed, clothed, housed. It is the enduring effects of trauma that make life difficult for Eva and Wendy. Parenting programs do not necessarily encounter such issues that need healing. The lack of cultural maintenance is an issue but it is the traumatic life issues that underpin Wendy’s issues. Culture itself suppresses existential anxiety by its capacity to give meaning and value to individual existence. This is a family far too damaged, with no inner strength or strong identity to draw on. Wendy’s presence feels less than solid when we are sitting together. I feel as if I need to reach out to grip her hand. It is an implicit sense that I cannot fully place or describe. It is as if she has no permanent anchor to situate her in this world. An elder read this story as part of our collaborative member checking. “That baby”, she said speaking of Wendy, “She needed smoking.” I consider her point. She was saying that she needed her culture and connection as a place to belong.

The Second Storyteller: Rosie

In contrast to Wendy, Rosie is a dark-skinned woman with strong Aboriginal facial features who is a university student. She looks as Aboriginal people must have looked when they lived here over 200 years ago. Rosie moves slowly and
deliberately in the world. It is as if she is aware of the whole living environment around her, and she is listening. Aboriginal lore tells us that listening allows the soul to fill up with wisdom and knowledge. She gives no appearance of chaos or drama about her. She has a dignified and regal air. She was raised in her own country and, in culture, by her parents. Her parents have a strong sense of Aboriginal spirituality. She has the rare experience of living in a family space of cultural maintenance. Of course, this is within the broader context of mainstream town living so her experience is co-joined with urbanisation.

Rosie was not removed and nor was her mother or grandmother; yet Rosie fears her one daughter Devon may be taken. She says she does not know why but her family always had small businesses around horses and blacksmithing so were valuable to the town. Currently, her parents live openly in culture in a small rural inland town. Her father is a highly regarded Aboriginal artist. The family have come to playgroup since Devon was a year old and not long after the playgroup began. Rosie knew me before the playgroup experience. Nonetheless, she did not disclose the horror of her own schooling experiences for a year after our first scheduled interview. At first, she told me how school was fine and there was no racism and the teachers were kind to her.

A year later, Rosie began to describe her real experience to me. It was so horrendous, she told me that she could not contemplate it for her daughter. Perhaps she would home school she thought; yet she wanted Devon to be with other children and not just white children. Her family valued education and during this research she completed an Arts degree. She did not go to her graduation ceremony. When I told her I did not see her there, she said she was not sure what it was or what happened so she did not attend. I told her I was there because my daughter had graduated with a communications degree that day. Rosie said, “Oh, I wish I had known you would be there. I would have gone.” This speaks to the privileged assumption that everyone knows what graduation is. She did not know if it was a situation where she would feel comfortable or be a part of the activities but if I had been there for support she could have faced it. But she said she was thrilled to get her degree when it arrived in the mail.
Raised up in culture

We go out to country a lot. My mob’s Kamilaroi. I know a lot about our culture because Dad always lived it and his family does too. Playgroup is great, it’s like our way with the mothers here doing things and the kids too.

Yes, it (the racism) was as young as Grade 2 and I didn’t understand it at all. I didn’t cope with it. The teacher didn’t help at all even when she saw it. She just ignored it and ignored me too for the most part. It was more than just the stuff every kid goes through. I was obviously different but also that was what was “special” (being an Aboriginal child) about me because Mum and Dad were so proud of their culture.

The black and white birds they are the messengers. My mother taught me that when I was little. Butcher bird is my Nana come to give me a message or come to see me. It shows that all is okay in the world. You have to listen to the natural world or you are not really that smart, you miss too much eh? I don’t know of any birds that are bad news. The crow is bad to some mobs but we call the crow the teacher. All birds teach us things if you watch. Like the saltwater people learned from the sea eagle. They learned to go for the fish in the middle of the school. The leaders and the ends are the ones to dive down if they are attacked. You attack in the middle and they are all in chaos then and easy to catch.

The animals are so clever and you can learn a lot if you watch them. Like if something bad happens and you see eagles and hawks, it means there is strength around, so you are not alone to deal with just the bad stuff. It’s a sign really, a sign that the natural world is there for you and it gives you strength and courage to go on eh? It’s all about spirits and being connected to everything.

Education was not always important to me, no. It is now that I am at uni. In high school I hated it and I stopped going and I really got sick of being called names by the other kids for being an Aboriginal person. The teachers did nothing. They knew it went on and said nothing. School was just a horrendous experience for me. I just wanted to be a good kid but it
was too hard with the name calling and the teachers’ attitude to you, like they wanted you to drop out. I got hooked up with the wrong crowd and stopped going to school, got into drugs and drinking and stuff. But I got pregnant, and realised I needed to get sorted out because of the baby. Maybe with an education you can show you are worth something. You can show you can do the work like anyone else.

Mum and Dad are glad I’ve come to uni. They wanted us kids to get an education even though Dad only went to Grade 7. We were always worried about it and watching out for gubby (government) people. It still worries me, every day I think about how they take your children and if they saw my house, if those government people came and saw how untidy my house was I think they would tell me that I am not fit to be a mother, that I am not fit to keep Devon. Yes, I worry about it still because I am single too. You live with it every day. Devon is really excited about going to Prep, and can’t wait. She already wants to buy her uniform and it’s six months away. I think she is really ready. Yes, she is keen to learn. She wants to learn to read books. We have a lot of books and she loves them.

I guess my worry is she will have racism to deal with at school. I hope not, but I have talked to her about it. I told her to ignore it, tell the teacher. I think if the kids are doing all right in school with the work it could be okay. I think if she feels really confident because she is doing well in school, she won’t be too worried about it. She’s just got to put up with it really, to some degree understand it happens. She will cop it, we all do. I don’t know how I can stop it. Her education is everything isn’t it? You can’t get a good job without it. You just need it to hold your own and not look like you need a handout. I want her to be able to do what she wants, that is the most important thing. I want her to be able to look after herself too.

**Insights on Rosie’s story**

Rosie demonstrates the Aboriginal way of listening, known as deep listening. It is different to the non-indigenous way of communication, in responding quickly to what is said. She listens to the end of a communication. Rosie often does not speak,
simply listens carefully unless specifically addressed but her eyes are intelligent, alert and miss nothing. She waits for people to reveal themselves to her and does not automatically assign trust. You are unaware of this. If you do not know her, she is polite and pleasant but reveals nothing. My first interview with her resulted in very polite answers. She told me how lovely school was, and it was good to go and her experiences were fine. After she knew me better, she began to retell me the story using emotive words like “horrendous” to explain her school experience.

It is really refreshing to listen to Rosie’s story because she has the balance of Aboriginal culture. It contributes to the sense of “groundedness” not evident in Wendy’s story or Eva’s story. She is a mature young woman who took an unplanned pregnancy and turned her life around to care for her child. She is fortunate to have been raised and loved by her own parents. There is a sense of self, of being “comfortable in her own skin”, evident in Rosie that is similar to the sensibilities of the elders’ stories. She is another example of an intact human being, having been raised by her own parents and extended family. She presents it along with Murri humour. Nonetheless, I was moved to hear Rosie’s story and saddened to hear what courage she and her daughter call upon to get on with their daily lives and school experiences. The fear of having your child taken permeates her daily life. This is endemic for Aboriginal people.

While Rosie values education, she fears racist incidents for her child more. She says she was not liked at school and ignored by the teacher. This experience has been described across all three generations of storytellers. While she values school and has prepared Devon well for school through playgroup and at-home activities like reading, she fears school may be an unhappy, even hostile, environment for Devon. She is aware she is sending her child to school where racism may shape her experience and the teacher may well not like her child.

After Rosie graduated from university she moved home to her traditional country and found a job in a larger country town. There is a large Aboriginal population in the town and children in the school. Rosie’s education and feelings of self-efficacy allowed her to see a way forward to best educate her daughter. She is in no way a victim to her experience. While she understands her daughter will “cop” racism, she is able to give her the type of grounding that will allow her strong self-belief and inner resilience. Rosie demonstrates that through her cultural linkages how
it was possible to build pathways for our young ancestors, the children as the grandmothers of the future.

**The Third Storyteller: Jenny**

Jenny is a non-indigenous young woman. She was 26 years of age at the time of this interview and pregnant with her fourth child. She says she was also raised not to discriminate between people and was socialised in a multicultural community. Her parents were supportive of her choice of partner and his Aboriginality was never commented upon. Alicia is married to a dark-skinned Kamilaroi man and is mother to four Aboriginal children. They live in an urban area but she considers their lives to be rich in Aboriginal culture.

Her husband grew up in culture and his own country in western Queensland. They visit country, spending time with the extended family who live in traditional country and in old ways particularly around celebration and ceremony. As a white Australian mother, she had no prior conception of the Indigenous challenges in society, until she saw her children’s challenges in school. White Australians do not experience racism; therefore they assume that this is the norm within Australian society. Jenny, like mothers who are not Indigenous, was very active in seeking out a playgroup for her child, and consistent in attending, despite a one-hour drive each way to attend.

**The white mother of Aboriginal children**

*It’s got worse since she started school. They (the school) put a lot of pressure on me for her to go to Prep and it was a bit of a business and in the end we just went along with it. Prep was non-compulsory but the school didn’t let us know that. I think maybe they just needed the Aboriginal enrolment for funds. She had a man teacher and I had no negative worries about it at first, but I didn’t like him at all. He thought that having an Aboriginal child in the class was special and not in the right way. He thought she needed special education and to get a tutor in to help her but she didn’t need it. He was constantly filling out forms for the Indigenous funding but she was there to start school she didn’t need it. She is a bright kid, normal and just like the others in the class, only...*
Aboriginal. It was a play-based curriculum, why did he think she needed special help? Aren’t they supposed to develop at their own level through play?

He said she needed special help to write her name and with sounds. She used to cry every morning. She knows she is Aboriginal and he gave her too much attention for all the wrong reasons. He was really patronising toward me, for starters, and everything came across as really fake. The church school – it was where all my family have gone and she had (white) cousins there too. So we sent her back. What a way to start school, poor little girl. Now, well she is out of his class. She’s got two teachers and they are just lovely. She loves it. They don’t pressure me about anything. They embrace her in a positive way. Her work is just up there with all the other kids. She doesn’t have any learning problems or anything like that. She’s a really bright girl.

They (Aboriginal grandparents) live in town, and cook on the stove but if they are doing a big celebration they do it in the traditional way. They (the children) are really different out there. They are really at home, really comfortable with grandma and pa and their cousins. We are all different out there. We relax, I think. Even when we visit we go fishing and have special foods because we are visiting. It’s a special thing. All the kids and cousins get into the traditional stuff and my kids don’t see it as different it’s just what they do out there.

I learned how to deal with them (the school issues). I know how to deal with them now. I think I saw the worst with that Prep teacher. I hope I’ve seen the worst. At least I am prepared now but how can you protect her all the time? And she had trouble with her (male dance) teacher too and the principal said to me that maybe she has trouble with men and maybe she was abused at home. It was about the time all that was coming out in the media about sexual abuse on the communities ... like they were always looking for negative things if the kid is Aboriginal.

I just love playgroup. It’s really an important part of our life. I know when I come here I am with the only other people who know exactly what
it is like to raise Indigenous children, to deal with our issues. It’s really important that the kids know their culture, and other Murris. It’s somewhere they belong. I think that helps make them strong to deal with the stuff that comes along in the real world. The mums here, they know I am white but it’s never an issue because they know I deal with the same stuff they do. There is racism, but it is not here. It’s the one place they are exactly the same as everyone else. I just love it and the other mums. We relax, and we can be ourselves and no matter what is going on, we can laugh about it. I do, I take strength from the other mothers. And if something comes up through the week I am straight on the phone to the mums here. It’s just a great group. We feel special here, important like this is just our place, and we don’t get that anywhere else.

Insights on Jenny’s story

Jenny’s story is interesting as she is witness to how the school treatment of the white child differs to that of the Aboriginal child as other. The difficulties and the anxiety that Indigenous mothers and mothers of Indigenous children experience with schools are not typically experienced by the Anglo-Celtic social group. How Jenny’s children were treated in school startled her. She is resigned to the fact, I felt, that she would have to continue to fight for her children in schooling and in life. She sees what all Aboriginal people know and that is that we live in a different social context to mainstream white Australians.

Jenny’s comments testify to how hard it is for Aboriginal children in schools. The children are seen as other and, more importantly, this remains unseen within the privileged lens of whiteness. Discrimination and racism have anchored all the stories across generations. It is the major factor all storytellers have identified as leading to disengaging from school. As a non-indigenous mother this startles Jenny. She told me this at a group yarning time and the other Indigenous mothers looked at her with faces bearing the look of tolerance. It was as if they were thinking, “How did you not know that, it happened to us all, all the time”. Often Aboriginal people consider these issues that remain unnoticed by the white mainstream and say, “They just don’t get it”. It is a common expression by Aboriginal people about negotiating within mainstream systems.
Jenny had fully expected her children to have the same school experience she had, and they should have. Why must Aboriginal children be *othered* and unhappy at school? Jenny had chosen the church school that she attended because she loved it. Her experience speaks to the Anglo-Celtic child in the Anglo-Celtic social institution of schools. Yet, now her children experience it as a different and difficult place. There is a similar testimony from all the storytellers’ experiences of schools. Rosie used the word “horrendous”; just as Uncle Henry did in the first of the elders’ stories.

The Murri Mums at playgroup are so outraged at this experience they wanted her story told in “Robyn’s thesis”. This alone speaks to the collective support within the playgroup and the power that the group is exercising. Jenny also sought my advice and advocacy. She wrote letters of complaint to the principal of the school and informed him and the teacher of her reactions. Jenny removed the child from the school. The school approached her to come back, and sought a pathway forward.

While Jenny is not Aboriginal, her husband and children are. They are being raised spending time with their paternal extended family and are learning the ways of knowing, being and doing of their tribe. While school is causing the children anxiety, the family’s cultural strength acts as a point of resilience for them. Jenny says that, “The children are different out there, relaxed”. The children are in a situation in which they feel they belong. As children they have an innate sense of belonging to the cultural ways of this tribe. In spending time with their paternal extended family the children become literate in the ways of knowing, being and doing of their tribe.

The resilience given to Jenny’s children by their cultural maintenance is a form of buffering capital that most Aboriginal people can no longer access. This cultural resilience and identity will give the children a grounded sense of strength by understanding what it means to be Aboriginal. They will need it when they are called on to fight their own battles. For now, Jenny knows she must be courageous for her children to get a “fair go”. For now, she says she is seen as “the school bitch”, but I believe every battle she fights from her position of power builds pathways for the children who follow. I hope I am right.
The Fourth Storyteller: Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a fair-skinned Aboriginal woman who was raised as white by a white mother. She knows very little about her Aboriginality or what it means. I suspect, from her comments, this is her mother’s way too. Elizabeth had married a dark-skinned Aboriginal man, Noel. Noel was incarcerated in a maximum security prison at the time of gathering this story. He was removed from his mother at birth and lived in a number of orphanages, foster homes, and institutions. He was adopted once, but returned to the orphanage by the family. His two adult sons (from a previous marriage) are also incarcerated in the same Murri unit. Elizabeth is 30 and her husband is 55. She chooses to study Indigenous issues, identify as Indigenous, and work in a specified Aboriginal position in her workplace. She takes her child to visit her father at the jail on weekends: “It’s awful just going in there but I have to take her so she knows she has got a father.”

I found this statement poignant, as Elizabeth knows nothing of her own father and has not experienced him in her life. My sense of Elizabeth is that she is a good person and an even better mother.

Raised up white

I am fortunate that my mother is supportive and can help me with the kids. I took Jessie to see him in jail. They look at my pregnant belly like I have a bomb or something stuck up there. They treat you so badly when you are the family, like you are all low life. I would hate to be in there if this is how they treat the visitors. It’s important for her to see her father. She’s too little to really know what it is about. She doesn’t understand and I don’t explain it too much. She’s a pretty settled child.

He’s got to stay out of jail. He’s too old and it’s no example to set for Jessie. They put them in so easy (the Murri men). He did find his mother but, oh boy, was that a disaster. She had a real drinking problem and she doesn’t stay sober for long. He goes to see her but I don’t. It’s not a healthy household and I don’t want Jessie in it, but he keeps in touch. It’s the only blood he knows, except for his sons. At playgroup everyone knows her Dad is in jail, but nobody thinks anything of it. It’s part of
being Murri isn’t it? So I didn’t know much about being Aboriginal to teach Jessie. I want her to be proud of her heritage; after all she’s a dark little girl. It is obvious she is Aboriginal so she is going to have to deal with it. It will come up. She’s got those beautiful big brown eyes. That is why this playgroup is so good. It’s all positive stuff about the culture here. She loves the stories and the books. Her favourite book is *Big Storm Coming*.

*And because we are here in the school, she gets to know where the toilets are and where you get a drink out of those awful cow troughs, and where you buy tuckshop. It’s going to be so easy for her to start because she is so used to the place. She loves the days you take her down to the Prep room to visit and the teacher knows her name. When she comes home she wants to practise writing her name because she says that is important if you are in Prep. She tells me, “You’ve got to be able to write your name so you know which painting is yours”. She loves sitting in there with all the big Prep kids and they treat her like she is special too. They all want to look after her. She loves school already, and plays school at home with her dolls.*

*The teacher in there says she can come into that room next year so she will feel comfortable. I really like this school. Even the principal comes by the playgroup and she’s just normal and not up herself. It’s nice to be treated ordinary and like we belong here. She says we can go and talk to her about anything, anytime. We can even go and talk to her about the teachers if there is a problem with them. It’s so nice too when the Aboriginal nurses and the dietician come. I don’t think the teachers are as hard on your children if they know the mother eh? I wanted my little girl at home for another year. But playgroup is great for her because she is with kids just like her, and she has this other view of being Aboriginal. I didn’t know anything about it, so I had nothing to teach her. Now you come and tell them all the stories and show them those dances. She’s always doing the emu dance at home. It’s not just the bad Aboriginal stuff like visiting your Dad in jail. The other Mums are good to her too. She loves playgroup and we never miss coming. Never.*
Insights on Elizabeth’s story

While Elizabeth’s father was Aboriginal, her mother was a non-indigenous woman and “passed” her daughter off as white, offering no attempt to explain her Aboriginality to her. Perhaps she did not know enough about Elizabeth’s heritage to explain to her or saw Aboriginality as an additional complexity for a single and unmarried mother. She also may have considered her stance as in the best interests of the child in a world that did not value Aboriginal people. It is in fact an act of assimilation. By circumstance, Elizabeth was separated from her heritage and knowledge of it but I suggest she has an innate sense of this heritage.

Not only does Elizabeth have a sense of belonging and make good friends in the playgroup, she finds ways to connect to Aboriginal culture that she has sought throughout her life. She looked to find her father in her partner. In close friendship with Jenny, Elizabeth sees firsthand the challenges that will face her dark-skinned child. She applies herself to creating pathways into school for her daughter. Elizabeth also takes advantage of pathways offered to her for an education. She undertakes a Certificate in Children’s Services that is offered the playgroup by the local TAFE provider. With this qualification she becomes the playgroup facilitator, and enrolls to do a degree in early childhood education. She is linking into pathways to improve her circumstances and her daughter’s. Her strength has increased with the support of the Aboriginal playgroup. In this instance it has developed from the linkages the playgroup mothers developed with the school, the TAFE and the local university.

In the school context, the group has reached out, bridging into the school in informal ways that are in fact creating a transition process that occurs over the length of the time the child is in playgroup. The children are thus socialised for school in a now naturalistic way. The parents also find a sense of welcome and belonging in this setting. Parents are in the school as part of their own group and do not have to venture into the school as a disempowered Aboriginal parent. Elizabeth recognises that parental participation in school is a positive determinant for her daughter’s success and education. Through the playgroup this association and parental involvement is evolving naturally.
The Fifth Storyteller: Lily

Lily is in her late thirties. She has worked as a Prep teacher but is currently undertaking postgraduate education. She is a very fair-skinned blonde woman who identifies as Kamilaroi from south-west Queensland. Kamilaroi is a large Aboriginal nation with extensive lands in south-west Queensland into northern New South Wales. Their language survives and is taught at universities in New South Wales. However, despite language being intact enough for revitalisation, many of the people were forcibly removed to missions so their language and culture were lost to them.

Lily was a playgroup mum with one son. He has now aged out of the program and attends Year 2 in a Christian school in the area. She attended playgroup for him to be with other Aboriginal children. At the time that she came to playgroup Lily was divorced. She has since married an Aboriginal man. Her new husband was removed as a baby and adopted by an English immigrant family. He has no knowledge of his Aboriginal heritage at this time and Link Up, which is an organisation that provides tracing and reunion services to members of the Stolen Generations, has been unable to assist him to identify family or country. His adoptive parents are described by Lily as “appallingly racist” to the point where they questioned her “blood percentage”. They told her if she was as much as “half-caste” they would not have condoned the marriage or associated with her.

The educated Murri mum

I am very white-skinned so no one ever assumed I was an Aboriginal girl, although I knew it. My mother was dark-skinned and ashamed of being Aboriginal. Her mother was mission bred, but with her own parents. They all died young. Mum told me to keep it under the rug and not tell anyone. We passed as white with a bit of Indian. A lot of Aboriginal people passed by saying they were Indian or Italian or Greek. There is one well-known Aboriginal man I knew as a boy. He was Italian then. And I was Indian. We probably all thought we were the United Nations and we were all blackfellas.

All I remember Mum saying was “Don’t tell anybody”. That was my Aboriginal heritage. Hide it. Shame eh? When they called her a “black
gin”, she said she was Indian. We are taught to be ashamed and pass as white and you always reckon someone will work it out. School was okay, though I did wonder why there were no Aboriginal people in the history and social studies. My uncles would tell me stories, and then I would learn different stuff at school. I was confused, and thought someone must be lying to me. Anyway, I seemed to know how to be quiet and be good in school and as I was white and not telling anyone, I was not labelled. It was okay. But I left the minute I could in Year 10. If you tell anyone you are Aboriginal they want to know, “what percentage?” And then they say “I’m not racist”.

And it stays bad even when you get an education. You find another form of racism; no one wants to give Aboriginal women with better qualifications than them a job. I reckon you walk out of the room and your CV goes in the bin. You are supposed to stay in your place. I loved the playgroup when Greg was little. We were just all the same down there and feel like everyone knows your story because we all live it eh? No racism there and we could laugh about the nonsense we put up with in the world. I went because I wanted Greg to have Aboriginal kids to play with. I feel my most relaxed when I am with a group of Aboriginal women. It’s one place I have no anxiety. I have trouble leaving the house with my anxiety but I always got to playgroup.

At that time my ex, his father, decided to tell him openly he was not of Aboriginal heritage. “No you are not” he would tell him. Greg would come back to me all confused and my mother even pulled up her shirt to show him her black skin. “Yes you are”, she would say. He was only four and so confused. I hope he did not know what any of it meant then anyway. You know, you can’t be valuable if you are blackfella. His father does not do it anymore. Anyway that is why playgroup was so good. Plenty of Aboriginal kids and Mums and all just were doing normal mother stuff. We would laugh all the time there, that is what I loved. It was a fun thing to do. I miss it now Greg is in school but I was not going to have another baby to keep going that is for sure.
I have four [children] now – three came compliments of the new partner.
Instant family and no chance to insist on birth control in this situation.
I’ve got them. You should see the pile of washing with four boys. Yikes.
We are like the Aboriginal Brady Bunch. Now that would be a sitcom. My
real problem with school (for Greg) is the teacher this year and she is
always trying to insist he goes on medication.

I openly identify now but I know nothing really about the old ways or
language. I really wish I did. We are an urbanised family, an urban mob.
I even have Kamilaroi tattooed on my wrist. It’s a bit of activism too. A
sort of “up yours” to the bigots. Really I am so ashamed of how racist
people are in Australia. You know you get labelled out there, especially
in education eh? I have decided that the Aboriginal stuff gets too hard
emotionally. Yes, playgroup did prepare him for school I would say, but
he went to Kindy too and we had a white middle-class type home too with
books and computers so all that helps. Because I am a teacher, I had a
sense of how to get him ready for school but most of our parents don’t.

Insights on Lily’s story

Lily presents a much more educated voice than the other mothers at playgroup.
She is astute about Indigenous concerns, and understands intellectually what the loss
of culture means. She does not present as a victim or living within a traumatised
space. In part, her mother’s career and income have allowed Lily access to resources
such as therapy and role models. Much of the courses she has studied relate to issues
that occur in her own life. This is an empowering way forward for her. She does not
construct herself as “the problem”.

Lily’s presence has had an impact on the playgroup mothers. She comes from
an educated and empowered place and this has impacted to transform the playgroup
mothers and their interest in education. She understood that schools as agencies were
not serving her. Her lack of engagement at school has not muddied her sense of self-
efficacy and she has constructed and pursued the future she wants. She is highly self-
motivated, and views herself as just as smart as other people. She is clear about her
vision, and shares it openly with other playgroup mums.
I heard her say this to one young grandmother at playgroup about becoming a teacher: “You can do the study and it’s easy. I just needed someone to mentor me until you see how to do it. You’ll like it, and it’s not hard when you get the hang of it. It’s just about hanging in there and doing the work.” This is the attitude the Murri Mums established and then they sought out the local TAFE to come to playgroup to offer an alternative study pathway towards university study. Lily has been a key influence on other mothers in the group.

Lily would be considered by the mainstream to be a politicised voice or even an activist. She does not know her traditional sacred stories but she still finds a space of difference within the mainstream. Indigenous studies have given her a knowledge base that shapes her strong sense of identity and belonging with the Aboriginal community. Her very fair colouring has allowed her to “pass as white” while she was growing up and this was deemed as important to survival so as not to be removed.

As a cultural insider, Lily is well aware of the disadvantage, prejudice and government intrusion in Aboriginal lives. She considers it from an educated perspective. However she experiences another level of racism when she seeks higher level jobs with government agencies. She says she applies for jobs and is found to be overqualified for an Aboriginal woman by her white interviewers. This is an experience Aboriginal woman commonly encounter and speak of in the workplace. Or she finds she is asked about the percentage of her Aboriginal blood. These issues speak to the construction of Aboriginal people as intellectually deficit and of lesser social status.

Lily has suffered severe episodes of depression, anxiety and agoraphobia. Issues of anxiety are common to Aboriginal people as they live in a world of fear, racism and trauma not experienced or known by mainstream white people. I believe that as a relatively young woman she will have the strength to endure and push past these mental health issues that relate to her Aboriginality and feeling unsafe in mainstream environments. Because she and her son are white, she claims they have not experienced much of the open racism other participants have mentioned. Insidiously it occurs when she acknowledges her heritage. She does experience discriminatory treatment from government agencies, for instance from Centrelink, based on her cultural identification. She understands the discriminatory implications.
of this and uses her educated voice to stand up for her cultural issues. I hope she can hold onto her mental wellbeing to last the course.

I**deas from the Murri Mums**

This chapter forms the culmination of the stories across generations. It speaks to the current reality of daily life, playgroup and schooling for Aboriginal people in an urban setting. It demonstrates that cultural teachings, identities and traditional knowledges have not crossed generations because of the paternalistic colonising forces which have penetrated into Indigenous lives. This group of storytellers differs from the previous generations as the families represented are the current young parents and their children, either preparing for school or in the early years of school.

One participant in this chapter was non-indigenous but spoke to the racialised experiences of her daughter in school and how she was constructed first and foremost as an Aboriginal child.

Therefore, the stories in this chapter spoke to the most recent Aboriginal experiences of colonial models of schooling. This group is also unique in this story as the mothers experience schooling for their children through the entity of a targeted Indigenous playgroup. Therefore they are beginning to have social support for their parenting and schooling lives despite living throughout a mainstream community. In mainstream communities young families typically live spread through the general population and may not have Indigenous social connections.

The stories in this chapter spoke to the family experiences of being constructed as *other* in schools. Mothers shared stories with me about being refused places in a kindergarten due to their need for financial arrangements when others were able to pay the full fee upfront. Jenny spoke to how life is different for Aboriginal children compared with her own non-indigenous experiences of the same school. The tone of these stories is very different to the tone of the elders’ and grandparents’ storytelling. The elders presented their stories as justifiably proud stories of survival and resilience. However, the underlying stories and their emotive stances spoke to the traumatic circumstances of living through their “awful” days when parents were not welcome into schools, even to protect their children.
Culture strong

This group of young parents live without the protection of their stories for the most part. The Murri Mums are storytellers who are the offspring from the generation who were removed from their family, knowings and cultural teachers. Only one storyteller in this chapter remained connected to her culture. Rosie presents as grounded in her cultural understandings and has comfortably completed a university business degree during the process of this research. She is a woman raised in culture by her own family. She spoke of her own education as “truly awful” because of racism and negative constructions by the teachers. Her worry about racism in mainstream schools had her relocate to traditional country. She inherently knew the connection to her culture and country would make her children strong in their identity.

The elders’ stories spoke of resilience in culture and even in their memories of it. Such memories may have carried an element of loss and mourning for their traditional ways, country and sacred kinship lines which attached them to culture. The stories from the taken-away grandparents carried no strength of survival from it. Nonetheless, they expressed some inherent knowings. All sought culture and connection to country. In the main, their stories spoke of lives shaped by helplessness and ongoing trauma. This state of cultural trauma (Halloran, 2004) for many was their understanding of Aboriginality. The families that experienced the worst of removal from culture such as those raised in institutions or in families of the “taken-away” children demonstrate significant anxiety and other mental health issues.

Identity

All of the young mothers interviewed in this project expressed how important the playgroup was to them. I suggest that while it increased their cultural social networks it also gave them a sense of tribe. From my own worldview and understandings, identity is the major issue permeating all generations of storytellers. Aboriginal people are not becoming white despite the fair complexions. The final Murri Mum, Lily, offers an educated voice and presence to the playgroup. She demonstrates the potential for young Aboriginal women. Yet, while she is successful in her university education, she still wants to be seen as an Aboriginal woman. Lily is fair-skinned, but she constructs her identity to look as a dark-skinned native. She
wears Aboriginal motif clothing, has a tribal tattoo, and darkens her complexion and hair. Perhaps, had she known her cultural stories and traditions, she would not feel so “lost” in her Indigenous identity.

Family, kinship and family lines were considered sacred and connected to the land itself. The social capital created through the playgroup created another more sacred space for these young families. It created a sense of traditional tribal belonging. Elders, grandmothers, and young families gathered together and shared their lives and stories within the group. Many of the stories are survival stories rather than cultural lore. Nonetheless it built a space that the families identified with and offered an opportunity to meet with families experiencing Aboriginal issues in schools and the mainstream world.

**Schooling and education**

The four Aboriginal mothers in this generational group spoke to schooling issues for them as Aboriginal children. The one non-indigenous mother, Jenny, spoke of school being such a nice experience for her that she wanted her children to go there. I believe Jenny’s story spoke poignantly to the differences Aboriginal children face in mainstream schools. Jenny was a part of the mainstream culture and enjoyed her education within that cultural schooling environment. Aboriginal children are othered in schools. Lily told me that she had to move her child from a school because the minute an issue occurred it was blamed on his Aboriginality and the school and teacher were not prepared to consider alternatives. At this time, her son has been diagnosed with a disorder which could manifest as “naughty” behaviour.

The non-indigenous mother, Jenny, was startled when any issue her daughter had in the Prep class was related to Aboriginal issues. The teacher wanted to secure additional funding for tutoring even if it required a medical label of intellectual impairment. The young families continue to endure these same issues around being assigned deficit characteristics which the elders spoke too. Aunty May said that the teachers 70 years ago related skin colour to intelligence. Aboriginal parents do anticipate the issue of racism. Rosie was prepared to uproot her home and family to educate her children away from the threat of racism in mainstream urban schools.
However, through the networking and access to information about schools that the playgroup provides, the families are seeing the injustice and discrimination which shape their lives. Those who are emotionally strong enough and supported by a network of peers are facing schools and speaking up for their children. This group of mothers are not accepting that they or their children are “the problem”. For instance, Jenny related the story of how she interacted with the school. “How can my daughter be in need of a tutor? This is a play-based Prep year isn’t it?” Not only did she take an empowered stance to support her child, she related a powerful teaching story to the other mothers. She demonstrated active agency, rather than passive acceptance.

This story has offered other mothers ways to “be” when interacting with schools. Jenny showed them she found information about Prep school, and then took the strength from this knowledge and questioned the school’s discriminatory practices. Lily too has offered her teaching story to the mothers. She models her ability to be educated, and many of the other mothers have followed her example by going into TAFE and university courses. The playgroup mums initially contacted me for advocacy, but over time saw they could find information and represent their children themselves. They see inequality, and while they may be damaged by intergenerational trauma, they are responding to issues at school. Through the playgroup they are also interacting positively with the school community, and feeling comfortable in schools and with teachers. The playgroup families are initiating relationships and partnerships with schools and teachers.

Voices and Silences of the Murri Bubs

Due to the intergenerational and Indigenous nature of this project, I had always planned to include the children’s voices as important. I had intended to conversationally ask the children their own stories about getting ready to go to school, what their thoughts were about school, what they knew about school, and if they worried about it. I found however that I could not engage them conversationally, even though I was a woman familiar to their ordinary social lives and home lives as well as playgroup lives. I did offer multiple and flexible opportunities to involve the children. The collection of the childhood stories was left until last in the story-gathering process, so the children were comfortable with me.
I had offered each child their own disposable camera and asked them to take photos of things they did to learn or play, or help Mum at home. The cameras went unused by the children. Typically, the mothers took photos of the children. So I attempted to have the children speak to me about the photos the mothers had taken. They would sit beside me, nod, smile, and say very little.

I attempted the use of puppets that I had found had been used in non-indigenous research in order to allow children to “speak” the character. The playgroup children loved the activity and would run and get the puppets when they saw me, and push them to me as soon as I arrived. Yet while they would chat together with their peers, they would say very little to me, even to answer a very open question. They would rely on one word answers usually. Even the parents would prompt them to speak to me, “You can tell Robyn about what we did, go on tell Robyn”. I asked one little girl what colour her new puppy was. “Black”, she answered and walked away. Her mother called after her, “It is not black. Why did you tell Robyn it was black? It’s brown and white.” The mothers would offer them words to say to me, “Tell Robyn how the snake ate your budgie”.

I was frustrated as I was writing a doctorate about giving voice to the typically unheard, and I could not get the children to speak to me. I spoke to a speech pathologist who was conducting home language research in school situations in an Aboriginal remote community. She told me she had observed that the children were very “chatty” and even humorous with laughter in the pre-prep room she visited. The room had a Murri teacher and teacher aide. She noted in her own findings that once the children graduated into the classroom with an Anglo-Celtic teacher the communication and the lively chat she observed earlier also stopped. About that time she said, the same happy preschoolers started to become behaviour problems (Gould, 2009).

Finally, I had the children do some artwork, and I wrote a narrative to their simple stories. They still offered me little; it was seen as a quick requirement to do to escape to play freely. I considered the possibility that they were too young or reluctant to speak to me when they had playgroup only once a week. I realised I was back to my original dilemma that the children in these research endeavours could be constructed as “deficit” in their communications, if I were to report on our limited conversations. However, I felt this was not the case. There was something significant
happening here that I could not place. I was forced to leave the children’s story space as silent in this thesis. I do discuss this silence in the final findings chapter of this thesis.

I realised that the children’s silences were speaking to me, especially when I considered it against the other personal conversations of the research. While the elders, grandparents and mothers valued school and send their children to school, none spoke to trusting school personnel or the teachers. The playgroup went quiet on the days any Child Protection Officers visited any of the children who were in care. The parents avoided attending when Anglo-Celtic researchers were present. Often families would not be at playgroup for a while. When I asked the other mothers where they were, I would be told they’d gone away for a while “because Child Protection had their eye on them”.

I realised that the children were taught to avoid Anglo-Celtic authority-like people. Just as our people do not typically engage with police voluntarily, they used avoidant behaviour with teacher-like people. This was “stranger danger” with real live boogiemen. Anglo-Celtic families teach children to go to policemen or teachers as people they can trust. Aboriginal people were removed by policemen. The truth of their fear of authority is as true in their situation historically as it is in the present day. Surveillance on their lives, and child removals, are a reality. I realised I had been taught similarly, to “tell no one anything about us”. It pervades Aboriginal thought and action on a daily basis. This idea has passed across the generations and is reinforced by their communities’ beliefs and actions in each generation.

Conclusions: The Stories across the Generations

This section marks the culmination of all the stories told. What is of interest is how the construction of the Aboriginal child in school has not really changed and our children continue to be viewed as problematic across generations. All of the storytellers had sought engagement with schools as children, but typically all generations reported racism and teacher attitudes as their reason for disengagement from education. Jenny, the non-indigenous woman but mother of Murri children, was startled by the discriminatory experiences. Jenny’s own ideas about her childhood school were remembrances of happy times. She saw that in the same context her
children were refused that experience by the essentialised construction of her children’s Aboriginality.

The tone of the stories from the Murri Mums is very different from the tone of the stories of the elders and the grandparents. The elders presented their stories as justifiably proud stories of survival and resilience. The grandparents were too overcome by their traumatic lives to focus on education. The trauma that the grandparents endured, their fear of not being able to protect their children, or prevent child removals, was present throughout the stories. Even Rosie whose family had no removals feared that her poor housekeeping could lead to removal of her children.

Identity underpins all of these stories because the storytellers are constructed as Aboriginal others in all contexts. Aboriginal people are not becoming white despite the fair complexions. Our final Murri Mum, Lily, gives another lens to Aboriginal potential. She is further along the education pathway than the other mums, although she too started her educational journey late after dropping out of school. She presents as highly articulate and reflective about Aboriginal issues, discrimination and social injustice. Her stories act as teaching stories to the other mothers. Lily is a mother who has knowledge about human rights, legal discrimination, social injustice and equality.

The elders’ stories spoke of a time of cultural resilience through the framework of cultural maintenance. While they have experienced trauma, they relied on a proud sense of identity which offered them dignity. The stories of “taken-away” children spoke to the horror visited about those children and their lives. However, in this current generation, the Murri Mums are seeking ways to equalise schooling outcomes for their children. This was not necessarily to do with the research but through the strengths of the social connections that were established by the mothers and how they continue to increase their capacity and networks. The stories of current issues in school acknowledge that these parents also understand the power that they hold as parents. They demonstrate stories of developing the power to maintain the playgroup as their own cultural space and interact with schools and agencies about their children.

The mothers, over the course of my research journey, called upon me for advocacy to interface with the new playgroup teacher but they are now handling such
issues themselves. They are also openly communicating with that teacher and as such, are constructing their own teaching stories to use with non-indigenous teachers. One by one they are making steps into a new Murri pathway. This is a significant change because the mothers have come to envisage themselves as equal partners in the education of their children. The playgroup context is educating them about how to “be” with schools. Through the stories, they have gained a sense of what power and the connectivity that is available to them. They can have a voice about school issues that concern them.

The stories in this chapter contrast the school experiences of the parents with those of their young children who are now in school. The playgroup remains a work in progress but it has acted as a transformative agent for these children. It has also done so for the parents as many of the Murri Mums have taken courage from the group and its support to undertake further education. Some of the participants, like Lily and me, have been positive role models that demonstrate “good things about being Aboriginal” in contrast to everyday challenges like fathers in jail and negative stereotypes. The most worrying element that unexpectedly arose in this chapter was the fear the children demonstrated, politely and with a smile. This mirrored the passive resistance of their mothers to “authority” figures.

The past stories, and those of this generation, have intersected with the power of survival and resilience. It is not about acceptance and assignment of who they should be. However, the recurrence of racism and the poignant expression from the storytellers about not being praised in school, even when they did very well, speaks to a sense of hopelessness. To find the strength to turn this experience around, I believe, will need the support of tribe.
Chapter 8: Conclusions

Introduction

This project originated as an opportunity for me to understand the schooling and the colonising experiences of Indigenous children across time. I also sought an academic space to give voice to the “silenced” about their ordinary schooling lives. Even as an Indigenous woman, I was not fully aware of how historical settlement processes had shaped the reality of Indigenous lives, let alone Indigenous people’s experiences with colonised models of schooling. I learned of their experiences and their courage. In this project, I was surprised by the scope and breadth of the stories. No two storytellers had similar stories to tell. Disturbingly, all the Aboriginal storytellers spoke to inhumanity, discrimination and injustice by dominant groups, processes, and practices.

As reported in Chapter 1, I came to this project well aware from my initial experiences that Indigenous families were not typically engaging with schools and teachers. I wanted to understand what the past schooling experiences were and how the past had shaped this contemporary reticence to engage with schools. I understood the importance of parent and home school partnerships in achieving good outcomes for children in schools (Hutchins et al., 2007; Shepherd & Walker; 2008; Silburn & Walker, 2008). While the difficult stories I heard affected me emotionally, this thesis also tells a positive story of the Murri playgroup journey.

While through this thesis I have spoken quite generally about the “experiences of Aboriginal people”, I need to reiterate that this thesis was conducted on a modest scale, telling the stories of just 15 Aboriginal people living in an urban context in a rural town in Queensland. Although their stories may represent the collective experience of many Aboriginal families across Australia, I am not in a position to make too strong a claim about their representativeness or that they speak for all Aboriginal Australians. However, the trauma reported in these stories is also evident within other research, including the Bringing Them Home report (HREOC, 1997). The research process took patience. It took time to build the relationships, particularly with the younger storytellers. This indicated that trust developed slowly.
The need to feel trust with researchers is very important for Aboriginal people. They need to have a sense of safety within any relationships to offer the authentic story.

I was moved by the playgroup journey, but delightedly so, because I had not anticipated or envisaged just how successful it would be. I do not claim the playgroup as my own intervention, for while I established the original space, it was the facilitator and Murri mothers who drove its journey. It evolved into a cultural space of agency, belonging and empowerment for the Murri families. Best of all, it was a place where Murri families and their children could feel happy at school. I often watched as mothers completed their own collage and artwork and took it home “for the fridge”. The mothers sat on the carpet at story time and listened alongside their children. They would “shush” their noisy children, so as to listen better and escape into the storybooks. For many of those mothers, I knew they were having a schooling experience along with their children which their own childhood did not hold.

In this chapter, I consider how narratives gave voice to the largely unknown stories of Indigenous experience about childhood realities in colonial models of schooling. This chapter is shaped by writing to the three research questions. The questions are: What was the reality of school for different generations of Indigenous people? What beliefs and values are held about mainstream education for Indigenous children? What ideas are communicated about school across generations?

After considering the questions, I write to the specific common categories which I identified from the stories. These categories are: culture and identity; fear and anxiety; and intergenerational trauma. I speak to the potential messages in the children’s silences. I also consider the development of social capital and transformative agency of the playgroup. I discuss the strengths and limitations of the Indigenist methodology. Finally, I relate these findings to practice and policy contexts.
What was the reality of school for different generations of Indigenous people?

All of the stories from elders to young mothers were difficult to hear as they told of suffering, trauma and inhumanity across time in all generations of storytellers. The elders’ stories still recalled aspects of their culture; and, while remembering a lost cultural past may be traumatising, it also offered some fragments of cultural belonging and support. Even if their culture was prohibited by authorities, they remembered who they were and took some support from their sense of belonging.

Their stories spoke individually and collectively to working hard at school and strategising ways to remain unnoticed in the classroom so they could learn. I believe that Aboriginal families believed that they could be educated and hold equal status with European settlers through attaining a “whitefella” education. Uncle Henry told me in another conversation that it was dignified if you could sign your own name. I believe this anecdote speaks to the attitude toward their expectations of becoming “as good as the whitefellas”. Unfortunately there was a compounding issue in that the storytellers were also constructed by racialised attitudes from mainstream society.

Daisy poignantly told the story of leaving school because of racism, working in a cannery while she finished school in night classes but she was still denied the chance to become a nurse. As Aunty May said, “Your skin colour was equated with your intelligence”. If this was not the case for Daisy, it was racism which stopped her success. While I found it emotionally difficult to accommodate the elders’ stories of forced removals and cruel mission experiences and school education, I found the grandparent stories more painful to hear. I felt I bore emotional witness to the stories myself.

The grandparents told me very little about their schooling because they either had little or were so immersed in traumatic life events that these were their dominant memories. These children were the stolen children; with stories of abuse, abandonment, sexual assault, and imprisonment. There was a lot of fear and anxiety which remained. Even Keith, who was placed in the most comfortable home circumstances, spent his childhood longing for the first day he could run in order to find out where he belonged.
None of the stolen children speak of joyful childhoods, happy schooling experiences or loving home lives. Children were removed from their cultural teachers and they were lost, abused and traumatised. The one storyteller who was raised at home with her own family still spoke to her terror and daily fear of being taken at school and never seeing her parents again. The current young adult parents equally spoke of racism and not being praised in school. They too carried fear of child removals which remain present today through the interventions of child protection services. The families and children remain at risk because of intergenerational poverty and health difficulties.

**What beliefs and values are held about mainstream education for Indigenous children?**

While all storytellers said they valued education, they did not speak with affection about school, their school day memories or teachers. Across the generations, all parents expressed they valued *education* although they did not necessarily value mainstream models of school. All the young parents wanted their children to do well at school. All attended playgroup to better prepare their children for school. At the time of this project, the playgroup had been in existence for four years and the families viewed it as culturally safe space within the school. All the parents attended regularly with their children because they felt safe, enjoyed the social aspects and wanted their children to learn.

Families commuted long distances to come to the playgroup and while it suited other social and cultural needs, the Murri Mums all identified their reasons for being at playgroup as “teaching the kids how to learn” and “getting the kids better ready for school”. Fleer and Williams-Kennedy (2002) identified that Aboriginal parents do wish to know the secret or invisible assumptions that schools hold about Aboriginal families. When I asked Brenda about what her grandchildren learned at playgroup she said: “Well they watch Annie [playgroup facilitator], and the other mothers show them things, and they listen to the stories and try to do things themselves.” She was well aware of the learning going on in playgroup. Most storytellers expressed ideas around education as a ladder to better lives or to equalise the job opportunities in line with those that are available to non-indigenous Australians. The elders seemed the most interested in education as the means to equality with non-indigenous people and
because their parents saw a real need for education. The elders also realised from viewing life from a long lens that a good education was key to being able to make life choices.

The grandparents were the least interested in school. This was also the most traumatised generation; for example, Esther lived in a space of real anxiety, fear and disappointment. She was abandoned by her mother and had left a sexually abusive adoptive home to live in a number of abusive adult relationships. Her survival is testimony to her courage. Brenda expressed to me often and at length how she abhorred the arbitrary rules and procedures of schools, which many of the storytellers also mentioned. Grandmother Valda also spoke to dealing with inconsistencies in the rules, as she felt they changed for Aboriginal students. For instance, she spoke about how a group of white children was invisible to the teacher, but a group of Aboriginal children was dispersed by teachers. Such incidents speak to how Aboriginal children are constructed as problematic.

The darker-skinned grandparents, Eva and Valda, also indicated that they did not like to go to schools for fear that they would identify their fair-skinned grandchildren as Aboriginal. This would expose the children to being constructed as Aboriginal, thereby potentially exposing them to racism and low academic expectations. One of the Murri Mum storytellers, Wendy, said a similar thing about her mother Eva: “At one school I told my mother not to come up, because that is how they knew I was an Aboriginal kid ... I didn’t want to deny her … I just wanted the name calling to stop.” These storytellers rely on passing as white in order to be treated as well as white children are.

None of the storytellers expressed enjoyment of school, except for Jenny, who was the only non-indigenous participant in this study. All three generations found they were othered, in trouble more often and exposed to racism. Elder storyteller, Aunty May, is in her 80s and she still spoke of the pain of racism. The young parents also spoke of this. These issues speak to how schools and educators reflect the social reproduction agenda. As such, it is difficult for parents to come to school or, at times, even send their children into the environment. Uncle Henry spoke to me often in our conversations about the need to be courageous. Aboriginal families and young children are called upon to be courageous in the simple act of sending their children into the white world of schools.
Jenny, as the non-indigenous Murri Mum, poignantly highlighted the difference in education experience offered to non-indigenous and Indigenous children. She loved her school days and seeks to recreate them in the same school for her children. Of course the difference is her children are Aboriginal children and she finds that issues occurring are constructed as “Aboriginal problems”. As such, she feels the children are constructed by their identity and no further explanation or understanding is sought. This experience rings true to elder Aunty May who felt that skin colour was related to intelligence by the teachers.

Lily, the graduate Murri storyteller, expressed the same concern for her son. His overactive behaviour is considered by the teacher to be an “Aboriginal problem”, relating to a racialised negative identity. Identifying as Aboriginal seems to relate to deficit (Malin, 1989; 2003b). In a study by Lareau (2000), children were stereotyped with a racialised identity.

What ideas are communicated about school across generations?

In the narratives about school, there were feelings expressed about not belonging, not being welcomed, fearing racism and authority, and being cast as less valued human beings within the classroom context. These ideas were reaffirmed by each generation. Lack of cultural safety, exclusion and racism were present and affirmed in broader social contexts. According to sociologists, Glass, Bengston, and Dunham (1986), in their studies of family attitudes, children are aware of family beliefs inherently by actions within the family. There are implicit and unexpressed ideas that occur within families that are communicated within the everyday family contexts (Goodnow, 1992).

These experiences occurred in each generation and were affirmed across generations. Atkinson (2002) spoke about how Aboriginal traumatic experiences crossed generations in her study of trauma and lack of cultural support. Each storyteller in this research speaks about wanting school success for their children but they also speak of similar negative experiences in their school days. Granny Valda suggested that school was easier now for her grandchildren because there were more ethnic groups at school. She did not suggest that the dominant groups of Anglo
teachers or children were more tolerant or inclusive, rather than there are now many more different ethnic and cultural groups evident within communities.

Schools act as agencies which reflect and reproduce broader social constructions of society as Bourdieu described (1986). From the time of first settlement, Aboriginal people were constructed and negatively essentialised against the inherent assumptions of whiteness which arrived with the European lens of civilisation (Pascoe, 2008a; Perkins & Langton, 2008). Postcolonial and decolonising scholars like Canella and Viruru (2004), Said (1978) and Smith (1999) spoke to the neo-colonisation processes of school and labelling of others. Scholars have referred to this as racialised “bordering off” (Spivak, 1988). Such racialised bordering off continues today (Foley, 1997; Paradies et al., 2008; Saunders, 2006). Dr Chelsea Bond (2011) is an urban Indigenous health researcher. In her doctoral thesis, she spoke of school-assigned constructions of Aboriginality. She states that she dropped out of school because the teachers constructed her by “the real ABCs” of Aboriginality which all Aboriginal people know. They are “Abo, Bong and Coon”. I would suggest after listening to these stories across generations that schools do block Aboriginal family and child engagement with schools.

Themes across Generations of Storytellers

In this section, I speak to common themes which emerged across all generations of storytellers. I acknowledge that these categories are my own, and other researchers with the same stories may have elected to speak to others. All the stories across generations are underpinned by traumatic colonising experiences. The categories I have identified are: culture and identity; fear and anxiety; and intergenerational trauma.

Culture and identity

Aspects of culture bind individuals and groups together as collective identities or ethnic groups. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal peoples in Canada in 1996 noted that culture provides meaning and a purpose to life. It also offers existential psychological spiritual support, as noted by Salzman and Halloran (2004). Archibald (2008) expressed this by stating the Cree belief that stories protect people and
cultures. However, the Canadian Royal Commission linked Aboriginal culture as usually anchored in place to a particular homeland. It may be a past or present homeland; rural or urban.

Even as an Indigenous woman I was not prepared for the trauma of the personal stories which were revealed to me in this project. I was raised in a family where my parents and grandparents chose “passing”, denial and silence as their distancing and coping strategies. I was largely unaware of my own family and tribal history. It was never openly discussed, yet always implied, particularly by the dark-skinned uncles who lived with us. However, I discovered from conversations in this project and within the community about this project, it is not unusual for family members not to discuss this. Pascoe (2008a) and Atkinson (2002) also remarked on this. The past experiences live as shadows, not fully shaped, but that may emerge whole into the current reality. However, a number of Aboriginal elders, such as Gungarri elder, Aunty Ruth Hegarty (1999), and Inala elder, Uncle Albert Holt (2001), have written about their mission schooling experiences in their respective autobiographies. Such actions speak to the need to break the silence, and the need to heal.

I believe the desire to speak, heal, and teach were the hopes of my storytellers. Generations of children were removed and the generation of today largely do not even know their country or kin. Aboriginality has not been reconstructed as worthy and the trauma and cultural loss have created great emotional and social burdens on Aboriginal families. Without the support of their culture, many of the storytellers have endured many physical and mental health issues. It is of interest to me that none of the storytellers except one spoke about their children being taken away. Eva did speak of child protection taking her children away and she also presented as the most fragile of the storytellers.

Identity is determined within a child’s cultural context (Bamberg, 2012). Culture supports you and allows you to “be” as a human being in the world within a unique cultural context. Culture allows you to hold an individual and collective identity as one of your tribe. For Aboriginal people, identity was attached in the beginning to land, culture, kin and tribe. Assimilation acts of removing children created insufferable trauma and the loss of cultural stories and ancestral teachers. From the mainstream view, Aboriginal people and culture were constructed so
negatively that they considered the children were better off as European Australians. Nevertheless, removing children from their cultural teachers did not make them into European children. The inherent sense of Aboriginality remained strong, even in children who knew nothing of their origins.

In Chapter 2, I identified the consequences of racism for mental health, including anxiety and depression. Racism continues in Australia and is a core reason why Aboriginal people disengaged from schools in every generation. It is not experienced by the white majority because it is not directed to them (Kincheloe, 2005). The effects of racism on oppressed groups has led to the development of an array of responses and mechanisms such as low self-esteem, mistrust of the dominant culture, internalised racism and denial. Members of minority groups with strong ethnic identity are more likely to have more positive self-conceptions (Pedersen, Walker, & Wise, 2006).

The Murri Mums tell of empowered ways of engaging with schools after they had come to playgroup. The playgroup story is its own teaching story. It tells how a community gained networks, support, and social capital to bridge and link with other agencies of power. The playgroup brought about change. The stories in this thesis shape new ways to engage parents and children with schools. It tells a story for schools so that they too can learn and reach out to the community and create opportunities for families to interconnect into schools. The playgroup story tells teachers and schools how Indigenous children want to have the same warmth and experience of schools as mainstream white children. I trust that these stories will move from the individual inner space of the recollected story into the broader social sphere where the stories can be heard.

**Fear and anxiety**

While elders and grandparents wanted to speak to me and tell me stories of their lives, the Murri Mothers did not initially open up with real stories. Instead they constructed polite acceptable responses which revealed nothing of their school lives. Initially, I constructed this from an anxious researcher’s point of view; how would I gather narratives if I only received one or two word answers? As a Murri woman I also recognised a considered reluctance. I feared I was viewed by them like a mainstream researcher. In reality, I was still an agent of authority and came from the
world of the university. While I wanted to celebrate offering the storyteller voice, the storytellers were strategising concealment based on fear, authority, and surveillance by a university researcher.

As I grew into this doctoral journey, I came to understand the wary relationship Aboriginal people have with authority. I became aware that the families feared child protection agencies and schools. They viewed their involvement as an opportunity for surveillance by schools. They had fears of child removal that shaped all of their actions around school. Aboriginal families traditionally did not involve their children with school until they were legally required to do so.

In light of this research, I suggest Aboriginal families have justifiable reluctance around sending their children into a school where they have experienced racism, exclusion and othering. Children carry a family anxiety about schools even if this is not explicitly spoken of at home. Research by Malin (2003b) spoke also about teacher attitudes toward Aboriginal children. Not only are the children not welcome, they are immersed in a mainstream white social institution which inherently others them. The parents prepare their children for the challenges of the school that the parents experienced.

**Intergenerational trauma**

Oral tribal cultures are most vulnerable to destruction if the stories and language are lost with the death of cultural people and the lands to which they belonged. The younger storytellers in this project were not aware of who their families were or their traditional country. They had no idea what it meant to be Aboriginal; rather they identified Aboriginality with the negative assumptions of European Australia and were taught that their heritage was something shameful and not to be revealed (Pascoe, 2008b). They lacked the cultural holding of their unique identity as well as experiencing trauma and worry that came from a self-construction of negativity as a person of less worth (Atkinson, 2002).

In her narrative research, Atkinson (2002) described the historical and ever-present anxiety and fear as “songlines of trauma” which run across generations of Aboriginal families. Halloran (2004) and Salzman and Halloran (2004) assert that trauma and post-traumatic like symptoms are shaped by fear which comes from the ever-present threat of annihilation. Annihilation did occur, historically, all Aboriginal
people have dealt with witnessing or remembering genocidal events, inhumanity and fear.

There is another source of intergenerational beliefs which impact Aboriginal people and their engagement with institutions. That is the essentialised and racialised ideas non-indigenous people apply to Aboriginal culture and people. It was assigned out of imperialistic convenience from the time of first settlement when the legal fiction of *terra nullius* proclaimed that no civilisation or culture of importance was here (Behrendt et al., 2009). Government intervention, racism and deficit constructs shape Aboriginal lived reality in every generation of storytellers.

Atkinson (2002) found that the remembering of culture was itself laced with grief and loss. The act of remembering back to the ancestors and old ways can be re-traumatising. According to Atkinson’s narrative work on intergenerational trauma, Aboriginal people suffered what Europeans would describe as mental health problems. However, as an Aboriginal health academic, Atkinson suggested that the people suffered soul wounding, or cultural crisis, which cultural reconstitution may, in part, begin to heal. Her interpretation suggests cultural healing could occur through reconnection with land, language, stories and community. I also suggest that it can occur through circles of strength such as the playgroup created for the Aboriginal mothers in this community.

**Healing and Cultural Reconstitution in Schools**

While much of the cultural traditions are lost to Indigenous people everywhere, there are moves internationally and within Australia to restore language, ceremony and cultural services. In Hawaiian Mo'olelo traditional healings have occurred through restoration of some marine ceremonies (Benham, 2007). In Australia, languages are now being reconstituted and cultural mores remain; and elders hold stories which they may share when they realise that they are of value. In my own traditional country, the Gungarri language is being taught in Mitchell State School and one of the Aboriginal teacher aides told me that the local children say hello to her of a morning in language. Of course, the language now only consists of a list of nouns, so it can never be fully restored. My own tribal elder, Aunty Ethel (personal communication, August, 2010), told me some stories of our lore. She then said she
had to be very careful to whom she told these stories because many people laugh at the old ways. These stories are often constructed as of no worth to modern times, as Granny Valda said in her story. Cultural restoration is a journey, a process of rediscovery and reconnection. This cultural healing is unlikely to require Western medicine. Aboriginal people often say, “We will be well when our country is well”. This comment speaks to the need for cultural healing and reconnection of people with traditional land and its knowledge. At this time our native Australians do not live in culture, rather as a culturally fragmented and colonised Indigenous people.

Trauma and anxiety were ideas which occurred or were noted in all the generations of storytellers. In many of the stories, the life experiences of trauma consumed the storytellers and they had less to say about their schooling. According to Atkinson (2002) trauma is transferred across generations in complex ways including intergenerationally from parent to offspring. Atkinson also described transgenerational trauma transmitted across a number of generations such as from a grandparent to a grandchild. It appears that trauma is visited on Aboriginal families in many ways. Another aspect of traumatisation which relates to the storytellers’ circumstances is being traumatised by witnessing another person experiencing trauma.

As I reflect on the stories in this research and consider the work by Atkinson (2002) and Halloran (2004) on trauma transference, I believe that many Aboriginal people live in a constant state of worry. It manifests as anxiety, agoraphobia, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Education policy or practice has not considered the emotional issues that continue to impact on the lives of Aboriginal families and their children. It would be possible to add healing and a cultural curriculum to schools. Cultural capability programs for teachers and school staff could enhance how schools and teachers treat Aboriginal families.

**The Silence of the Children**

I have reflected at length on the silence of the Murri playgroup children. When I considered who “I” was in my playgroup researcher role, it was very like the “authority” of a teacher. Lewis (2010) identified that children’s silence, as a related notion to children’s voice, is an important issue. Lewis suggested that the silence in
encounters with children needs to be considered within the context of the power relationships between the researcher and the researched. Lewis found that the “preference by children for silence, despite elaborate ethical protocols and careful procedures for voicing their view, warrants more notice” and acknowledged that “that silence needs to be heard as it is not neutral or empty” (p. 18).

In the foreword to the book, *Power and Voice in Research with Children* (Soto & Swadener, 2005), Kincheloe emphasised that not all childhoods are middle class; rather “…some children are rendered powerless and vulnerable in their everyday lives” (p. xii). While Kincheloe’s research is with North American populations, I suggest his ideas transfer into this situation. Kincheloe suggests that family beliefs, as well as agencies like child protection, contribute to power assignments. Children may have already learned within families the implicit messages of racism, othering and silence within their home contexts. Kincheloe (2005) maintains that other childhoods exist that are different and inhabited by different social, cultural and political structures to the dominant, middle-class childhood.

In order to understand the silence, I reflected upon my own childhood. I too was taught to reveal nothing about my family to anyone. To even inadvertently reveal so much as a middle name or birth date met with angry and controlling responses. I did not understand why as a child but these stories of subterfuge and “passing” alert me to it now. Silence is an Aboriginal skill of survival. When your life is lived with an ever-present element of fear, it is necessary to remain unrevealed. Aboriginal children remain over-represented in child removals and child protection (AIHW, 2010). Such worry and suspicion underpin parental attitudes about engaging with schools. My own experience of finding the young Murri Mum storytellers politely non-complying to my research demonstrated the worry they carried in relation to revealing information about themselves or their children.

Lewis (2010) proposed that silence is heard more loudly in contexts where issues of power and authority are present. If children construct school as a place to fear then this does not bode well for a successful transition to school. This area needs further research. The *Little Children are Sacred* report (Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, 2007) alerted governments in a very powerful way to the issues of paternalistic policy and
practices that oppress and suppress Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal families. Without culture and stories, Aboriginal people remain fragile and vulnerable.

**Playgroup Dreaming: A Creation Story of a New Urban Tribe**

At playgroup the mothers were not marginalised, *othered* or victimised. The Murri Mums were simply normalised as mums in the mob. It was a space inside the mainstream school, rather than an exclusionary space. The community, the mums and the children loved coming to playgroup. The parents openly disengaged when it was infiltrated by European Australian authority figures, such as white middle-class researchers and teachers. It evolved into being a culturally safe place within the school. Its acceptance by the school also took time and over time the school was prepared to offer the playgroup better space and conditions because of the interest of the school principal.

Over time, the power of the playgroup linkages and bridging aspects of social capital made the playgroup a part of the school itself, rather than being seen as an add on. It became embedded in how the school worked with and interconnected with the community. It was a channel of contact from community to school, and vice versa. The mothers built links into the school, the teachers and the classrooms; they bridged into other educational providers such as the local TAFE and university. At this time, many of the mums have completed Certificates in Children’s Services. Some have taken alternative entry courses into university and others have enrolled into education, social work and nursing programs. One mum has completed a degree in communication and is working in this field. Others have taken jobs as teacher aides in schools and some have become playgroup facilitators in their own communities. All have developed strong friendship networks and connections with places for advice and support. The mums have a playgroup Facebook page and share good outcomes and news about their children.

Its existence and presence influenced change within the school on a systemic level. The school appointed an Aboriginal reference group to inform the school about their issues and ways of doing business with their children. This offered the school a way to handle Aboriginal issues across year levels in culturally appropriate and more socially just ways. In many instances, urban Murris typically live in communities in
social isolation and lack the kinship networks of traditional communities. The playgroup was one of the few education spaces which offered a sense of community support which did not exclude Aboriginal people and allowed the families to have a sense of control. Many reports and government funded research (e.g., Cooper, 2011; Hutchins et al., 2007; Malin, 2003b; Martin, 2008) identify factors of ownership and self-control as key to successful programs for Indigenous people. The playgroup, when left alone, developed into a low stress, culturally safe and healing space. In an analysis of data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), Edwards, Baxter, Smart, Sanson, and Hayes (2009) found that, regardless of socioeconomic status, community factions such as social networks and supports for families and children are important predictors of children’s developmental outcomes.

Silburn and Walker (2008) identified that the community’s role in child raising is more important in predicting children’s developmental outcomes than has been generally recognised. In this research, children are often not sent to school because of issues related to poverty. For instance, the mothers spoke to me about not sending their children to school if they had no money for fruit or lunch. They feared if Child Protection were told by schools that the children had no food they would lose them. It was their strategy to keep away from surveillance by authorities until pay day.

The playgroup story is a teaching story and a resource which could be reproduced. It has an important message for mainstream service providers because it illustrates Murri ways of doing business that can work without input of non-indigenous experts. I believe for change to occur within urban Aboriginal communities, people need to look to models that do not rely on government or paternalistic models. This playgroup developed with few resources, but many linkages to network into other more powerful resources. The families gained strength from each other and the urban tribe.

A culturally safe place, like a playgroup, has the ability to connect people and families so they do not feel isolation in mainstream communities. These families felt they belonged in the school and had a place of cultural safety, support and refuge. The playgroup built social capital, as described by Mignone (2009). The playgroup mothers are also improving their own education and are able to question the “powerful” roles of teachers in discussing their children’s schooling. The ownership and power has shifted in this setting within a few years. Despite Aboriginal people
being the least powerful and most vulnerable they can step up and educate their children. My tribal elder, Aunty Ethel, told me in personal conversation (May 28, 2010) that parents must stand up for their children. Aboriginal parents must take a more powerful position whether they are anxious about going into schools or not. They must be courageous and demand better treatment for the children.

**Strengths of this Research**

In many ways, this project could have been an engaged and Western project had a non-indigenous researcher applied Indigenous protocols carefully such as advocated by NHMRC (2003, 2005). However, I believe that the depth of stories revealed reflect my common cultural heritage with the participants and the trust that was built. I discovered in this research that storytellers with young children were most anxious about engaging with me as a researcher. However, through my intuitive knowings and realising “what was going on here”, I perceived the wariness of the playgroup mums; the concerns about authority; and the non-welcoming spaces. At times when issues arose, I went back and considered my own experience and inner life, as well as the extensive teachings I have had with my tribal elders in this journey.

I would suggest the greatest strength of this research is that it was collaboratively designed and implemented with the Murri Mums. They identified their comfort needs in order to work within the group. Through the support of the group, individual storytellers would gradually come to me and reveal more about themselves or tell another story that they recalled. There was a sense of liberation in the storytellers, as if pressure was removed from them. To me, understanding the impact of fear on families and young children about schools is significant and will inform further research that I undertake. It suggests the need for healing curriculums and supportive practices in educational settings. Participants told me they did not feel judged by me. Most importantly, this allowed them to speak for themselves.

**Research Limitations**

While research typically explores how findings may generalise to other contexts, this research was Indigenous and local to this community. While these
findings may be indicative of Aboriginal experiences of schools, I would not suggest that the research findings transfer to other geographical, ethnic or cultural contexts. I am not sure the same findings would manifest in rural or remote settings. Because of the narrative nature and large amount of transcripts I have not identified all of the issues or categories that emerged within the stories. The categories I have spoken to acknowledge the main issues which seemed most significant to me.

I believe using narratives as teaching stories is an appropriate model and a way forward with beneficence. Indigenous stories need positioning within a broader interconnected framework of Indigenous research. Perhaps, as Indigenist research emerges into its own spaces, creative scholars will develop such pathways which connect the past through narrative to realise the potential of the future. Nonetheless the categories discussed, such as the intergenerational trauma, are stories which should be known and heard.

The stories will be accessible as teaching stories through this thesis, in my own teachings and in any future presentations of this information such as in a book, or a play. I believe this research offers real teachings to educators and policy writers around the different assumptions within Western and Indigenous worldviews. In my work in government advisory groups, I shall share these stories as demonstrations of what needs to be addressed by education providers in order to better engage our families and children at schools. I believe the teaching I offer about the need for healing and intergenerational trauma need to be addressed in education policy.

**Implications of the Research for Policy and Practice**

The impact of cultural trauma, racism, and fear of authorities in individuals was clearly evident in this research. Fear and anxiety impact on the wellbeing of Aboriginal families and children. Halloran (2004) suggested that the impact of trauma is worth exploration within education contexts. Racism should also be addressed by schools to assist in the reduction of anxiety. For example, Purdie et al., (2010) discussed intergenerational anxiety in high school contexts. Research is needed that unpacks this fear and anxiety as it impacts on children of all ages; for example, in the transition to school.
Unlike Western literature that suggests Aboriginal parents do not prepare their children for school, I found Aboriginal parents do prepare their children for the Aboriginal space and experience of school. School is a different place for Aboriginal children (Malin, 2003b). It is a space of authorities who have power over families’ and children’s lives. It is too often an unwelcoming space where children are othered and need courage to endure different forms of racism. It is a space in which Aboriginal families can assume that their children will be less valued and less educated than their mainstream peers. The sense of somewhere to belong and a sense of cultural safety are important and needs to be built for Aboriginal children in school environments.

Identity issues are addressed in the literature by Paradies et al. (2008). Mixed ethnic marriages are resulting in Aboriginal people having many different complexions. However, cultural identity ties people to the beliefs and to identification with their larger cultural groups. Aboriginal children who have fair skin may deal with confusion at school that could further complicate a sense of identity for the child (Foley, 2000). Children may be dealing with intergenerational trauma and Aboriginal health issues in the family that may not be known to others. Many Aboriginal children are in schools and may continue to “pass as white” if the family fear how they will be treated at school if their identity is known. White skin does not define cultural belonging to the Anglo-Celtic mainstream. It is the cultural stories and beliefs that will determine where Aboriginal people belong (Archibald, 2008).

The playgroup discussed in this research built for the parent participants a deeper sense of identity, self-determination, and self-efficacy because it is run and owned by the group itself. As such, it is a site of self-empowerment, of which there are too few in the Aboriginal world. Ideally in time, playgroups will be run by Aboriginal early childhood teachers who have the additional level of knowledge and skills to offer the community. If non-indigenous teachers are running Aboriginal playgroups they need to be closely informed by the community. The review by the Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) of Indigenous parenting programs (Borg & Paul, 2004) identified broad agreement across Indigenous communities that early childhood intervention strategies to support families and parents are critical. The review identified Aboriginal issues as a direct
consequence of the historical legacy of government policies that have had transgenerational impacts on Indigenous child development and the loss of cultural knowledge and skills supportive of parenting (Borg & Paul, 2004). In this report a number of strategies were recommended to support Indigenous families, including working with kinship groups and implementing healing strategies for communities.

As our educational qualifications improve and our voice is represented in powerful places we may be able to create real policy and practice difference. Until then, we must do as Aunty May suggested in the stories. We need to stand up, have courage and create our own change. Our families must go to school anyway, and speak to the teachers about our children. We must make these tracks ourselves or our little children will continue to suffer. Meanwhile we must ask each teacher to be humane and kind to our children. Perhaps the stories in this thesis could be the teaching resource that the teachers hear, so they know how our children are suffering.

Dockett, Perry, and Kearney (2010) have correctly identified core junctures for Indigenous children’s success at school. For example, on the transition to school, they emphasise a number of important components: the school to be ready; the community to be ready; as well as the family and the child. At this time, there are no culturally respectful foundational programs or pedagogical approaches to ensure Indigenous children are ready and equipped with early academic skills as expected in the Western early education tradition. Indigenous children must succeed within colonial models of schooling. Teachers must be prepared to work with culturally diverse learners and parents, particularly Indigenous families, in developing mutual trust and ensuring that their pedagogy reflects the importance of culture and cultural knowledge through strengths-based models of practice.

If teachers and schools lack cultural capability and sensitivity to the past and present circumstances of Indigenous experience, they will continue to blame the victims. Indigenous parents also need to utilise their power through engagement with schools. While parents remain absent, they are too easily assigned blame for children’s poor schooling outcomes. As my tribal elder, Aunty Ethel, suggested (personal communication, May 28, 2010), our parents must demand better outcomes for their children. Engaged parents can hold individual teachers and schools responsible. All Australian children need inclusive and warm classrooms to achieve positive education outcomes.
Conclusions

The contemporary Australian Aboriginal context is no longer a culturally intact place. Only a few “fortunate” Aboriginal families hold their cultural identity and stories to protect them. Others have endured intergenerational trauma, social exclusion and racism within their own generational groups and across generations. Schooling experiences have remained difficult rather than healing to a much victimised people. Aboriginal families and children do not live in a strong cultural space; rather a colonised place where only fragments of culture have survived genocidal processes including assimilation polices which removed children from their cultural teachers.

While much literature addressed in his project speaks to what works, mainstream policy writers, educators and decision makers continue to offer top-down Western and paternalistic interventions. If normative whiteness and Western educational practices that I have discussed in this thesis continue, I believe that our children will continue to be failed by schools. Aboriginal families have worries and fears about their children’s experiences of school. The presence of Indigenous centres such as the playgroup and Aboriginal families and workers in schools means that families are not blocked from schools but can have and see a pathway and a place of contact and cultural safety within a school. Indigenous research does give our families opportunities to be heard so that they can express their own ideas about Western schooling. Schooling has continued to fail Indigenous children because of deficit constructions and low expectations for our children.

The stories here speak about how Aboriginal families prepare their children to cope with racism and othering issues that occur within school contexts. Our families send their children to schools where they know that they will be less valued. Transformation needs to be shaped through humanity and healing and should be an agency for social change. If the normative worldview calls for assigning humanity only to white children, it needs to be reframed as a call for human rights, equality and social justice. It is not a political call but a moral imperative. New stories of successful, supported, healing Aboriginal education journeys need to teach our families and children the ways forward.
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