

Foregrounding Indigenous Worldviews in Early Childhood

Dr. Catherine Hamm, La Trobe University, Australia, Guest Editor

We acknowledge the traditional lands and territories of the Indigenous communities where the research and writing of the papers in this special issue took place. We pay respect to Elders past and present and acknowledge the deep learning these places hold and have held for many thousands of years.

This special issue has been a joy to edit. Engaging with authors from a range of worldviews related to childhoods, the papers activate different ways of knowing, being and doing. Responding to the provocation of *foregrounding Indigenous worldviews in early childhood*, the papers engage with a wide range of ideas, including:

- place
- disrupting Western policy worldviews
- refiguring Indigenous presences
- cultural competence
- quality

In addition, the papers in the Ideas from Practice section engage with the ethics and politics of foregrounding Indigenous worldviews in early childhood pedagogies. These papers attend to the tensions of settler accountabilities for the early childhood field in moments of everyday teaching and learning.

I am very honoured to coauthor this editorial with Dr. (Aunty) Sue Atkinson, a Yorta Yorta¹ woman living on Wurundjeri Country now known as Melbourne, Australia. Dr. Atkinson's extensive scholarship for over 40 years as a kindergarten teacher, adult educator, and researcher has made significant contributions to the field of early childhood.

As a way to introduce this special issue from an Indigenous worldview, Dr. Atkinson and I use dialogue as a method to respond to the provocations that frame this issue. I have had the privilege of knowing Aunty Sue for around 20 years and have often engaged with her teachings on Indigenous pedagogy in early childhood. Aunty Sue and I sat together and engaged in a lively discussion that responds to some of the provocations that frame this special issue.

Catherine: Hi Aunty Sue, thank you for generously spending your time with me. Can we begin by thinking with the provocation *What are our ethical and political accountabilities in places of unequal relations (both human and more than human)* in relation to engaging with Indigenous perspectives? I guess we are talking about early childhood in colonial places.

Sue: My response to that provocation is to start with early childhood teachers' philosophies and agendas. I wonder what they are basing their educational programs on? Have they examined their own understandings of colonization, dispossession, racism, and marginalization? Is that something they have thought about or unpacked prior to launching into embedding Indigenous voices or perspectives into the curriculum? What is their starting point? Is it because they have to do it, or have they actually done some deep thinking and critical reflection on their own knowledge and understandings before or alongside what they are doing now? The starting point is very important.

Catherine: Yes! Everybody's starting point is at different place. How do you identify what or where your personal starting point is?

Sue: It doesn't come sometimes at the start, does it?

Catherine: No, it is not a linear process.

Sue: When I was talking to you years ago about my thesis, I spoke to others and they reflected on a lot of the ideas around the bicentennial celebrations [in Australia, 1988] and it changed how they thought about things. They began to create educational programs from a political perspective, not just a play perspective.

Catherine: I wonder if this is how we are beginning to think about place ... how can we understand places from an ethical and political perspective. For some people, their starting point is thinking about writing an acknowledgement of Country (land acknowledgement). It takes a while to get there. Some people are not sure how or where to start.

Sue: It is good for people to be unsure, because if you just launch in without asking deep questions, that's when things become tokenistic or even racist.

Catherine: I wonder what kinds of questions prompt that personal beginning of your philosophy or understanding of accountability? What does it mean to be accountable as 21st-century settlers?

Sue: You need to recognize the tragedy and trauma that colonization created and work within these realities.

Catherine: Are you talking about shared history? This is language I have heard quite a lot lately.

Sue: It is shared, although "shared" seems a bit too warm and fuzzy. Maybe entangled history is better. The word Aboriginal² didn't exist in Australia until colonization. The colonizers really invented who we are to an extent, and that is still in people's minds, in terms of what they think Aboriginality is—what the Aboriginal body looks like, sounds like, and how culture is practiced. This impacts on forming ideological and physical connections to local Aboriginal communities. These relationships are central in foregrounding Aboriginal worldviews. Moving beyond tokenism also means reconceptualizing what is an authentic Aboriginal body, identity, knowledge, and voice. For example, people don't notice that there is a strong culture here in Melbourne. People don't see what's around them.

Catherine: That comes back to your earlier comment about people's starting point. What is their understanding of local Aboriginal culture and heritage? They think that Aboriginal culture needs to look or be a certain way.

Sue: Yes, people need to understand that we are practicing 21st-century Aboriginal culture. Culture changes and adapts wherever you are. People aren't living the way they were 200 years ago anywhere. Why do people expect that from us?

Catherine: This is a nice move into another provocation: How might everyday moments of teaching and learning refigure Indigenous presences on unceded lands and territories?

Sue: Everyday moments of teaching need to refer to the continued presence of Indigenous people in the here and now, not as a past that is lost and extinguished or existing in another place where Aboriginality is "more" authentic. I wonder where we are up to with this in our educational settings? Things tend to go in waves or movements where there is an engagement with Indigenous voices then a resistance and a pulling back.

Catherine: How do non-Indigenous people respond to Indigenous knowledges in a respectful way? It is important to think carefully about engagement because there is the danger of appropriation. What are settler accountabilities in relation to engaging with those knowledges?

Sue: As a non-Indigenous person, if you are not sure, don't do it! You can do it next year. WAIT, what's the rush? You need to wait until you can build up a relationship with an Elder or other member of the local Aboriginal community. It might two years, three years. Wait. In the meantime, engage the children with resources that have been constructed with or in partnership with Indigenous people, and always acknowledge the source.

Catherine: Yes, I think it would be very difficult to make deep embedded connection, thinking, and reflection if you try to rush and cram engagement with Indigenous people. That is not being respectful of a relational worldview, where authentic engagements take time.

Sue: It's not possible to cram relation building into a short timeframe, but it's important to make a start in reaching out to Indigenous people in your local community.

Catherine: The stories of people rushing make me uncomfortable. I think there is a temptation to get it done, tick the box, move on.

Sue: I suppose people feel overburdened. They don't get the support to do things in a genuine way.

Catherine: That also makes me think about how Indigenous people shouldn't always have to do the "giving."

Sue: Absolutely! I have often heard the comment that *you* people should be educating the wider community. The wider community needs to be more responsible for its own education.

Catherine: So how can non-Indigenous people take responsibility and also act in a respectful way?

Sue: A good step for early childhood teachers is to engage with Indigenous community events. For example, NAIDOC³ week. There is lots of arts, dance, cultural events. Take the time to be involved.

Catherine: Take responsibility for educating yourself. Sit back and listen.

Sue: Yes! Don't have a dialogue in your head about what the answers are before you get there. Accept what the Aboriginal person is saying. Don't doubt their knowledge or experience because they have fair skin, for example.

Catherine: In education we are trained to ask questions and get answers. We have to shift this notion to be open to engage, to be open to entanglements. You have taught me so much about Indigenous pedagogy. To sit and listen.

Sue: Yes, to sit and listen to Elders and to Country, engaging with more-than-human others connects to caring for country, plants, and the land. I believe that our ancestors still guide us and exist on a spiritual level. This is why I wrote the poem "Walk with Care on Country" (see below). I wanted to share the importance of engaging, learning, and connecting.

Catherine: What are the tensions in bringing together Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews? What are the tensions in the authentic walking together?

Sue: Yes, I am always thinking about how we engage with the tensions without creating a pretty, naïve moment of revelation.

Catherine: Do you think that is about challenging structures that create space for “settler moves to innocence” (Tuck & Yang, 2012)? The colonizing mindset: It wasn’t my fault; I didn’t do it; I don’t have to engage with these issues.

Sue: You can challenge colonization by acknowledging its impact and taking some responsibility for the present and future. It is important for non-Indigenous people to acknowledge the trauma of colonization and not just tell us to “move on,” to deny history. So much has been taken from us by colonization. Dreaming stories have been taken away from us. It is hard to interpret those stories now in a 21st-century context. I believe that some of the stories are about looking after Country and community. Unless people look at that deeply and understand that these stories are not just entertaining or cute, but they have survived colonization, which is a miracle.

Catherine: In our Australian context, I feel very privileged to have such generous Indigenous scholars such as you to share Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies, and I thank you very much for spending time with me to yarn. Do you have any last words?

Sue: There is a lot of reflecting and learning to do! Take your place as the learner instead of the teacher all the time. Learn to wait and slow down!

Walk with Care on Country

Although passed into the Dreaming
They speak
The ancestors buried beneath our feet
They lay under burdens built
Over two centuries tall
Burdens that are eased
When you listen deep
And walk proudly on Country
Where both joy and sorrow
You keep

Dr. Sue Atkinson, 2019

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References

- Common Ground First Nations. (n.d.). Aboriginal, Indigenous, or First Nations? Retrieved from <https://www.commonground.org.au/learn/aboriginal-or-indigenous>
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society, 1*(1), 1–40. Retrieved from <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630/15554>

(Endnotes)

- 1 Indigenous community in central Victoria, Australia.
- 2 In Australia, Aboriginal refers to the original peoples of mainland Australia. Torres Strait Islander refers to the original peoples of the 274 islands located north of Australia in the Torres Strait. Indigenous has become a term to describe both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Common Ground First Nations, n.d.).
- 3 National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee, a significant annual cultural event in Australia.