

## A Conversation about Building Awareness

*This is an edited version of an interview with Rosemary Cahill and Glenys Collard, two of the Deadly Ways to Learn project officers. Both work for the Education Department of Western Australia. Rosemary is a wadjela, a non-Indigenous Australian, Glenys is a Nyungar person from Kondinin, near Wave Rock in the south-west of WA.*



*It is included here at some length because it provides so many excellent starting points not just for a discussion of Aboriginal English and other relevant issues related to language which was the topic of their project, but for the education of young Indigenous people.*

**Rosemary:** We started looking for what could be done to help literacy. But as I got to know Glenys and the other Aboriginal participants, and there were a lot of Aboriginal participants, it became clear that it wasn't those day-to-day practices and literacy teaching strategies. That wasn't the key issue. The key issue was the teachers really getting to know their kids, knowing where they were coming from, valuing their culture and actually seeing that they did bring a whole lot of really valuable stuff to school, that hadn't been widely recognised and wasn't valued. And the reason it wasn't being valued is because it simply wasn't understood.

**Glenys:** That would be my word, the strongest word – understanding. Because a lot of people, you know, have said they're this and that, they specialise in this area, and they've worked with Aboriginal people, and they've read materials and so on. But from a non-Aboriginal perspective. That's okay for background, because I've read that stuff when I did a degree too. But there's reading... and there's reality.

The reality I found was that nobody was touching on the right now, where our kids were and where we were as Aboriginal people. I had to consult widely

even though I've got a big family, a really big family of my own, over a hundred and eight, just with my mum and dad and brothers and sisters and our kids and our grand kids. But I've also been lucky because for six years I've sat in at our meetings, statewide meetings, national meetings, and as soon as the talk starts, really starts, the real talk and the issues, it all came to the Aboriginal English.

Everybody had to come to that, for full understanding and participation in all of those meetings. That's something that's still happening now with our adults which has been passed down to our kids and this is why I feel that people have to know *us!* Not there's something out there that we want our kids to all be able to speak this wonderful thing called Standard Australian English. But if there's no context to it ...

At the moment, we're still living in a world where as Aboriginal people, we have Aboriginal health, we have Aboriginal education, we have Aboriginal organisations and you know, from legal services to everything. And the people that sit around and make those decisions are Aboriginal people and, even though they have language background, they are using Aboriginal English to try and put across those concepts. Then when I read the minutes, the concepts don't match what was actually said. It's very easy for a non-Aboriginal person to go, yes I've got that and I can write that down, but they've really missed the message.

**Rosemary:** There is always this cultural interpretation that's happening. Glenys's point about the non-Aboriginal people finding out about Aboriginal culture through books and so claiming to know about Aboriginality and Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal people as a group – very few can say that they know an Aboriginal person. As someone who grew up in Australia – all four of my grandparents were born in Australia – it wasn't until I became involved in the User Friendly Project<sup>1</sup> that I actually had an extended conversation with an Aboriginal person about something other than sport.

My first extended conversation with an Aboriginal person, about Aboriginal culture or about Aboriginal views or values or anything, was through this project. And I thought, hell's bells, I should have learned all this stuff. I should have had these opportunities when I was at school. And then I've looked around, and I've got two little kids at primary school right now, and I've thought, they're not learning it either, and that really scared me. That's what really got me going, and realising that there's this incredible culture and it's not the culture that I'm reading about in books.

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<sup>1</sup> *Towards More User Friendly Education for Speakers of Aboriginal English Project* conducted jointly by Education Department of WA and Edith Cowan University in 1996/7, funded by an ARC grant.

It's the culture that people live every day, in the suburbs, not only out there in the sticks. People think that's where Aboriginal education happens; but here in Perth and in every city and most towns in Australia it's happening.

**Glenys:** Sometimes I felt that even our own people have made decisions based on what the *wadjelas* want, what looks good written up for the *wadjela*, not what's been best for us – maybe from the lack of understanding of Aboriginal English. I've been doing this for over fifteen years, doing *Nyungar* language, and I really found out the difference between talking about language and talking about Aboriginal English. Even though I can collect examples quite easily, a lot of our people can't. They get confused, and then they say that's not good enough. You actually have to write it like this, and I'd say, I'll write it like that, that's the way, and it should be able to be accepted in that way because that's the way I'm writing it. And if I change that, the words I'm using, then I'm changing the whole message.

**Rosemary:** And also there's that implied cringe about the words, which is something that you know that you see happening and that has to be avoided. The point that Glenys made about the minutes – it's the same thing when we turn around and we're asked to put up a paper about the work we're doing. How do we write it? Straight away you write it like any other paper in any other journal and so there's this message that hits you in the face that we can talk about Aboriginal English in one way, but as soon as you take it seriously ...

**Glenys:** It's not accepted and we challenge that. I won't change my talk for no one. We've written a few journal articles, but I will not change mine, and I don't think I need to and I don't think all our kids will need to, to achieve and that's the biggest thing. I think it's a learning thing for all Australians, it's a part of a history and it's something we have to deal with because it's not going to go away. It's not going away.

**David McRae:** Let me see if I can put my finger on three issues that you've brought up. The first one is that Aboriginal English is an important entry point for white people's understanding of Aboriginal culture ...

**Glenys and Rosemary together:** But they don't need to know it [Aboriginal English] ...

**David:** Okay. They don't need to know it. The second one is that it is an important medium for communication and that it has its own meanings and structures and so on like any forms of language...

**Glenys and Rosemary together:** Yes.

**David:** And the third one is that it's something we need to identify as a legitimate form of expression which is different to Standard Australian English. How close to the mark are those three things?

**Rosemary:** Yep. that's a sort of line, and also that not only does it have value as a bridge to add to Standard Australian English, but it has value in its own right.

It doesn't just serve a purpose of leading kids to engage in literacy, but it is actually important, and it's not like it's something you abandon once you've got Standard Australian English. It's crucial to identity and meaning. Everyone's talk, everyone's language, is crucial to who they are.

**Glenys:** When someone like myself doesn't even finish Year 7, and then will go and have five children and whatever, and then go back to the TAFE purely for the money, just because that was available, because I had what they called no skills and whatever ... but that's where I come from. I can still now go and come and talk to people the way I need to for them to challenge me, and not be shamed to say – ask *me* about it. No good asking Rosemary or Patsy [another project worker] because they're *wadjelas* and they don't have that full depth understanding.

I understand them a bit better because I work really close with them and I've known them five or six years now. But most of my people aren't doing that, and this is a part of that thing what Rosemary said. Do we know what *wadjelas* do?

I know the ones that I work with. Otherwise I know hardly anyone, and it goes both ways. We can talk about reconciliation and all these things, but those things are put up in false, you know, forced sort of settings – so there's an Aboriginal person reading this script. They may have written it, but it's for the *wadjelas*. And the people are scratching their head and going – I wanted them to say that, but when it's put into the *wadjela* talk for us in the Standard Australian English, it's watered down.

But once people start acknowledging you and accepting you for who you are, like myself, I'll go and present at any conference all over Australia. I don't have that fear no more, because I feel I have adequate skills. But fifteen years ago I would not have, and that's what's still locking a lot of our people in, not being able to voice their opinion in the words that they just want to use instead of trying to find the politically correct type of language.

**Rosemary:** I remember when we were at one of those IESIP conferences and there was a young Aboriginal man that stood up and said – As an educated man, I'd like to challenge what so and so said – and I thought, I haven't heard any of the *wadjelas* standing up and actually using 'as an educated man' as a qualifier. This young fellow felt the need to put this qualifier as the way of claiming the authority to speak... And I thought that pretty well captured it.

We talk a lot about how we need to value Aboriginal English and the wealth of linguistic and cultural heritage that that implies and the fact that it's part of identity. But pragmatically, not only to participate and have access, but also to influence and change the world as it is, then the kids will need that sort of facility with Standard Australian English. But they have to be able to choose when they switch. If they choose to stick with their Aboriginal English, and that's their prerogative ... but if they choose to switch (and you hear that all the time, you people (to Glenys) actually switch just for effect) there's power in that

choice. Whereas if they don't have that choice, then the power is far more limited.

But, in terms of our brief, we were to come up with a set of strategies for teachers and so we sort of set about that task, compliantly, *wadjela* way, doing, coming up with a set of strategies. What we found though, is that we look around for what teachers need, and there's a wealth of strategy there already.

Teachers are sort of buried by books that have strategies they can use. Here in Western Australia we have some fabulous resources that you can drag out. But at the end of the day, it wasn't so much the strategy, what teachers did, that made the difference, it was what they believed. And the way to change what *wadjela* people believed was get them to engage in conversations with Aboriginal people and get the AEOs [Aboriginal Education Officers] to engage in conversations with the teachers, get those cross-cultural conversations happening and, and that is actually what changed where people were.

**Glenys:** ...the Aboriginal people actually being able to say what they wanted to say without feeling put down or that they hadn't said it good enough they started feeling better about. They've been in their communities and schools, working there for years, and they've seen teachers come and go. But they're still on their first block. And, you know, the teachers come in and they have these plans, and they have all this set, and they know about everything. But the person who knows all about those kids, especially the Aboriginal kids, but they also know a lot of *wadjela* kids in these different towns, is that Aboriginal person sitting there so quietly.

They just do what the teacher says, even though they know it's not going to work, because nobody's given them the opportunity to bring them in, genuinely bring them in and say – how can we address this, or where is this kid up to? Let's go walk through this, and there's lots of issues in that. But you know, they only give them a little bit of money and yet they can run the whole classroom. They have that strength. And they can tell me up the back but they won't tell the *wadjelas* that, and they're the ones that aren't leaving their community, the teacher is.

Even in the city here the teachers are moving on, not the Aboriginal people. They're pretty much stopping there. So that's the importance, another part that I've been trying to push in to our people – you have a voice, you have a culture, you have a belief.

We do the family stuff to show how the crucial thing is you've got to understand about the family, and I've been stunned to find out that right through WA when I've gone and done the ABC\*<sup>2</sup> PD, and that starts off with family – everybody tells me they know Aboriginal people have big families,

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<sup>2</sup> ABC Project of Two Way Literacy and Learning conducted by Glenys Collard and Patricia Konigsberg for the of Education Department of WA.

but when the diagrams that I've put up that I've made myself, the *wadjelas* are only just going, oh. So all that stuff in the books only just clicked after hearing this and seeing me go through this. So everything they've read didn't mean too much until I've stood up and given this overview myself of family, what is family? And then it changes another whole picture that they had in their head. So this, it's been a long, long process, but it has been an interesting one.

**Rosemary:** It also needs to be said that, and Glenys and I often, often say it — we've operated in this two-way fashion, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal together kind of thing, and we talk about two-way teams, and it kind of gives the impression that it's easy. And it's absolutely not. It's actually really hard because the sort of stuff that we're dealing with goes to the core of who you are and the assumptions that you've grown up with; and the number of times, you know, it's just been really ...

But the abiding thing, the thing that's brought us back after we've had some sort of blow up and there's this really difficult issue that we're trying to work through, and we get really resentful of each other and all those sort of things ... but, the abiding thing that kept us going is because we really respect each other and the expertise and the perspectives that each brings. But to imply that it was easy would be false, because it's really hard, for both sides...

**Glenys:** And if you didn't have an argument, or disagreement, something would be definitely wrong.

**Rosemary:** One of the things that we came away saying is that, if working in this two-way fashion is easy, then someone else is doing your share of the hurting. And it's usually been the Aboriginal people who are doing the hurting because they're bending to fit the *wadjela* way. I think what we did, I like to think that what we did was far more of a meeting in the middle...

**Glenys:** ...and I've tried, as an Aboriginal person, as a *Nyungar* woman, I've tried really hard, and I've given the *wadjelas* a hard time... I've given them a hard time, and they know it. But I've done it, not because I wanted them to suffer, but because I feel there's no other way for anything to happen ... and we needed to get frustrated and say, that's not the way it can be written down. Or, I'm sorry, you can't change that because if you change that, that means nothing to nobody. So I've had to stand strong.

But I've also had to run this through every AIEW in our state. They've all done our workshops, and some of them, you know, they're in middle point. They know what I'm talking about, they have no problems. But it's how they're going to get to where I'm at, to be able to challenge their teachers without getting the sack, or without being put down. They don't know how to answer back and they end up saying — well, stuff you — and lose their jobs.

That's where people are at. They're going to insult you really badly because you've insulted them. There's all this still happening, but it's just starting to really challenge people.

Although I must say there is still a small group of our Aboriginal people who think there's one way to success for our people and that's just purely to learn, to go to school, to learn Standard Australian English. And I wish it was that easy, but it isn't that easy because there's no knowledge base. It's easy to say, we can learn the kids Standard Australian English. But if they're not introduced to that in the home, only from that teacher that's teaching them, it means nothing at all.

**Rosemary:** I kind of think of myself, you know, four generations Australian – there aren't all that many *wadjelas* around who can claim that – but I knew nothing, and that bothered me a lot.

We talk a lot about how this two-way, bidialectal education and learning about and valuing Aboriginal culture has huge benefits for the Aboriginal kids. I kind of figure that it has huge benefits for my kids, and for the *wadjela* community as well, and I don't think that idea should be lost. People say oh, yeah but we haven't got any Aboriginal kids in our school, we don't need to become involved in this, and I have seen that absolutely they do.

**Glenys:** They've got to learn about today. I saw some material come through that was being produced and there was Aboriginal people's names that agreed to this set of encyclopaedias which I think is fine. But when I looked at it and – is that me today? – and that's not me today.

You have to be black-skinned, and in actual fact my grand kids *are* black, blacker than any of them that was in those pictures, but it still portrayed the Aboriginal as being black and in the bush and this has got to change. I'm the fairer skin in my family, but that means nothing. People have to get this out of their head, that Aboriginal people are out there in the bush doing dances and ceremonies. Yes, that's an important part of different Aboriginal group's lives, and it still is in my family; but there is time and places for that.

The reality is, is that people aren't seeing us, who we are and what we are today. In the education setting I'm on about, it is about us today. My blue-eyed blonde-haired kids are going to have to live with this along with my dark-skinned grand kids.

**David:** Can you both, separately or together, pick out the key messages that you're trying to get across in these materials, just as simply as possible?

**Glenys:** I think my side of it is to start from reality, which is about Aboriginal kids. So we're talking about me, we're talking about my kids, my grand kids, and the fact that this is how we're living and this is the talk that they've been taught from zero to age five before they meet other little *wadjela* kids. They don't know that they're not talking the same talk until they start going to school and start getting things wrong. That worries me, because the real issues are being skipped over. The big issue is the idea that they'll be able to start from where white kids start from, and that isn't true.

Doesn't matter what background, whether it's in Perth, 200 miles out of Perth or 5000 miles out of Perth, all the research that we've done shows that

Aboriginal kids follow that same pattern. That's what they've learnt, that's what they're going to school with. Teacher comes with her set of values, there's a clash, and the kids are not achieving. The kids are actually achieving, but the teacher doesn't know how to see and assess their achievements.

**Rosemary:** I guess mine is very similar. Teachers need to have a look at the cultural screen that they use to view the world and to be really aware of that cultural screen. For a lot of non-Aboriginal kids there's huge cultural congruence between home and school because the school is largely framed on *wadjela* culture. White kids so often leave home to go to school with the same set of expectations, the same sorts of relationships, the same language, the same ... So much of it's the same. Of course the extent to which this cultural congruence appears applies for Aboriginal kids varies, but it is often pretty limited. Not that either is better or worse ... they're just different. And where kids are expected to fit in, some have an easier road to travel than others because there's more home-school cultural congruence for some kids than there is for others. Not just for Aboriginal kids. So at the end of the day you've just got to know the kid, you've just got to know the kid's family with all that entails. And be a lot less judgemental.