

Finding A WAY FORWARD

Reflections on the Voice referendum and the future of reconciliation in early childhood education

Catharine Hydon in conversation with **Jo Goodwin** and **Wendy Gorman**, Co-Chairs of the Early Childhood Australia Reconciliation Advisory Group.

When over 2,000 people rose to their feet in solidarity with Karen Mundine (CEO of Reconciliation Australia) at the Early Childhood Australia National Conference just a week before the referendum on the Voice to Parliament, there was optimism in the air. We were moved to say **'Yes'**—to not only a constitutional change that would see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being heard, but also the hope that this country could become truly reconciled. We said **'Yes'** to the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's access to equal opportunities and a future free from prejudice. We said **'Yes'** to better health outcomes and final closure of the shameful gap in life chances for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

And then the next Saturday's result dealt a devastating blow. Most of our country said 'No' to the Voice.

And while we are yet to trawl through the debris of the referendum result, it is clear that an opportunity to say 'Yes' to listening more closely to the voice of the First Peoples of this land—the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples—has been roundly rejected.

So what does this mean for our sector? What does it mean for those who stood in solidarity in person and in spirit with Karen Mundine? What does it mean for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues, children and families who participate in our settings? And what does it mean for our daily curriculum decisions as allies and activists for justice and equity?

To help us all take the next steps and to move forward, Jo Goodwin and Wendy Gorman have generously shared their raw reflections and their wondering about this moment in our nation's cultural history.



Many of us want to stand strongly in allyship with First Nations peoples. Can we reflect on how First Nations peoples might be feeling and how we can be good allies/supporters at this time and into the future?

Jo Goodwin: Our people are feeling shattered by the process. The message we took from the process is that we don't matter. That there is really no love, trust and kindness for our people and our desire to be heard. We feel once again 'whitewashed'—rejected and dismissed. This has made me reflect on what my father went through—the exclusion and adversity and the fight for justice that our people have endured. We asked for a simple thing from the Australian people—to give us a voice, to be heard—and the answer was denial. It was a vote driven by suspicion and fear rather than connection and hope.

The Aboriginal community needs time and space. We were dissected, attacked and asked to justify our existence during this campaign. We ask that everyone consider the potential role of racism and prejudice in the result and commit to being uncomfortable as we call out white privilege and bias.

Wendy Gorman: The result is hard to believe. We are feeling deep sadness and grief. There is a loss of hope for the possibilities of reconciliation and disbelief about the rejection of the Voice, especially for our young children. We are trying to understand this and the devastating impact this will have. I keep coming back to the words of that pop song from the 1990s—'I get knocked down, but I get up again—you are never gonna keep me down.' We need to get up again and keep trying.

I hold big concerns for this nation. But at the same time, I take great heart from the fact that the young people I talk to are deeply aware and respectful of the story of Australia's First Peoples. Our children are hungry for justice and curious to learn.

I come back to education. Education is the way forward. We have power in the early years to make change.

What information/messages ought educators share with children and their families about the results and what lies ahead?

JG: Educators do need to be prepared to have truthful and, at times, difficult conversations with their colleagues, children and families about the referendum result and the state of reconciliation in their community. We all need to consider how we encourage our young citizens to be justice warriors. We could also take this time to reflect more deeply about inclusion—and the fact that inclusion exists as a goal because we have inequity and discrimination in this country. Consider ongoing education and awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and how to foster empathy for our peoples and issues.

WG: Educators need to acknowledge the hurt. Then, move to truth-telling with children and families. We need to keep telling the truth—to keep telling stories and listening. Some educators might feel uncertain, like they don't know how to respond. We must continue to work on understanding culture and use the mandate of the updated approved learning frameworks to offer a space for learning.

What does this mean for the place of reconciliation in early childhood education and care?

JG: People have asked me whether reconciliation is dead. It's not dead, but I know it has suffered a blow. We now need to think about reconciliation differently—as a movement of the people demanding rights and justice. We have tried to use the systems that are available to us—the referendum process being one—but it didn't connect with people. It became a cultural war. We cannot go through this again. Working towards justice and rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is a collective endeavour that requires acceptance and active participation from everyone. We need to do things differently, using the thinking and actions of great people like Eddie Koiki Mabo, who not only used the system to talk up justice and rights but created a movement. Reconciliation must now be more than words; it has to be about actions.

We need to be careful that the reconciliation story doesn't just disappear into the background, but it must be reconsidered and reimagined on the terms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We must not shy away from truth-telling and the need to tackle ignorance. It is time to think about our shared humanity and how we can build respect and empathy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

However we move forward, it is an opportunity to stand in solidarity with mob. Meaningful change must include a real commitment to progressing our rights.

WG: When I think about the way forward, I think about love, faith and hope. Love for children—professional love, a concept that we recently explored at the ECA National Conference with Dr Jools Page. Faith in the world and humanity. And hope for a better future. I believe we can reach these goals if we embrace our role as strong allies, walking alongside and doing better.

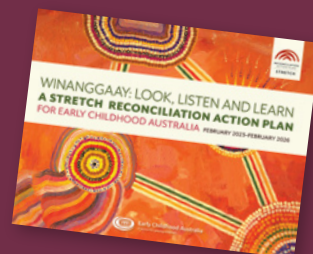
We need to strengthen our relationships with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community—to listen, not to save. We know that educators have a great relationship with families in their community. Now is a time to reach out and connect, and, together, lead gently into the next phase of our reconciliation work.

We hope that our ponderings offer a space for you to consider how we can say 'Yes' to a reconciled future for this land we now call Australia.

#alwayswasalwayswillbe

For more information on the work of ECA's Reconciliation Advisory Group, visit <https://bit.ly/3FC4I11>

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