Classroom teachers meeting the new National Professional Standards for Teachers specifically standards 1.4 and 2.4

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Classroom Teachers Meeting the New
National Professional Standards for Teachers
Specifically Standards 1.4 and 2.4

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Abstract

Commitment to enhancing the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people has long been the aspiration in Australia. Research over many years has, however, noted inequitable outcomes between these children and their non-Indigenous counterparts. The groundswell of support for reconciliation and the ongoing determination to enhance the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people more recently has seen the inclusion of two new Standards in the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* that teachers have to meet to gain and retain registration as a teacher in Australia. The first Standard required teachers to provide evidence of being able to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; the second to provide evidence of their knowledge of Aboriginal histories and cultures such that they can use these to assist all children in their classes to work towards reconciliation.

The single most important determinant of educational outcomes for children is the teacher (Hattie, 2008) and research on effective teaching for learning has been extensive. There is a growing body of research regarding effective strategies for meeting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners specifically. There has been little research, however, on teachers’ perceived capacity to meet the two new Standards and investigating what they would like to see in a professional learning program that would enhance their capacity in these two areas. The current study makes a contribution towards filling this gap in the literature.

In this current research, an Aboriginal research paradigm underpinned the design of the study which took place in a theory of interpretivism. A multiple case study methodology was utilised and data were gathered using group interviews.

The meta-themes that derived from the study were: (i) teachers’ efficacy in providing opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages; (ii) teachers’ efficacy in identifying and utilising effective teaching strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students; and (iii) teachers’ efficacy in demonstrating responsiveness to the local community and cultural settings.

Several sub-themes emerged in the findings in the current study. These were as follows:

1. Teachers’ perceived efficacy in providing opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures
and languages is discussed in Chapter 4. The most significant factors noted by participants in this section were (i) teachers’ lack of training, (ii) their fear of causing offence, (iii) participants’ current practice being of variable quality, (iv) teachers feeling inadequate, and (v) participants identifying a lack of suitable resources as being problematic.

2. Teachers’ perceived efficacy in identifying and utilising effective teaching strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students is discussed in Chapter 5 where the subthemes identified were (i) teachers’ lack of knowledge of students’ cultural background, (ii) teachers having little confidence in developing quality teaching relationships, (iii) teachers noting that they have little insight into Aboriginal pedagogy in the classroom, (iv) variable implementation of recognition of Country, (v) how teachers value learning from cultural educators in the classroom, (vi) the need for high expectations, and (vii) the need for recognition of Aboriginal languages and Aboriginal English.

3. Teachers’ perceived efficacy in demonstrating responsiveness to the local community and cultural settings is discussed in Chapter 6 and which includes the subthemes of (i) teachers being uncertain about how to be responsive to the local community, (ii) the need for observing cultural protocols, (iii) the need to have “a conversation”, (iv) understanding of kinship-roles and responsibilities being lacking, (v) cultural miscommunication frequently arising, (vi) the need for input into positive ways to achieve parental engagement, (vii) the vital role of Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs), and (viii) teachers seeking assistance with celebrating days of significance.

One of the outcomes of this study is that it offers a different perspective on the links between culture and wellbeing and the potential impact this relationship can have on Aboriginal education (Nakata, 2008). A sense of cultural identity, and active recognition and validation of Aboriginal cultures by school leaders and classroom teachers can be crucial to student wellbeing and success at school. The aspects participants in the current study identified important to include in a professional learning program will form the basis of such a program under development in 2015.
Declaration of Authorship

This full research master's dissertation is the candidate’s own work and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other institution.

To the best of the candidate’s knowledge, the dissertation contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Candidate Name: Lisa Buxton  Signature__________________ Date 24/03/15
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I would like to first acknowledge my Elders from both my community at home, Yugambeh country, and from where I live and work in Sydney, Gadigal country. In particular I would like to acknowledge Aunty Doctor Elsie Heiss for her ongoing cultural and spiritual guidance.

The experience and knowledge I have gained over the past two and half decades within education, has not been gained by myself. It has been hard fought and earned in partnership with my Koori colleagues at the Catholic Education Office in Sydney. In particular, Jane Bridges, Elizabeth Burke and Julianne Manson working within a strong team of Aboriginal women has provided me with cultural knowledge, educational expertise, and personal support to navigate this space.

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CHAPTER 1 – SETTING THE SCENE

1.1 Protocols

The protocol for introducing one’s self to other Indigenous people is to provide information about one’s cultural location, so that connection can be made on political, cultural and social grounds and relations established. (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, pp.xv).

1.1.1 Acknowledgement of Country

I would like to firstly acknowledge with respect the ancestors of the country in which this study was conducted, the Gadigal, Bidjigal and Dharawal people of Eora country. I would also like to acknowledge my own ancestors the Mununjali people of Yugambeh and Bundjalung country. Taking this time to pay my respects to these peoples and countries through this acknowledgement is to locate myself firstly as an Aboriginal woman and then as the researcher of this study. This also allows other Aboriginal people to locate me and determine the relatedness that may exist (Martin, 2003).

1.1.2 The term Country

Following Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2013) I use the term country here as follows:

to mean not only the tracks of land to which we are inextricably tied but it is also the term used to denote Indigenous people who have bloodline to that country through creator and ancestral birth. This interconnectedness is the basis of Indigenous sovereignty, which informs our standpoint as embodied socio-cultural and historically situated subjects of knowledge. (p.335)

1.1.3 Other terminology

At the outset I would like to clarify the terminology used throughout this study. In New South Wales, some Aboriginal people take offence at the term ‘Indigenous’ (New South Wales Department of Community Services, 2009) as it can be seen to deny the diversity of Aboriginal sovereignty. That is, this continent is under the custodianship of over 500 different nations, and not simply one Indigenous People. The term “Aboriginal” continues to be problematic as it is an imposed English word. However, it is, for historical and cultural reasons, the preferred word. Along with Goori, Koori, Murri and language “nation” names are most appropriate for New South Wales, given that Aboriginal peoples in Australia are not one homogenous group.
As such, I wish to recognise, acknowledge and respect that Aboriginal peoples of Australia consist of many First Nations, each with their own country, unique cultures, languages and histories.

In this study, I express my views from my perspective as a Yugambeh and Bundjalung woman. I do not have experience with and cannot speak for Torres Strait Islander people, cultures, identities and languages. My view is summarised in the resource produced by the New South Wales Department of Community Services (2009) developed by their Aboriginal Services Branch in consultation with the Aboriginal Reference Group:

As Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of NSW, and as the NSW Government only has a specific charter of service to the people of NSW, this document refers only to Aboriginal people. References to Torres Strait Islander people will be specifically stated where relevant. It is important to remember that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are very different, with their own unique histories, beliefs and values. It is respectful to recognise their separate identities. (p.1)

I, therefore, refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander when documented as such in government policies and/or statements. Otherwise, I prefer the term Aboriginal. The term Indigenous is frequently used in government and education documents, in part for expedience, rather than using the longer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander term and some leading Aboriginal educators, whom I have quoted, have used this term.

In line with all government policy, in using the term non-Indigenous in this study, I mean no disrespect to anyone but it is necessary to have a descriptor for people who are Australian but not Aboriginal.

### 1.2 Background to the study

I start this section with a painting I have created which represents aspects of the literature review, the findings and the positives as the findings culminate in action leading to potentially enhanced outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people into the future.
1.2.1 From past to present for Aboriginal learners

The literature review details the varied attempts that have been made to educate one specific group of Australians: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. These have invariably not attained their objective of achieving equitable educational outcomes for all children in Australia. Statistics show a persistent trend of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students performing in the lower bands in literacy and numeracy. Aboriginal educational outcomes are measured against minimum mainstream standards which are supported by the government rhetoric of ‘closing the gap’, resulting in a continued deficit model of Aboriginal funding and approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

What is not revealed, however, in these statistics from government and educational providers’
reports is that for “too many Aboriginal students’ families, schooling continues to be an unfulfilling experience and in too many ways, an unfulfilled goal” (Martin, 2008, p.1).

Flowing from this have been challenges made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education leaders to mainstream education to enhance the wellbeing of the children by recognition of their distinct cultural identities and the use of a “strength-based approach” (Perso, 2012, p.18) to building relationships with Aboriginal parents, families and communities to enhance the learning outcomes of the children.

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2011), which have renewed focus on teachers’ responsibility in relation to the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, are seen as modern Australia’s response to this call by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators. The current study investigated teachers’ perceived confidence in meeting these Standards.

1.2.2 Researcher background – what brought me to this study

Behind all research is the person of the researcher and I respect the fact that I have been privileged to work with the participants in this study. I am grateful for their support in this endeavour as I build on the relationship we have forged from past to present and into the future.

As noted in the introduction I am an Aboriginal woman who was educated within the mainstream education system of my generation (mid-1970s - mid 1980s). Like many of my contemporaries, and despite growing up and living “on country”, Goori culture was ignored and unacknowledged within the curriculum. This “White-washing” continued into University.

I am currently an Aboriginal Education Adviser of the Eastern Region of the Catholic Education Office, Sydney. As such I deal on a daily basis with Aboriginal children in crisis, with their teachers working with the best of intentions but often counter productively.

I see the inclusion of two new Standards, focussing on teachers’ responsibility to meet the needs of Aboriginal children and young people, as a beacon of hope for enhancing their learning outcomes. As part of my role, I work with teachers who became participants in this
study. I am responsible for providing professional development for teachers in the Eastern Region, and this study provides me with clear guidance as to what teachers are asking for in such professional development.

1.3 Rationale

Access to education is a basic human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Most people now accept that education is the key to improving life chances and life choices. An education leads us to greater opportunities to participate in employment and in the wider society. This in turn can lead to other benefits such as improved emotional and social wellbeing and better access to services such as housing and health care. (Tom Calma, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, cited in Doyle & Hill, 2008, p. 2)

In the education sphere, where this current study is nested, concerted collective action on the part of key stakeholders has resulted in there being a focus on the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (AITSL, 2011). This is a departure from the fragmented approach Australia has had up until now in enhancing the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Many of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers parallel the previously promulgated New South Wales Teacher Standards. However, in the recently passed Australian Standards there are two new standards: one relates to teachers’ ability to meet the educational needs specifically of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; the other to teachers’ understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and knowledges such that they will be able to make a positive contribution to reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia. A recent report (Ma Rhea, Anderson & Atkinson, 2012) commissioned by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership found that teachers across the country think “that much more can be done to improve what is being offered” and that there is “lack of systemic level planning for teacher professional development in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education as part of workforce development” (p.52).

This study investigates how confident teachers in the Catholic System in the Eastern Region of the Archdiocese of Sydney feel about their ability to meet these two new standards, and in
what areas they might feel they require professional learning. Based on the findings of this study a professional development program will be formulated.

1.3.1 The changing Aboriginal population and Aboriginal experiences of education

While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 2.5 per cent of the population in Australia, Aboriginal children and young people make up 4 per cent of the total student population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008, p 15). This increase in percentage is a result of over 50 per cent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population being under the age of 20. This reflects a growing population, in direct contrast to an ageing non-Indigenous Australian population. With increasing numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in schools, there is a greater need for education systems to embrace culturally responsive schooling (Perso, 2012). In addition, it is an undeniable fact that in Australia today, “Indigenous students at all levels experience worse educational outcomes than non-Indigenous students” (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provisions, 2007 [SCRGSP], p.4). Aboriginal students demonstrate lower school attendance, retention and achievement than non-Indigenous students across all age groups and all States and Territories (SCRGSP, 2007).

Education for Aboriginal children and young people remains far from equitable. At the turn of the century, as noted by Buckskin, (2000) Aboriginal education remained in crisis. More recent statistics show little change. The evidence shows the gap in meeting literacy and numeracy benchmarks, there being a significant difference in minimum standards between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous children and young people. Many consider this to be unacceptable. This is exemplified by the fact that 60 per cent of Aboriginal children are significantly behind non-Indigenous children by the time they start Year 1. The largest ‘gap’ in 2008, was 29.4 percentage points in Year 3. For Year 5 only 63.4 % of Aboriginal Year 5 students were at or above the national minimum standard for reading compared to 92.6% of their non-Indigenous counterparts. The smallest gap (17.4 percentage points) was for Year 3 numeracy where 96% of non- Aboriginal students were at or above the national minimum standard compared to 78.6% of Aboriginal students. The retention rate from Year 7/8 to Year 12 in 2010 was 47% for Aboriginal students compared with 77% for non-Indigenous students (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2010).
The current study seeks to enhance current understandings of how these inequitable educational outcomes can be improved if we are to meet our international and national obligations. Australia has agreed to be bound by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) which states that all children have the right to an education that lays a foundation for the rest of their lives, maximises their ability, and respects their family, cultural identities and languages. As a signatory to the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous peoples (United Nations, 2007) Australia has recognised in particular the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities to retain shared responsibility for the upbringing, training, education and well-being of their children, consistent with the rights of the child.

There is an enormous amount of goodwill evident in Australia and determination to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Concrete evidence of this is that government, largely made up of non-Indigenous people and expressing their will, has developed two standards as part of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, specifically related to meeting the educational needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and to teaching about Aboriginal cultures, histories and languages to all students thus harnessing the commitment of all to the notion of reconciliation.

1.3.2 The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (hereafter ‘the Standards’) were endorsed by Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) in December 2010 and were implemented in New South Wales in 2012. There are four levels in The Standards, depicting increasing levels of knowledge, skill, and leadership, running from graduate for those just completing their teacher education course to lead describing what the executive team and principal within a school need to be doing to achieve or retain registration as a teacher at those levels. There have been teaching standards in the past, but two that are new and different from the past are included in Professional Knowledge facet with regards to:
### 1.3.3 Professional Knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Graduate</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
<th>Highly Accomplished</th>
<th>Lead</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.4 Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students</strong></td>
<td>Demonstrate broad knowledge and understanding of the impact of culture, cultural identity and linguistic background on the education of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.</td>
<td>Design and implement effective teaching strategies that are responsive to the local community and cultural setting, linguistic background and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.</td>
<td>Provide advice and support colleagues in the implementation of effective teaching strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students using knowledge of and support from community representatives.</td>
<td>Develop teaching programs that support equitable and ongoing participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students by engaging in collaborative relationships with community representatives and parents/careers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard 2 - Know the content and how to teach it</th>
<th>Graduate</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
<th>Highly Accomplished</th>
<th>Lead</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2.4 Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians</strong></td>
<td>Demonstrate broad knowledge of, understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages.</td>
<td>Provide opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages.</td>
<td>Support colleagues with providing opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages.</td>
<td>Lead initiatives to assist colleagues with opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(AITSL, 2011, p. 9)

There are 37 Professional Standards that teachers are obliged to meet and to provide evidence of meeting on graduation and as they become increasingly expert teachers. The two noted
above reflect and build on national and international evidence that a teacher’s effectiveness has the most powerful impact on students. This has been well articulated in Hattie’s (2008) work, where he synthesizes a plethora of research on what has the most positive effect on student learning. There is broad consensus that teacher quality is the single most important in-school factor influencing student engagement and achievement (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2009; Hattie, 2008; Organisation for Economic and Cooperative Development, 2005). This current study investigated to what extent practising teachers in the Catholic Education system in the eastern region of the Archdiocese of Sydney feel competent to meet Standards 1.4 and 2.4 in this context.

1.4 Research questions

The specific research questions were:

a) What are teachers’ current views on their capacity to meet the ‘proficient’ level of Standard 1.4:

Design and implement effective teaching strategies that are responsive to the local community and cultural setting, linguistic background and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?

b) What are teachers’ current views on their capacity to meet the ‘proficient’ level of Standard 2.4:

Provide opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages?

These were followed by additional questions with regards to professional development participants would like to be able to participate in if they identified gaps in their knowledge and skills so that they will be able to meet those standards comprehensively. This follows the recommendation 5 of the AITSL report (Moreton-Robinson, Singh, Kolopenuk, & Robinson, 2012) on teacher preparation to meet these standards that we “develop and deliver training to better equip pre-service and in-service teachers to constructively engage and consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and communities” (p. 2).
1.5 Literature Review

The literature review tells the story of education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, providing an historical overview leading to the disquiet of the 1970s and 1980s leading to the call for Aboriginal knowledges to be included in education (Harris, 1990) and culminating in the two-ways schooling approach (Yunupingu, 1994). It goes on to describe attempts made to grapple with Aboriginal epistemology and its implications for the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people (Yunkaporta, 2009; Perso, 2012).

The literature reviews then goes on to consider policies promulgated and enacted (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008) including the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014* (MCEETYA, 2011). Both of these documents can be linked to the National Professional Standards for Teachers’ fourth identified level of ‘Lead’. Focus Area 2.4 states that the teacher at this level should provide evidence of having been able to: “Lead initiatives to assist colleagues with opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages” (AITSL, 2011, p. 11).

Following policies in the literature review is a synopsis of the challenges from leading Aboriginal educators critiquing, for example, what research is achieving when underpinned by deficit thinking of ‘closing the gap’ (Martin 2008). Buckskin contends that “Australian education jurisdictions need shock treatment to jolt them into reality, taking responsibility for the systemic failure to provide the culturally safe place that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students need to learn and develop” (Buckskin, 2013, p. 1). Agreeing, Mick Dodson stated “Education is something we’ve let slide miserably in recent decades. We’ve failed a lot of children in that time” (Dodson, 2009, p.1). Another dominant voice in the education arena, Chris Sarra (2007) holds that “[f]or too long I think many of us as educators have colluded too easily with the notion that Indigenous children are automatically underachievers at school.” (p. 6)

The literature review then moves to a consideration of what Australia might learn from international studies where there are some synergies, for example New Zealand and Canada.
Following this, the review then moves to the more positive framing, the perspective within which this current study takes place. It highlights the importance of valuing Aboriginal knowledges and that a cultural lens helps us to see each child and their relationship to their own family and community from their perspective. “The presence of interactive effects between cultural affinity and factors such as self-esteem and self-efficacy has been investigated in several studies” (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012, p. 3-4). When non-Indigenous educators are working with Aboriginal children, the endeavour is “multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations” (Nakakta, 2007, p.199) as the life-worlds come together.

Given that the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people today are attending schools with non-Indigenous school leadership teams and being taught and supported largely by non-Indigenous teachers in their classrooms, the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous is significant in children’s schooling experience (Matthews, Watego, Cooper, & Baturo, 2005). In considering reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australians, Dr Marika, an Australian Yolngu Aboriginal leader, scholar, and educator holds: “[o]ur job as educators is to convince the people who control mainstream education that we wish to be included. Until this happens, reconciliation is an empty word and an intellectual terra nullius” (Marika, 1999, p. 9).

To counter the potential negatives, Watego (2012) notes that the inclusion of Aboriginal culture, history and language in standard school curricula has also been identified as playing an important role in building both Indigenous and non-Indigenous student understanding and appreciation of Indigenous history and culture and addressing racism and discrimination.

Another identified aspect leading to improved outcomes for Aboriginal children is recognition of their linguistic background and understanding of Aboriginal English. Williams (2011) has highlighted the tangible connection between language learning and psychological wellbeing and increased self-esteem.

As this current study takes place in Catholic schools in one region of Sydney, the literature review then concludes with a summary of approaches implemented by the Catholic Commission.
1.6 Theoretical framework

1.6.1 Cultural interface framework

The Cultural Interface framework proposed by Nakata (2007) was extended by Yunkaporta (2009) as his research sought to engage teachers with Aboriginal knowledge at the Cultural Interface (overlap) between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous cultures, and to investigate ways teachers could apply this common-ground knowledge in the classroom. Yunkaporta has contended that Aboriginal perspectives do not come from Indigenised content, but from Aboriginal processes of knowledge transmission. A common-ground pedagogical framework was developed using an Indigenous standpoint methodology inspired by the work of Martin Nakata.

Figure 5: Boomerang Matrix of Cultural Interface Knowledge
(2008 training resource for teachers I developed during work on the first research question.)

(Yunkaporta, 2009, p. 4)
Yunkaporta’s “Eight Ways Framework”, flowing from this depiction and Nakata’s cultural interface theory, proved a useful conceptual framework in discussing the findings in the current research.

1.6.2 Eight ways conceptual framework

“The eight-way framework of Aboriginal pedagogy brings Aboriginal ways of knowing and being ‘out of the dusty corners of anthropology and linguistics’ and into the Australian classroom” (Yunkaporta & Kirby 2011, p. 206). It comprises eight interconnected pedagogies that see teaching and learning as fundamentally holistic, non-linear, visual, kinaesthetic, social and contextualised. The eight interconnected pedagogies are illustrated below:

Yunkaporta’s (2009) process of constructing an Aboriginal standpoint is itemised below, and was useful in the interpretation of findings in the current study as this can assist non-Indigenous teachers in identifying their own cultural standpoint and teaching philosophy by doing the following:
1. Figure out your ontology (what you believe is real)
2. Figure out your epistemology (way of thinking about that reality)
3. From this develop your methodology (a tool to make your epistemology)
4. Do these steps within a framework of your axiology (ethics and values) (Yunkaporta, 2009, p.4).

1.7 Methodology

1.7.1 Aboriginal research paradigm

Aboriginal social research paradigm subsumes three elements: axiology, ontology and epistemology (Porsanger 2004; Martin 2008; Moreton-Robinson, 2013). This paradigm is informed by Aboriginal connections to country, our ancestors; our sovereignty. Moreton-Robinson (2000) conceptualised this as ‘relationality’, and Martin (2008) as ‘relatedness’. Ontology is defined as our way of being (Porsanger 2004; Martin 2008, p. 81) building on the definition provided by (Rigney 1997, p. 6): ‘the theory of the nature of existence, or as what knowledge is, or assumptions about the nature of reality’. Axiology is our way of doing (Porsanger 2004; Martin 2008, p. 79). Epistemology is our way of knowing (Porsanger 2004) or a ‘system of knowledge and how you come to know about your world’ (Martin 2008, p. 71). In Aboriginal ways of being country, people and spirit are intertwined, therefore axiology, ontology and epistemology are all interconnected.

1.7.2 Framing

The current study falls within the domain of adult education and professional development. Participants in the current study were mostly highly experienced or expert teachers as described by Tsui (2009) evidencing three aspects which characterise an accomplished teacher: the ability to integrate curriculum knowledge effectively within the teaching act; relating this to their specific contexts; and being effective reflective practitioners. Within the current study, then, there was the determination to build upon these strengths, but to bear in mind the power relations within the teaching field (Widin, Yasukawa, & Chodkiewicz, 2012), given that I work with participants professionally.
1.7.3 Theory of interpretivism

The current study took place within a theory of interpretivism. As researcher, I had tremendous concern for the individual and prioritised understanding participants’ subjective lived experiences in answering the research questions. In the current study participant voice was important as I sought to understand what meanings participants may have constructed and what their understandings were.

1.7.4 Multiple case study methodology

A multiple case study methodology allowed me as researcher to ensure as wide coverage of perspectives as possible would be accessed, given the geographic limitation and religious background of the schools participating. I could ensure there was a voice from low socio-economic (SES) schools as well as middle and high SES schools. The views of teachers who had high numbers of Aboriginal children in their classes could be given equal time and attention as those who had few or no Aboriginal children in their classes.

Case studies “recognize the complexity and ‘embeddedness’ of social truths ... (and) can represent something of the discrepancies or conflicts between viewpoints held by participants” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 292). Furthermore, they provide “participants’ lived experiences of, thoughts about, and feelings for, a situation” (p.290). This current study sought to investigate the breadth and depth of teachers’ knowledge about Aboriginal histories, cultures and knowledges to inform the professional development they would like to receive in this area. Also, it sought to understand teachers’ perceived capacity to effectively teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Consequently, the advantages of multiple case study were aligned with the objectives of the research.

1.7.5 Method of data collection

Data were collected using semi-structured group interviews with voluntary members of school leadership teams and teachers from five schools in the eastern region of the Diocese of Sydney. In one large school, two interviews were conducted to accommodate the number of teachers wishing to participate.
Up to six staff members from each of the purposively selected schools were invited to take part in each group interview. As the participants had been working together for a while, there was likely to be a level of trust between them and, potentially, a common goal with the research. Furthermore, since participants were contributing to the content of the professional development program to be developed, it was useful that they have heard what others have said (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

1.7.6 Method of data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic coding of interview transcripts: first the transcripts of the interviews were read to discover emergent themes and categories, allowing themes and meta-themes to emerge. Those initial clusters provided the broad view and the subsequent line-by-line coding allowed for higher and higher levels of abstraction to be reached.

Line-by-line coding was then followed by identification of pertinent text. This was then summarised and linked to the meta-theme and sub-theme as these developed. A detailed example is provided in Chapter 3 showing how themes were identified by meta-theme for each question in each interview, and resultant sub-themes were then summarised.

1.7.7 Scope

There is a proliferation of government reports, research studies, journal articles and conference papers with regards to the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The field of education is broad and the issues and factors impacting on the effectiveness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education are complex. For that reason this study focussed on the specific challenges and opportunities relating to primary (Years K to 6) school level education and their teachers’ perceptions of their capacity to meet the new Standards 1.4 and 2.4 as described earlier. The study took place in one region of Sydney, the Eastern Region of the Catholic Education Office, Sydney. It was therefore gaining the perspectives of participants in one School System in Australia, the Catholic System.

Care was taken to utilise a purposive sample, including primary schools of low, medium and high socio-economic status (SES) and with no, few and high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolment. A purposive sample of teachers from five Catholic schools in the eastern region of Archdiocese of Sydney (n=32) participated in group interviews.
1.8 Limitations of the study

Any methodology will have limitations. The current study, a qualitative inquiry, is by definition interpretive and therefore subjective. The role of the researcher and my professional role could have contributed to there being the notion of a power dynamic. Furthermore, several participants noted that previous interactions had made them almost dependent on me and it was novel for the roles to be reversed. As researcher running the interviews, I had to be careful not to let each interview devolve in a mini-professional development session! On the other hand, participants did note that because of an already established relationship with me, they were comfortable to discuss their feelings on the issues under discussion.

As participants were all teachers in Catholic schools, the study did not include public schools nor schools in the Independent System. Furthermore, all schools were urban schools and as such the views of teachers from rural and remote schools were not included. Additionally, working within the time constraints, only primary schools were included in the study; comparing and contrasting the views of secondary teachers will be part of further research.

Nevertheless, having included the views of teachers in low, middle and high SES schools and with a range of Aboriginal enrolments within the schools, the findings and conclusions may well prove useful to other schools which have a similar demographic.

1.9 Outline of the thesis

Chapter 1 provides a rationale for the current study and an overview of the theoretical framework for interpretation of the data, and makes reference to the limitations of the study. The literature review is found in Chapter 2; themes that emerged from the literature were later supported by findings in the current study. The chosen methodology and description of the participants and schools are discussed in Chapter 3. The end of Chapter 3 provides the rationale for weaving together the presentation of the data, the interpretation of the data and discussion under three meta-themes, one considered in each of Chapters 4, 5 and 6, rather than following the more traditional format of data, findings and discussion in separate chapters. Chapter 7 encompasses the concluding remarks, considering the limitations of the current study in more detail and opportunities for further research. In the appendix I include
a peer reviewed journal article which I co-authored and which has been accepted for
publication in the *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*. This article used part of the
literature review from this study as a basis for the interpretation of data in another context.
CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This review encompasses a number of themes that paint the background to the current study. Amongst others, it outlines literature on attitudes and approaches to Aboriginal education in New South Wales, nationally in Australia and also internationally. It further provides examples of a range of challenges made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators to the dominant culture’s systems of school educators to better meet the needs of Aboriginal children and young people. It is evident within the literature that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have voiced the need for systems of schools to value and include Aboriginal knowledges and perspectives into mainstream education systems of schools and the schooling experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2011), which have renewed focus on teachers’ responsibility in relation to the education of Aboriginal students, are seen as modern Australia’s response to this call by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators. This chapter provides the context for the current study and it is from this literature review that the research questions are derived.

There is increasing evidence from both international and Australian literature suggesting that Aboriginal children and young people’s wellbeing is enhanced by the recognition of their distinct cultural identities and how this can have a positive effect on students’ self-esteem and self-efficacy. Perso, (2012) states that the “use of a strength-based approach is essential for relationship building and validating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, it is also essential for quality teachers to build on what students already know and the way it is embedded in their identities” (Perso, 2012, p.18). This author is suggesting that it is essential that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisers, teachers, regional community liaison officers, learning support staff and students are valued for who they are, what they know and the skills they bring with them into the learning environment of a school.

The current study is embedded in this aspiration for Aboriginal children and young people to have the same educational outcomes as their non-Indigenous peers where currently and historically there has been an enormous difference in the educational outcomes for those two
groups. It is also situated in the positive framing of a way forward, while at the same time being sensitive to the negatives that are a fact from the past. In wider society, for example, there are discrepancies on many levels between Aboriginal peoples and non-Indigenous Australians: life expectancy, average income, general health and wellbeing. Aboriginal people feature, however, with a higher percentage than non-Indigenous Australians in relation to the jail population, addiction statistics, and suicide rates. The evidence is unambiguous. A report released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2008) highlighted that:

- Aboriginal peoples on average live 17 years less than non-Aboriginal people 59.4 years for Aboriginal men vs. 76.6 years non-Aboriginal men and 64.8 years for Aboriginal women vs. 82.0 years non-Aboriginal women;
- Infant mortality is 3 times as high, and Aboriginal babies are twice as likely to be low birth weight;
- An Aboriginal man is 13 times as likely to be in jail as a non-Aboriginal Australian, and an Aboriginal teenager is 28 times more likely to be in jail;
- Aboriginal women are 25 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Aboriginal women;
- Kidney disease Aboriginal people is 10 times higher, and diabetes 3 times higher, than for other Australians;
- Aboriginal people are much more likely to be victims of violence, for example Aboriginal people make up around 15% of murder victims, even though they only make up 2.3% of the population; and
- In 2008, suicide was the leading external cause of death for Aboriginal Australians, the suicide rate for Aboriginal people in specific communities is as much as 40% higher than that for the Australian population as a whole. (ABS, 2008, p.14)

The current study acknowledges that this is the starting point. This study, however, is more positively framed and focuses on the evidence that there is more recently a powerful emphasis on reconciliation within Australia with the realisation that it is not the responsibility of Aboriginal people alone to turn these statistics around. It is the responsibility of all Australians. This current study is grounded firmly in the discipline of education where a clear example of this move to reconciliation is evidenced in two new mandatory Teaching Standards that focus on the issue of teacher capacity to (a) meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools and (b) their understanding of Aboriginal histories.
and knowledges such that they can assist non-Indigenous students to play their part in the reconciliation process.

To understand and interpret the data in the current study, it is necessary to have a clear picture of the historic-political moment in which this study found itself.

2.2 History of approaches to education of Aboriginal children in NSW

It has long been recognised that the education system in New South Wales was established by the colonisers for the colonisers (Owen et al., 2011). Government and non-Government systems of schools’ approaches to Aboriginal education have gone through many different phases since invasion and continued occupation of Australia. It is useful to provide a brief overview of the last 140 years.

2.2.1 Clean, Clad and Courteous to Exclusion on Demand

The Public Instruction Act of 1880 introduced compulsory “free and fair” education for “all children if they lived within a two-mile radius of a school” (Fletcher, 1989, p. 57). Aboriginal children were allowed to attend school if they were ‘clean, clad and courteous’. Fletcher (1989) described the approach to Aboriginal education in the nineteenth century as founded on the Clean, Clad and Courteous policies. By 1902 the Exclusion on Demand policy was in operation. This policy stated, “Aboriginal children could not attend school if an objection was received from just one non-Aboriginal parent, and were deemed unclean” (policy cited in Fletcher, 1989, p. 8). This policy was not removed from the New South Wales Teachers’ Handbook until 1972. The policies of the 1980s were based on the belief that “Aboriginal people did not have the ability to make decisions for themselves in the most basic of realms, such as hygiene, or the intelligence to be educated in the same manner as non-Aboriginal students” (Fletcher, 1989, p. 274). Schooling was viewed as an opportunity and means for the removal of Aboriginal children and young people from the negative influence of their culture and instilling in them what was regarded by educators as “normal white values and habits” (Fletcher, 1989, p. 274).
2.2.2 The Act of Protection

The New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board was established in 1883, gaining legal power under the Aborigines Protection Act (1909), which subsequently developed into an extraordinary level of control of Aboriginal people’s everyday lives. In 1915, the Act enabled the Aborigines’ Protection Board to remove Aboriginal children from their parents - without having to establish that they were in any way neglected or mistreated. Children under the age of 10 were sent to Bomaderry Aboriginal Children’s Home, located near Nowra, which was established in 1908 by the United Aborigines Mission. Young girls were sent to Cootamundra Girls Home to train as domestic servants, and the boys to Singleton Boys Home to train for service on farms as labourers. Kinchela Boys Home, sixteen miles from Kempsey was established in 1924. The children in these institutions received limited education.

2.2.3 Assimilationist period

Protectionism was replaced by a policy of Assimilation. In 1937, the Commonwealth Government held a national conference on Aboriginal affairs, which agreed that Aboriginal people ‘not of full blood’ should be absorbed or ‘assimilated’ into the wider ‘white’ population.

This Conference believes that the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin (sic), but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end...The policy of the Commonwealth is to do everything possible to convert the half-caste into a white citizen. (Initial Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities, 1937, p. 1)

The aim of assimilation was to make the ‘Aboriginal problem’ gradually disappear so that Aboriginal people would lose their identity in the wider community (Broome, 1994, p. 174).

Fletcher (1989) noted a shift in the New South Wales Department of Education’s position in the middle of the assimilationist period of Aboriginal education:

Research has indicated that the pupils are of average intelligence, and that social deprivation and depressed environment are the reason for initial retardation rather than low intelligence. Aboriginal children are now seen as disadvantaged members of the general community rather than a substandard racial group. (New South Wales Department of Education cited in Fletcher, 1989, p. 274)
An assimilationist approach did not recognise or respect the rich and diverse cultural backgrounds of Aboriginal children and young people. Instead it epitomised a school of thought, which blamed the child’s socialisation within community and sought rather to assimilate them into non-Indigenous society. Beresford and Partington (2003) noted: “… Tens of thousands of children were removed by authorities up until the 1970s because parents were judged to have failed to bring up their children according to white standards” (p. 53). Aboriginal children and young people were still being viewed as deficient when compared to white standards.

Up until the 1950s “it was not uncommon to express the position that Australia’s Indigenous people reached a point of intellectual development around adolescence where they could progress no more” (Nakata, 2007, p. 155). The early records from the archives of the New South Wales Department of Education cite ‘research’ to support these attitudes. There was “common agreement that the intelligence of Aboriginal people is below that of the white population” (Fletcher, 1989, p. 274). This widely held belief was used as justification for not providing Aboriginal children and young people with an education past year 3 of primary school. Chris Sarra reflects on a conversation with his mother, which illustrates such attitudes:

My mum dreamt of being an archaeologist when she was a child. It was an ambition she was denied, not because she was intellectually incapable but because she was only allowed to stay at school until year 3. When I asked her why, she replied: “I guess they just thought of us as uncivilised natives, and that we weren’t capable of learning”. (Sarra, 2014, p.1)

There remain many such reminiscences among Aboriginal children and young people’s families and communities still today.

2.2.4 Cultural deprivation to compensatory education

Schooling in the 1950s was based on the belief that Aboriginal children and young people suffered from cultural deprivation or deficit, which in turn depleted their linguistic and cognitive abilities (Harker & McConnochie, 1985). According to these authors this school of thought prevailed until the 1970s, when compensatory education was the approach, with the implementation of programs that would rectify the perceived inadequacies of Aboriginal children and young people, to “solve the problems of Aboriginal education” (Harker & McConnochie, 1985, p.175).
2.2.5 Disquiet and discontent of the 1970s and 80s

Following the assimilationist period, Fletcher (1989) described the 1970s as “a new decade of disquiet and discontent” (p. 308) in Aboriginal education, due to Aboriginal people actively challenging racial discrimination and institutional racism, which included the education system. Watts (1982) concurred that the 1970s were characterised by a shift in Federal Government policy “from an assimilationist stance in 1965, to an emphasis on self-determination in 1973, and thence, in 1975, to an expressed goal of self-management” (p. 3). During this time Watts (1982) also noted the desire of Aboriginal families and communities to be actively involved in the schooling of Aboriginal children and young people. Schools were seen as largely being unresponsive, which was explained as being “due to ineffective communication” (Phillips & Lampert, 2005, p. 122) between families, communities and schools.

In 1974, the Schools Commission of the time established the National Aboriginal Consultative Group (NACG), which was later changed to the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) in 1977. This was an avenue for Aboriginal people to present their views and advice on special provisions being made by the Commonwealth Government to improve education for Aboriginal children and young people. At this time a stronger call became evident for “self-determination in Indigenous education” (House of Representatives Select Committee, 1985, p. 28).

2.2.6 Two-way schooling and both ways education

In the 1990s, as reported by authors such as Harris (1990) and Yunupingu (1994), Aboriginal communities were calling for the inclusion of Aboriginal knowledges within teaching and learning programs in schools. Harris (1990) described this approach as two-way schooling, a strong cultural identity as a source of inner strength, for young people “to be empowered in terms of the western world and in retaining or rebuilding Aboriginal identity as a primary identity” (Harris, 1990, p.48) Two-way schooling was based on the belief that “schools can be structured so that the new skills learned from another culture can be added to a person’s primary cultural makeup, rather than displace it” (Harris, 1990, p. 114). This author also highlighted that two-way schooling arose from Aboriginal parents and community concerns.
for their children and young people obtaining a western education at the expense of their cultural identity. They stressed that schooling needs to prepare children and young people to make the matter of choice real in both worlds:

... to provide opportunity for the primary Aboriginal identity to stay strong, though changing, and these continue to be the source of inner strength and security necessary for dealing with the Western world.... Aboriginal people today are increasingly interested both in being empowered in terms of the Western world and in retaining or rebuilding Aboriginal identity as a primary identity. (Harris, 1990, p. 48)

Mandawuy Yunupingu (1994) described both ways of schooling as the coexistence of knowledges which are not mutually exclusive but which maintain culture through the use of Aboriginal knowledge and language. Both positions agreed that education for Aboriginal children and young people should, first and foremost, build on their cultural identity while preparing them for success with the wider Australian community.

### 2.2.7 Grappling with Aboriginal epistemology

A review from a decade ago, undertaken by the NSW Department of Education and Training and NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) (2004), showed little change from previous policies. It identified that some teachers struggle with accepting the concept of Aboriginality: “Aboriginality is more often ridiculed, denied, discounted or deemed suspect and where there is a presence of Aboriginal children and their families they are begrudgingly tolerated” (NSW DET & NSW AECG, 2004 p. 195). This view is prevalent despite research showing a strong link between culture and the way people think and learn (Yunkaporta, 2009). Over thirty years ago, in the 1980s the then National Aboriginal Education Committee called for the need for schools to “develop an education theory and pedagogy that takes into account Aboriginal epistemology” (National Aboriginal Education Committee, 1985, p. 4). They further stressed that it is only “when this occurs will education for our people be a process that builds on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and identities” (National Aboriginal Education Committee, 1985, p. 4). A question for consideration in the current study therefore was: If classroom teachers understand the ways in which one’s culture influences ways of learning, would this help in understanding the impact of culture and cultural identity on learning? This became a subsidiary question to the main questions in the current study.
More recent research highlights that the limitations of western or ‘mainstream’ approaches to education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people have been acknowledged for some time (Foley, 2003). Aboriginal peoples and educators have suggested the development of a theory of pedagogy that recognises and values Aboriginal epistemology and ways of learning, as a bridge in moving forward (Foley, 2003; Yunkaporta, 2009, Perso, 2012).

In continuing this moving forward, the current study sought to establish gaps in knowledge of current teachers and to be able to build on their strengths in determining what professional development they deemed essential.

2.3 Policy context – National legislation and priorities

To further understand the context of the current study, it is important to consider current trends, policies, legislation and priorities.

2.3.1 Background

In Australia, the disparity between the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous children and young people are well documented and continues to be of great concern. The ‘gap’ between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous students continues to grow as student’s progress through school. The National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008) reported that the educational outcomes for Aboriginal students are substantially lower than compared to other students and advised:

Meeting the needs of young Indigenous Australians and promoting high expectations for their educational performance requires strategic investment. Australian schooling needs to engage Indigenous students, their families and communities in all aspects of schooling; increase Indigenous participation in the education workforce at all levels; and support coordinated community services for students and their families that can increase productive participation in schooling. (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 15)

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014 (the Action Plan) endorsed by COAG on 23 May 2011, commits all governments in Australia to a unified approach to ‘closing the gap’ in education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The Preface of that Action Plan states that:
Governments across Australia recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians with one of the oldest continuing cultures in human history. They affirm the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to sustain their languages and cultures and acknowledge associations with land and water. (MCEECDYA, 2011, p.3)

As a result of this national commitment, the New South Wales Government has an ambitious Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan, which has stated targets to, within a decade, close the gap in literacy and numeracy between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous students and, by 2020, at least halve the gap for Aboriginal students in Year 12 attainment or equivalent rates. One strategy to achieve these stated targets is the establishment of the New South Wales Smarter Schools National Partnerships (SSNP) (MCEECDYA, 2011). The strategic focus is aimed at improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students through effective and sustainable reforms in classrooms and school communities through the establishment of focus schools across the state. Research indicates that key influences in effective change in any school are a supportive principal and a supportive school executive. In each of the identified New South Wales focus schools, it was expected that:

Every principal of a focus school will within two years be required to participate in a leadership program to assist them lead improvement in learning outcomes of Indigenous students. … [and] Education providers will deliver professional learning to teachers to ensure high levels of cultural competency to inform the best teaching strategies for Indigenous students. (MCEECDYA, 2011, p.16)

In relation to the current study, it is useful to note here that there are seven broad Teacher Standards that have been implemented nationally, and each has a number of related Standards that fall within the broader Standard. Additionally, there are four levels of performance identified in the Standards as teachers grow and develop during their careers: (i) Graduate, (ii) Proficient, (iii) Highly Accomplished, and (iv) Lead Teacher.

Both of the aforementioned statements can be linked to the National Professional Standards for Teachers’ fourth identified level of ‘Lead’. Focus Area 2.4 states that the teacher at this level should provide evidence of having been able to: “Lead initiatives to assist colleagues with opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages” (AITSL, 2011, p. 11).
Despite noticeable effort over the past forty years, the gap in educational achievement and attainment between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous students remains. The Hobart, Adelaide and Melbourne Declarations, spreading over a timeframe of nearly twenty years, all had goals that allude to teachers improving their knowledge of, and skills in, educating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and in guiding all students towards a better understandings and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

One of the overarching objectives of Smarter Schools National Partnerships national initiative was *Improving Teacher Quality National Partnership*. This aimed to provide high quality teachers in New South Wales schools beyond the life of the Partnerships. The approach was defined by the strong research and an evidence base that linked teacher and school leadership capacity with improvements in school outcomes (Hanushek, 2004). The current study sought to augment current data and information and to play a part in ensuring that the current policy requiring teachers to demonstrate capacity in Standards 1.4 and 2.4, does not become yet another policy that has little positive effect on the learning outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Teachers need support to be able to work effectively with any new initiative. Professional development is most successful where teachers choose the content area and play a collaborative role in determining the focus (see discussion in chapter 4), hence the desire of this current study to establish the current knowledge level and to get teachers’ input as to what professional development they would value as they seek to meet the new Standards.

### 2.4 Challenges from Aboriginal educators

Another thread in the tapestry that weaves into the background of the current study is the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators.

Social justice is what faces you in the morning. It is the ability to nourish your children and send them to school where their education will not only equip them for employment but reinforce their knowledge and appreciation of their cultural inheritance. (Dobson, 1993, p.1)
2.4.1 The tide must change

Whilst the educational outcomes of Aboriginal children and young people are well researched and remain a focus of government policy and funding, and “sometimes an obsession of educators, researchers and governments, there is much that can be learned about what the research actually seeks to study and equally what it does not” (Martin, 2008, p.1). For example, statistics show a persistent trend of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students performing in the lower bands in literacy and numeracy. Aboriginal educational outcomes are measured against minimum mainstream standards which are supported by the government rhetoric of ‘closing the gap’, resulting in a continued deficit model of Aboriginal funding and approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. What is not revealed, however, in these statistics from government and educational providers’ reports is that for “too many Aboriginal students’ families, schooling continues to be an unfulfilling experience and in too many ways, an unfulfilled goal” (Martin, 2008, p.1).

Buckskin has stated “Australian education jurisdictions need shock treatment to jolt them into reality, taking responsibility for the systemic failure to provide the culturally safe place that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students need to learn and develop” (Buckskin, 2013, p.1). Given the state of affairs, Martin (2008) has argued that, in order to improve education outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people, there needs to be recognition of, and a space for, Aboriginal worldviews. For the purposes of the current study, ‘worldview’ as defined by Martin (2005) is adopted where it is characterised as ‘relatedness’ as follows:

To know who you are in relatedness is the ultimate premise of an Aboriginal worldview because this is the formation of identity. This is acquired through being immersed in situations, contexts of people and other elements which lead us to come to see and to come to know, and then be part of the relatedness through change and past, present and future. A child is therefore guided, or parented, through the various stages of lifehood, fulfilling the expectations and conditions, the roles, rites and responsibilities of relatedness. (Martin, 2005, p. 28)

Therefore one can conclude that Aboriginal knowledges, experiences, realities and aspirations would need to be at the forefront of any professional learning for school leaders and classroom teachers. Nakata (2007) has proposed the cultural interface as a way of moving forward when he stated that the ‘irreconcilable’ nature of two knowledge system occurs through misunderstandings “at surface levels of aspects of Indigenous knowledge” (Nakata, 2007, p.29).
In an extension of this thinking, Yunkaporta refers to the “reconciling principle in finding common-ground” (Yunkaporta, 2009, p. 17).

Given the status quo discussed above, many leading Aboriginal educators have challenged the way that education systems, at a macro and a micro level, operate for Aboriginal children and young people across the Australian continent. Aboriginal educators and policy advocates have continued to challenge the dominant culture’s educators to better meet the needs of Aboriginal children and young people. As noted earlier, historically Aboriginal children and young people have largely been excluded from the mainstream Australian educational system. There have been two aspects to this. Firstly, there was legislation which excluded Aboriginal children and young people entirely from mainstream education and, secondly, but more informally, these students have been excluded through the failure of educational providers to deliver culturally appropriate services that meet the needs of Aboriginal children and young people. The current study seeks to address this by empowering teachers to meet the new Standards.

Highlighting the outcome of these elements, Professor Mick Dodson, Co-Chair of Reconciliation Australia and Director of the National Centre for Indigenous Studies (NCIS) at the Australian National University, has stated that:

Education is something we’ve let slide miserably in recent decades. We’ve failed a lot of children in that time. And many of those children—a disproportionate number—are Indigenous children. We’ve been failing them for a lot longer. (Dodson, 2009, p.1)

Chris Sarra, (2007), through his work with the Stronger Smarter Institute, has challenged principals to increase Aboriginal students’ outcomes “by taking risks through different, yet imaginative, approaches to schooling” (p. 3) which challenge past approaches to educating Aboriginal students. The Stronger Smarter approach aims to change the tide of low expectations in Aboriginal education. Sarra (2007) has further stated that:

For too long I think many of us as educators have colluded too easily with the notion that Indigenous children are automatically underachievers at school. There is no basis for this belief and it is one that must be purged from our profession. (Sarra, 2007, p. 6)

In summary, these Aboriginal educators propose that the tide has to change; Aboriginal children and young people, when at school, need to be provided with opportunities that will
develop a pride of, and in their cultural identity, whilst having a strong focus on high achievement.

2.4.2 Promotion of high expectations for Aboriginal students

In 2009, State, Territory and Commonwealth Ministers of Education endorsed a set of Educational Goals for Young Australians. Goal one states that: *Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence.* In elaborating on this goal, all governments agreed to undertake a range of actions. One such action is to:

Ensure that schools build on local cultural knowledge and experience of Indigenous students as a foundation for learning, and work in partnership with local communities on all aspects of the schooling process, including to promote high expectations for learning outcomes of Indigenous students. (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 7)

There is a clear link here to the Standard 1.4, which is the enactment of this determination. Aboriginal peoples have always held high expectations and achieved high outcomes from their knowledge systems and it would be commonplace for a disparity to exist between the achievement of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous children and young people when measured in a foreign paradigm.

On interesting finding in a study conducted by Basit and Santoro (2011) was that in Australia it is fairly common for an Aboriginal teacher to be considered the cultural expert and a good source of local cultural knowledge. This leads to this person being called upon to provide advice in a variety of fora to a plethora of people. These demands can be problematic and lead to disenchantment and burn-out (Basit & Santoro, 2011). It follows, therefore, that strategies need to be developed, as explicated by MCEETYA (2011), that do not jeopardise the well-being of Aboriginal people who happen to be readily accessible.

2.5 Identified aspects for success – National and international

There is a growing body of knowledge and literature, from a long history of trialling different approaches and strategies, of important aspects that need to be evident to ensure the engagement and success of Aboriginal children and young people. These are a) connections
with the passing on of knowledge; b) valuing of Aboriginal knowledges; and c) exploring Aboriginal ways of being.

2.5.1 Connections with the passing on of knowledge

In Aboriginal ways of being, teachers are the ones who have been on the journey before; they act as supportive guides for the children and young people, to open the doors ahead, to facilitate the learning process, to unlock each young person’s learning potential (Alberta Education, 2005; Edwards & Buxton, 1998). In Aboriginal ways of learning and seeing, simply knowing the information and passing it on is not enough. Children and young people are supported, encouraged and challenged to own their learning, to make it a part of their lived experience and to reflect on what they have learnt. In Aboriginal ways of being, with knowledge comes responsibility – not to the person for their own development and gain, but for what this means so that they are in a position to contribute to the collective good of their community and country (Edwards & Buxton, 1998; Martin, 2003; Moran, 2004).

2.5.2 Valuing Aboriginal knowledges

For over forty years Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators have been arguing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges to be included in the curriculum and pedagogy for all students. Martin (2003) argues for a pedagogy that values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges as equal to western “ways of knowing, being and doing” in Australian schools (p. 9). It is important for teachers to look at where Aboriginal students are at this point in time, to find out what Aboriginal students bring with them to the learning experience and bring education to their students in a relevant and meaningful way (Hanlen, 2002). Yunkaporta (2009) argues for the need to include authentic Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum in ways that increase intellectual rigour and support mainstream academic success for Aboriginal children and young people. He asserts that this is currently being blocked by:

An oppositional framing of Aboriginal and western knowledge systems, caused by shallow perceptions of Indigenous knowledge as being limited to token cultural items. This tokenism serves only to highlight difference and marginalise Indigenous thought. (p. xv)
It can be argued that this is what all teachers would do as a matter of course to meet the diverse learning needs of the children in their classrooms, however, the Australian mainstream education system has largely failed in relation to Aboriginal children and young people. From the discussion above, it seems to reside in the failure of non-Indigenous teachers to fully understand and to value Aboriginal ways of knowing as a complex knowledge system or to recognise that Aboriginal people, as holders and practitioners of knowledge, as being well placed to build on these and to have two frames of reference within which to interpret new information and knowledge. An important factor is teachers’ ability to start from Aboriginal children and young peoples’ knowledge base to help them bridge to the western curriculum they encounter in schools (Nakata, 2008).

2.5.3 Exploring Aboriginal ways of being

We are part of the world as much as it is part of us, existing within a network of relations amongst Entities that are reciprocal and occur in certain contexts. This determines and defines for us rights to be earned and bestowed as we carry out rites to country, self and others – our Ways of Being. (Martin, 2003, p. 10)

Aboriginal ways of being are indelibly driven through their ways of knowing and serve as guides for establishing relationships and relatedness (Martin, 2003). Their ways of being are about the rights they earn by fulfilling relationships to people and country (Edwards & Buxton, 1998; Martin, 2003).

In the past, Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum have been taught from an external perspective, as an academic study of a culture (Edwards & Buxton, 1998; Williams, 2013). This is articulated by Williams (2013) who maintains that many “may find the prospect of yarning-up language and culture daunting, and feel a need to seek external academic support to help us research our current cultural knowledge position” (p.8). This approach to learning allows teachers and students to remain separated from the material that they were learning about, in much the same way as students might be removed when learning about life in Rome in the Latin class. Edwards and Buxton (1998) argue that there is a vital difference between Aboriginal perspectives and cultural education. Learning through experiences, as with ‘Guyunggu’ (Darnginjung word for being), is “the first stage of an approach to learning from an Aboriginal point of view” (Edwards & Buxton, 1998, p. 4), allowing teachers and children to get a glimpse of an Aboriginal way of seeing the world. ‘Guyunggu’ is about learning a
way “to be” (Edwards & Buxton, 1998, p. 4). Edwards and Buxton (1998) explain that the success of Guyunggu depends:

In leading children to experience activities to which they respond emotionally. A sense of belonging, and all that it entails, requires that children develop an ‘emotional library’ on which they can draw, as they develop further understanding and, as further concepts are felt, rather than just known. In an Aboriginal way of learning, to be able to act on a concept, you must not only understand it at an intellectual level, but be able to feel that concept at an emotional level. (Edwards & Buxton, 1998, p. 4)

This approach to learning has the potential to broaden and deepen both teachers’ and students’ views of their world. This way of approaching the learning experience involves both teachers and children in a shared journey of growth and learning (Edwards & Buxton, 1998; Yunkaporta, 2009; Williams, 2013).

In Aboriginal ways of seeing, the teacher does not separate self from the process of teaching and learning. ‘Guyunggu’ recognises that teachers, children and young people are all part of a learning community (Edwards & Buxton, 1998). By becoming a part of this approach to teaching and learning, what one is doing is opening oneself to opportunities that deepen one’s way of seeing the country and discovering the many possibilities that exist to learn more about one-self and our place within this country (Edwards & Buxton, 1998). Yunkaporta’s Eight Ways of learning is a pedagogy framework that can assist teachers to include Aboriginal perspectives through Aboriginal processes and protocols, to move beyond just content, to “learn through culture not about culture” (Yunkaporta, 2009, p. 4).

While there is much written about Aboriginal styles of learning and the development of relationships, there is less written about how to teach in an Aboriginal way. The only two pertinent are ‘Guyunggu’ and more recently Eight Ways. In summary, an Aboriginal teacher needs to go on the journey first to analyse their emotional response to the proposed pedagogy before they take children on that journey. To illustrate, I was recently working with a large group of teachers at a professional development day. The activity was a Koori intelligence quiz to explore the notion of cultural bias in intelligence quotient (IQ) testing, in particular, intelligence as a cultural construct. At the end of the quiz participants were asked to swap their answer sheet with the person sitting next to them to mark. Interestingly a number of teachers were uncomfortable with this yet we often ask students to do this in classrooms.
2.5.4 Implications for the current study

The Australian Government and education providers are, at this point in time, being challenged to reduce the disparity between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous student outcomes. The inclusion of Aboriginal knowledges and ways of seeing in school pedagogy is only, in part, a result of attempting to better Aboriginal students’ educational participation and engagement. Effective teaching strategies that are responsive to the local community and cultural setting, linguistic background and history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (AITSL, 2011) represent good practice for all teachers. It is to “know students and how they learn” (p. 9). However, at the preservice teacher education level, “there is a pattern within the Australian … literature showing a separation and imbalance between Indigenous content and the transfer of effective teaching skills” (Moreton-Robinson, Singh, Kolopenuk, & Robinson, 2012, p.1).

It is now time to understand the educational needs of Aboriginal children and young people living at the interface of two cultures, their own and the mainstream western culture, from their perspective (Nakata, 2008). This current study seeks to assists teachers “to develop their knowledge and understanding of the impact of culture, cultural identity and linguistic background on the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students” (AITSL, 2011, p.9).

2.5.5 International research on respect for and embedding Aboriginal knowledges

It is not only in Australia that there is a focus on culturally appropriate ways of eliminating the disparity in achievement between Aboriginal, Indigenous, or First Nation children and that of their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Culture is the lens through which we look at the world; it is the context within which we operate and make sense of the world and its influences on how we process learning, solve problems, and teach. (Lee, Cosby, & de Baca, 2007, p. 9)

Where Aboriginal education works best is where there is a strong relational bond between teacher and child as noted in the following extract from Canada:

The teacher’s relationship with the student is at the heart of Aboriginal approaches to education. Traditionally, teachers knew each student as an individual, with unique gifts
and needs. In this environment, they tailored the learning process to the student’s needs as a matter of course. (Alberta Education, 2005, p.79)

Other countries have undertaken similar projects to that recorded by Colquhoun and Dockery (2012) in Australia. They used qualitative data made available from a Longitudinal Study of Indigenous children (LSIC) known as ‘Footprints in Time’ to explore this relationship in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Specifically, responses to two open-ended questions were considered: “What is it about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture that will help your child to grow up strong?” and “Apart from health and happiness, what do you want for your child?” (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012, p. 2) Evidence from both international and Australian literature suggests that while there is a strong desire for children to be successful within the dominant culture, the wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples is enhanced when they maintain traditional culture; equally, their wellbeing is jeopardised when an assimilation or any other approach discussed earlier, is adopted. Negatives accrue “when institutional ideologies and values of another culture that directly or indirectly judges their way of being in the world as somehow less valid, or worse, unworthy of acknowledgement” (Kickett-Tucker & Coffin, 2011, p.155).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Kapa (in rows) haka (dance) is a performing arts initiative distinctive to mainstream secondary schools. Over fifty four thousand Maori students (18 per cent) attend mainstream secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2006). Kapa haka provides opportunities for teachers to foster the social and cultural wellbeing of Maori students by providing a culturally responsive learning environment where students actively engage in learning about language, culture and traditional ways of knowing and doing (Whitinui, 2010). Whitinui’s (2007) doctoral research explored the ‘voices’ of 20 Maori students and 27 secondary teachers about the educational benefits of participating in kapa haka. His research concluded that the most effective way to improve the levels of participation of Maori students in secondary mainstream schooling is to provide “learning environments that are socially, culturally, emotionally and spiritually uplifting and in particular, to assign learning activities that are specifically linked to their unique identity as Maori” (Whitinui, 2010, p. 19).

In Ontario, Canada, the education of Indian, Inuit, and M’etis children is also in crisis (Cherubini, Hodson, Manley-Casimir & Muir, 2010). Past policies are “widening the void”
rather than “closing the gap” (p. 329). The *Ontario First Nations, Me’etis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* made a commitment to “a holistic and integrated approach to Aboriginal student outcomes” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p.6) and “promotes the development of a positive personal and cultural identity, as well as a sense of belonging to both Aboriginal and wider communities” (p. 8). The Ontario Ministry of Education is offering opportunities to improve the capacities of teachers, principals and school board administrators to recognise Aboriginal students’ distinct cultural and epistemic traditions, while actively informing their pedagogy to improve Aboriginal student academic achievement.

Furthermore, the affirmation of cultural identity and the positive effects for students’ self-esteem and self-efficacy has been investigated internationally with regards to First Nation students. Lorna Williams (2011) a Canadian Lil’wat educator from the St’at’eyem’c First Nation in her research in the area of teacher development and collaborative learning identified the crucial importance of maintaining and enhancing cultural identity of Aboriginal students in that context as well:

> Protecting, maintaining and enhancing the identity development of Indigenous students is crucial, especially in places where the cultures, knowledge, values and languages of Indigenous people are devalued or rendered invisible in a country. Students must perceive their school learning as adding to their knowledge, not obliterating their own Indigenous wisdom and values. Indigenous people have survived by resisting assaults on their identity. (Williams, 2011, p.16)

Students need to be able to see themselves reflected in the learning taking place in their classrooms and in the day-to-day practices of their school. Reconciling two ways of being is challenging and, having a strong sense of identity, can help to negotiate between the two worlds (Williams, 2011). Similarly, Professor Lorenzo Cherubini another Canadian researcher argues the need to:

> heighten teachers’ and administrators’ awareness of Aboriginal students’ social, cultural, and academic preferences in order for educators to authentically represent Aboriginal students’ knowledge, traditions, and cultural nuances into the social fabric of their classrooms and schools. (Cherubini et al., 2010, p 2)

Research suggests that schools creating learning environments of respect and that include Aboriginal students’ socio-cultural and socio-linguistic worldviews both strengthen their
sense of identity and improve their academic achievement (Hilberg & Tharp, 2002; Kanu, 2002; Swanson, 2003; Cherubini et al., 2011; Perso, 2012).

Dr Marie Ann Battiste (2002,) a Mi’kmaq educator from Canada, argues that enlivening the voices and experiences of Aboriginal people and integrating them into education creates a balanced centre from which to analyse Eurocentric pedagogies in mainstream classrooms. She further states that “focusing on the similarities between the two systems of knowledge rather than on their differences maybe a more useful place to start when considering how to best introduce educational reform” (Battiste, 2002, p. 11). This reconciling ethic is also evident in Martin Nakata’s work here in Australia on the concept of ‘Cultural Interface’ (2007), a concept that has impacted significantly on global directions in reconciling diverse knowledge systems. Battiste concludes that:

All true education is transformative and Nature centred …. Education for wholeness, which strives for a level of harmony between individuals and their world, is an ancient foundation for the educational process of all heritages. (Battiste, 2002, p.30)

A parallel understanding has been clearly articulated in Australia: “Aboriginal knowledge as an ontological foundation for understanding the world” (McGloin, Marshall & Adams, 2009, p. 5), the interconnectedness of developing knowledge on different levels of oneself – physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. This way of knowing and being is specific to country. Nakata clearly states that Aboriginal and Torres Strait knowledge differs across place and has differing meanings to various groups of people but is understood “in terms of its distance from scientific knowledge” (Nakata, 2007, p.185). Aboriginal knowledges comprise ways of seeing and understanding the world that “in many cultures predates what we understand as science in its Western modality” (McGloin, Marshall & Adams, 2009, p. 4). Within the context of teaching and learning, Aboriginal knowledges can be understood as information that comes from lived experience and from millennia of interactions with the physical, human and spiritual worlds. Aboriginal ways of knowing are grounded in country. Its authority, then, derives not from hypotheses, but from tens of thousands of years of ‘listening’ and ‘being’.
2.6 Areas for improvement already identified in Australia

2.6.1 Recognition of cultural identity

“Culture .... [i]s the foundation upon which individual identity is built” (Tripcony, 2010, p.7). The notion of cultural identity is closely linked to self-concept. On a surface level it is the way in which a person identifies him or herself. In Aboriginal ways of seeing, this identity comes from country, family and community. Identity is personal and evolves as the individual grows in knowledge and matures, being able to respond to varying places and circumstances. This identification with country is developed on many levels from social relationships to deeply spiritual connections.

A significant factor in educating Australian Aboriginal children and young children has been the failure to recognise their cultural identity – their Aboriginality. As Linda Burney has stated:

> Being Aboriginal has nothing to do with the colour of your skin or the shape of your nose. It is a spiritual feeling, an identity you know in your heart. It is a unique feeling that may be difficult for non-Aboriginal people to understand. (Burney, 1994, cited in NSW Department of School Education, 2002, p. 7)

Positive cultural identity is the foundation upon which all children grow, develop and relate to those around them. Teachers are included in this conceptualisation. “Cultural responsiveness results from cultural competence which respects and values the unique identity of each child” (Perso, 2012, p.18). A cultural lens helps us to see each child and their relationship to their own family and community from their perspective. “The presence of interactive effects between cultural affinity and factors such as self-esteem and self-efficacy has been investigated in several studies” (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012, p. 3-4). There is some evidence (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012; Perso, 2012; Williams, 2011; Burgess & Berwick, 2009) that cultural affinity promotes self-esteem, and that cultural identity combined with self-esteem and a sense of self-efficacy can have a positive influence on school participation, engagement and, in turn, achievement. These elements are the focus of Standards 1.4 and 2.4 discussed in the current study.
2.6.2  Responsive to the local community

For a long period of time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and communities were not considered in the education of their children. If they were, they fought a losing battle against government or religious orders for their voice to be heard with regards to the education of their children (Attwood 1989; Beresford & Omaji, 1998).

Parents were humiliated, dispirited, and marginalised by racial and intellectual inferiority dogma. They experienced separation from their children, ostracization from government schools, exclusion from decisions concerning the education and welfare of their children, and treated with extreme paternalism by government and Church. (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report, 1997, Beresford and Omaji 1998)

With this long history and the state of being of systems of schools, it is not surprising that there are Aboriginal parents and caregivers who are wary of schools and may not be confident in approaching principals, members of school leadership teams or teachers.

Given that the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people today are attending schools with non-Indigenous school leadership teams and being taught and supported largely by non-Indigenous teachers in their classrooms, the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous is significant in children’s schooling experience (Matthews, Watego, Cooper, & Baturo, 2005). Currently, these relationships are largely dysfunctional (Reconciliation Australia, 2010). Within schools and systems of schools there are a plethora of relationships. Matthews et al. (2005) posed a question that needs further investigation, that being: To what extent does this ‘dysfunctional’ relationship contribute to the underachievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people? From statistics on achievement it would seem that the answer is: substantially.

Further, does this emphasis on ‘underachievement’, as Martin (2008) has argued previously “sometimes an obsession” by governments, reinforce and contribute to this dysfunctional relationship? (Matthews, 2012) The means to combat this is to build relationships:

...one of the most important relationships to build is with Elders, parents and community. When school leaders acknowledge and embrace the strength of community leadership we’ll be off to a good start. When school and community share the responsibility of leading and supporting this change, great things really can happen. (Sarra cited in Indigenous Education Leadership Institute, 2009, p. 6)
One way of potentially achieving this would be a time of cultural immersion (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2012). These authors report on and recommend a three-day cultural immersion program known as Connecting to Country as a way to increase teachers’ knowledge and understanding of local Aboriginal history, culture and community.

Moving from a deficit conceptualisation of Aboriginal society, teacher knowledge and understanding of their local Aboriginal community and ability to work authentically with community is an important factor in successfully working with Aboriginal children and young people and is significant for delivering relevant and engaging teaching practice (Andersen & Walter, 2010).

The Review of Aboriginal Education in New South Wales (2004) conducted by the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECG) and the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (DET) identified the need for school leadership teams and classroom teachers to develop: “Deep knowledge and understanding of their Aboriginal students, families and local communities” (NSW DET & NSW AECG, 2004, p. 78); “Cultural programs that allowed them to make connections with local Aboriginal culture” (NSW DET & NSW AECG, 2004, p. 88); and “strategies to affirm the self identity of Aboriginal students” (NSW DET & NSW AECG, 2004, p. 96).

Research perseveringly suggests that despite their good intentions and commitment to the education of young people teachers often have difficulty in establishing effective relationships with Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2012; Santoro, Reid, Crawford & Simpson, 2001; Buckskin et al., 2008; NSWDET & NSWAECG, 2004) Furthermore, research (Higgins & Morley, 2014; Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012; Santoro, Reid, Crawford & Simpson, 2011; Berthelsen & Walker, 2008) shows that Aboriginal children achieve better educational results in schools where their parents and their community are engaged, where their culture and identity is understood, valued and affirmed and where learning activities are underpinned by quality teaching and curriculum that draws on the knowledge and experience of the Aboriginal community.
2.6.3 Recognition of Linguistic Background: Languages and Aboriginal English

A further aspect important in the background to the current study is that of the recognition of the linguistic background of Aboriginal students. In 2005, MCEETYA released *The National Statement for Languages Education in Australian Schools*. The statement emphasised the need for education to focus on developing intercultural understanding and identified a two-pronged approach:

Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages have a unique place in Australia’s heritage and in its cultural and educational life. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, they are fundamental to strengthening identity and self-esteem. For non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, they provide a focus for development of cultural understanding and reconciliation. (MCEETYA, 2005, p. 7)

According to the 2006 Census, around 10.8 per cent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, 5-19 years of age, speak an Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander language at home (ABS & Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008). This rises to 17.0 per cent in remote communities and 58.0 per cent in very remote communities. Across Australia there are greater percentages still of Aboriginal children who speak Aboriginal English as their first language. If this linguistic background is not taken into account when children start school, then the skills that Aboriginal children bring to formal education are often overlooked, leading to children being assessed incorrectly.

The *Review of Aboriginal Education in New South Wales* (2004) conducted by the NSW AECG and the NSW DET also noted that Aboriginal parents and community members who were interviewed: “...believe that Aboriginal English is not well understood by teachers” (2004, p. 70). Teachers reported only limited understanding of Aboriginal English. They stated that they had not had access to training and support in developing an awareness of Aboriginal English and its importance in the classroom, or how to incorporate it in classroom practice.

Questions pertinent to the current study therefore arise: In 2014, has this changed? Is Aboriginal English recognised as a legitimate language in its own right by classroom teachers? Is it still regarded as ‘Bad English’? Although beyond the scope of this study, there exists a need for further discussions with regard to teachers with skills in teaching English as a second language and the valuing of bilingual education. In 2008, the Northern Territory Government announced that the remaining nine remote schools that followed a bilingual education
program would, from 2009, revert to instruction in English only (or at least for the first four hours of the school day). This was done with the aim of improving English literacy outcomes. Marion Scrymgour, an Aboriginal member of the Northern Territory parliament at that time, supported the bill but within months in a radio interview, she had changed her stance and said in the interview: “We really fucked up with that one”! Tom Calma, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, in more measured language explained how this would be counter-productive: “there is evidence that bilingual students do better in English reading literacies than English schools in their regions” (Tom Calma cited in Doyle & Hill, 2008). This also goes against the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which clearly states that Aboriginal peoples have the right to their own schools and to provide “education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning” (United Nations, 2007, p. 7). The question for Australia, emanating from this discussion, is whether this lack of knowledge of Aboriginal students’ linguistic background and the use of Aboriginal English contributes to the disparity in achievement? If this were to be the case, it is hoped this is going to be addressed by the Standard 1.4.

On the 27th of May, 2011 the New South Wales Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the Honourable Victor Dominello (2011), MP announced in a press release that “the NSW Government will investigate how to create further Aboriginal cultural and linguistic opportunities as a key way of closing the gap” (p.1). Dr Shane Williams (2011) was given the brief of working on a set objective to “provide an understanding of the connection between teaching Aboriginal languages and culture and benefits to community wellbeing and engagement with the education system” (NSW Office of Aboriginal Affairs, 2011, p. 1). Williams (2011) has highlighted the tangible connection between language learning and psychological wellbeing and increased self-esteem. He also makes a strong statement that:

Education stands out in this regard as the way forward. There is continual strong commentary within national and international literature that flags education systems as the most viable avenue for us to nurture the cultural education of our upcoming generations, and thereby secure our cultural continuance. (Williams, 2011, p. 15)

He also stressed that it is:
an ideal moment in time for more meaningful partnerships to be forged between
government agencies so that revitalisation and reclamation become more developed
and tangible. Whatever occurs it is vital that we the principal stakeholders – the
Aboriginal peoples of NSW – take the lead because this is first and foremost our own
cultural business, and about our cultural vitality. (Williams, 2011, p. 18)

In Australia, the Commonwealth Government House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (2012) Our Land Our Languages Report
acknowledged the value of language learning and the merit of language nests as a means of
safeguarding Aboriginal languages (House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Affairs, 2012). The New South Wales Government has moved to
ensure this occurs by centring the establishment of Centre for Aboriginal Languages
Coordination and Development (CALD) within their Opportunity, Choice, Healing,
Responsibility, Empowerment (OCHRE) Plan (New South Wales Government Education and
Communities, 2013). As a result, in partnership with the NSWAECG and CALD the New
South Wales government has selected five Aboriginal language groups: Gamilaraay;
Gumbaynugirr; Bundjalung; Paarkintji/Barkindji; and Wiradjuri to initially establish
Language and Culture Nests. The intention to be from these the lessons learned will then be
shared with other Aboriginal language groups “to support communities aspiring to
rejuvenate and revitalise their local Aboriginal language” (Williams, 2013, p. 20).

Recover Re-Voice Re-practise Implementation Plan Aboriginal Language and Culture Nests
in New South Wales (2013) explains the concept of Aboriginal ‘Yarning-up’ as “our way of
invoking our collective cultural dialogue and energising our cultural intellectualisation”
(Williams, 2013, p. 8). In Yarning-up cultural knowledge the implementation plan stresses the
importance of maintaining focus on our foundational ways of speaking, knowing, doing in
being in terms of:
Template for Yarning-Up (Williams, 2013, p. 9)

A recent development has also been the publication of the *Capability Framework: Teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander EAL/D Learners* (State of Queensland Department of Education Training and Employment, 2013) a document collaboratively developed by Senior Officers National Network of Indigenous Education (SONNIE) from Queensland, Northern Territory, NSW, WA. The document has been adopted by all the States and Territories in Australia. This framework provides good evidence of what would be required of teachers to identify students who speak Aboriginal English and to support their learning. The current study investigated whether teachers were aware of the document and whether their schools had any plans to implement the Framework.

### 2.7 Promotion of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous

Dr Marika, an Australian Yolngu Aboriginal leader, scholar, and educator holds: “Our job as educators is to convince the people who control mainstream education that we wish to be included. Until this happens, reconciliation is an empty word and an intellectual terra nullius” (Marika, 1999, p. 9).

Goal Two of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young People (MCEETYA, 2008) states that: “All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens” (p. 8). In elaborating on this goal, all governments agreed to work in collaboration with all school sectors to support all young
Australians to know, be and have many qualities and capabilities, one being that they: “understand and acknowledge the value of Indigenous cultures and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians” (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 9).

In the current study, the Standards state that to be ‘proficient’, teachers need to “provide opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages” (ATSIL, 2011, p.11). Within the literature there were few references to investigation on teachers’ expertise in this area. One entitled An exploration of teachers’ knowledge about aspects of Australian Indigenous history and their attitude to reconciliation (McClure, 2008) found that of the teachers sampled, most considered increasing their knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history an important aspect of the reconciliation process. Further, a positive attitudinal change was found after teaching based on their improved understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Many teachers express concern at their own lack of knowledge and confidence with this content. Attempts to teach respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involves more than just knowledge of skills, it also involves the development of children and young peoples’ attitudes and values.

Effective teachers examine their own personal understandings about Aboriginal peoples and communities, have the ability to interact with and engage with children and young people while, at the same time, knowingly critique their content area. Critiquing a content area requires passion, curiosity, humbleness, patience and resilience; all the characteristics educators strive to develop in their students (Watego, 2012). This author argues that if teachers need to have increased “knowledge about” Aboriginal communities and history, it really is up to the teachers themselves to have an awareness of their own practice – both as an educator and as a learner. There appears to be a resistance to modelling resilience, courage, curiosity, adventure. Yet there is an expectation exists that students will apply these same characteristics to their lives.

Craven (2000) argued that social education needs to be make a significant long-term contribution to reconciliation and social justice by ensuring the truth about Australia’s history becomes more actively shared and more widely known. Craven also asserted that “the greatest
contribution to telling the truth about our history can be made by teachers” (Craven, 2000, p.63). The inclusion of Aboriginal culture, history and language in standard school curricula has also been identified as playing an important role in building both Indigenous and non-Indigenous student understanding and appreciation of Indigenous history and culture and addressing racism and discrimination (Watego, 2012).

Politically, in Australia, there has more recently been a move to have everyone recognise they have a part to play in reconciliation between non-Indigenous Australians and Aboriginal peoples. Teachers play a key role in ensuring the next generation feel empowered to play a positive role in this reconciliation endeavour. As a consequence, many educational providers and individual schools are investigating ways to establish learning environments that improve the educational achievements of Aboriginal students. A key feature of such a learning environment is the positive attitude teachers hold towards reconciliation. For teachers to be able to progress from ‘graduate’ to the ‘proficient’ level of the Standards, it is essential they demonstrate that students are provided with opportunities “to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages” (ATSIL, 2011, p. 9).

2.7.1 Catholic Education’s commitment to reconciliation

One of the last aspects to note in relation to the current study is that all participants were teachers in Catholic Schools in the eastern region of Sydney. It is important, therefore, to include a synopsis of the Catholic system’s stance on this matter.

The National Catholic Education Commission’s (NCEC) vision for reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia is that all involved in Catholic Education will act upon the words of Pope John Paul II, the Australian Bishops, and the Vision of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (NCEC, 1998) they note:

The Church of Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you [the Indigenous peoples of Australia] have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others. (Pope John Paul II, 1986, p. 13)

The Australian Bishops “[f]irmly opt for solidarity between all of Australia’s inhabitants by individually and communally responding to a call to conversion based on hope, promise and love” (Australian Bishops, 1988, p. 3). The same view was echoed by the Council for
Aboriginal Reconciliation (1993) “A united Australia which respects this land of ours; values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and provides justice and equity for all” (p. 1).

The NCEC intends the statement "Educating for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation" to be a positive response to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who stated at the NCEC Conference in 1986:

We call upon the Church – her people, her leaders and her children to listen with new ears, to see with new eyes, what always was and what always will be – to be awakened to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lifeways, cultures and spiritualities. (NCEC, 1998, p. 2)

The NCEC declared its commitment to the Reconciliation process by acknowledging that justice and truth are at the heart of reconciliation; and a further commitment to support and encourage educators in the Catholic community to journey with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and work towards reconciliation through education (NCEC, 1998).

The Great Jubilee in 2000 was a major event in the Roman Catholic Church, held from Christmas Eve (December 24) to Epiphany (January). For the Archdiocese of Sydney this was a major celebration for students, teachers, parents and the wider community where the Reconciliation Statement (2000) was proclaimed:

(Non-Indigenous student begins then taken up by whole stadium)

We, the students of Sydney Catholic schools assembled here on the land first occupied by the Eora people, want to say to you our indigenous sisters and brothers that we understand how sad the past has been for you: how you were driven from your land you call Mother Earth, and how your rights were ignored. We cannot go back and change the past but we can move into the future ensuring that the mistakes of the past are not repeated.

All non-Indigenous students:
And so, today we make a commitment, a promise:
• to learn the truth about our shared history,
• to respect your culture and heritage as much as we value our own,
• to do all we can to make sure that everyone is treated fairly in our country.

Let us walk together on this Earth seeking reconciliation.

(Response from Indigenous students)
As an indigenous person I rejoice in Mother Earth who gives life to my people.
I give thanks for all the gifts that my people have inherited and that have been passed on through many generations.

I hear the voices of my non-Indigenous brothers and sisters. The sadness they speak of in our shared history is my sadness and the sadness of my people too. We have lived for over 200 years with unfairness. We have been driven from the Land. We have been stolen from our families. We have almost lost our identity and our heritage.

And yet we believe that reconciliation is possible. We want to live in harmony with all Australians. We want to be treated fairly and with respect. We want our heritage and culture to enrich all Australians.

**All Indigenous students:**
And so, today we make a commitment, a promise:

- to learn the truth about our shared history,
- to respect your culture and heritage as much as we value our own,
- to do all we can to make sure that everyone is treated fairly in our country.

Let us walk together on this Earth seeking reconciliation.

*Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia*

**SIR WILLIAM DEANE**
We are indeed one people, though we come from different cultures and different traditions. As a sign of our oneness I link hands with representatives of both the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous students here, and I ask each of you, wherever you are in the stadium to reach out to the person next to you and link hands as a symbol of our unity.

*The Governor General links hands with the Indigenous and non-Indigenous students as a symbol of reconciliation.*

The Catholic Education Office, Sydney’s (2003) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy. *Many voices: One shared vision* philosophical basis restated the commitment that Catholic school students made on 17 March 2000 to reconciliation. Relevant to this study in the school system responsibilities states that CEO, Sydney will take responsibility for:

- supporting education for reconciliation and cross-cultural awareness;
- promoting professional development that informs knowledge and understanding of our shared history and reconciliation;
- providing professional development about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, ways of life and contemporary issues;
- promoting understandings of Aboriginal spirituality and appropriate cultural protocols; and
- identifying and promoting appropriate teaching and learning resources.

In the implementation of this policy it states that schools will take responsibility for:
• providing programs that promote a greater knowledge and understanding of our shared history and reconciliation;
• providing teaching and learning programs that work towards improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Islander students;
• providing programs that recognise, support, value and promote awareness of Aboriginal and Torre Strait Islander students and families; and
• supporting the cultural safety of Aboriginal and Torre Strait Islander students and removing racism through the school Pastoral Care Policy. (Catholic Education Office, Sydney, 2003, 2-3)

This raises the question considered in the current study: Is there a link between teachers’ knowledge of Aboriginal histories and cultures and their attitude towards reconciliation and their ability to provide opportunities for students to develop understanding of, and respect for, Aboriginal histories and cultures? This is the expressed requirement of Standard 2.4. Government policies emphasise an understanding of, and respect for, Aboriginal histories and cultures, but do not explain how teachers should go about achieving this. This is one gap the current study addresses building on the research recorded in this section.

With this as the backdrop to The Standard 2.4, this current study investigates how confident do teachers, in the Catholic system, feel about reaching the proficient or highly accomplished level as stipulated in the Standards. This will be achieved by focusing on those two facets which have never before been part of the the Standards, nor, therefore, part of the expectation of teacher expertise in this area. The current study investigates how confident teachers are in their ability to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in their classes and, secondly, their current level of understanding about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and knowledges which will allow them to play a positive role in the reconciliation process in Australia. This subsumes the notion of teachers being able to empower non-Indigenous students to also embrace the concept of reconciliation and play their part too. This study will make a contribution to the growing body of new knowledge, based on past and recent research, specifically in the area of education and teachers’ perceptions of their capacity.

2.8 Research questions which flow from the literature review

In the past, “cultural deficit programs concentrated on up-skilling the cognitive, perceptual and linguistic lack in Aboriginal students and address the disadvantages of being Aboriginal”
Aboriginal children and young peoples’ under-achievement in mainstream schooling has been viewed as the fault of their home life and not the fault of educational providers and teachers’ lack of knowledge and understanding of the impact that culture, community, identity and linguistic background has on teaching and classroom practice.

This current study would identify how confident teachers are in their ability to meet these laudable aims and what support they require to enable them to meet the two Professional Standards. These Standards are the concrete expression culminating from the views discussed thus far, of Aboriginal educators and policy advocates who continue to challenge the dominant culture’s educators to better meet the needs of Aboriginal children and young people. Specific research questions and supplementary questions are noted in Chapter 3.

2.9 Theoretical framework for the current study

In order to adequately interpret the findings of the current research, it was useful to consider the data in terms of the following theoretical frameworks:

2.9.1 Indigenous Standpoint Theory

Building an Indigenous standpoint into a theoretical framework requires more than the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander narratives and perspectives (Foley, 2002; Nakata, 2007; Yunkaporta, 2009). It requires the recognition of the existence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems and an understanding of the complexities of the cultural interface. Therefore, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint can never be reduced to just the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content (Nakata, 2007). Edwards and Buxton (1998) in Guyunggu explain an Aboriginal way of being as an interrelatedness of people, land and spirit. Foley (2002) conceived this epistemological standpoint as grounded in Aboriginal knowledge of spirituality and philosophy.

2.9.2 Cultural Interface theoretical framework

In order to provide a deep level of analysis of the data in the current study, Martin Nakata’s Cultural Interface Theory provided a suitable framework as it provided a means to capture the nuanced and multi-dimensional nature of the place of non-Indigenous teachers charged
with the responsibility of meeting student and society’s needs as articulated in Standards 1.4 and 2.4.

Martin Nakata (2007), a Torres Strait Islander man, “captured this complexity and conceptualised it as a broader interface” (Nakata, 2007, p. 198). What he has termed as cultural interface, is embodied by points of intersecting trajectories. Nakata explains as follows:

It is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations constituted by the intersections of time, place, distance, different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions, and different systems of social, economic and political organisation. It is a space for many shifting and complex intersections between different people with different histories, experiences, languages, agendas, aspirations and responses... All these elements cohere together at the interface in the everyday. (Nakata, 2007, p. 199)

Nakata argues that the elements and relationships in this space are how one’s thinking, understandings, knowledges, identities and histories change in a continuing state of process, our “lived realities” (Nakata, 2007, p.199). According to Nakata there are three guiding principles to Indigenous Standpoint theory. Firstly, Indigenous people are entangled in a very contested knowledge space at the cultural interface; secondly, to move forward it is necessary to recognise the continuities and discontinuities of Indigenous agency; and, thirdly, there needs to be the understanding of the continual tension that informs and limits what can be said and what is left unsaid in the everyday (Nakata, 2007, p. 215-216).

Nakata (2001) has also described the successful application of the cultural interface theory in schooling as requiring the starting point to be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ‘lifeworlds’ and then extending learners in the overlap with non-local realities, maintaining continuity with the past while learning skills relevant to the present and the future. He further asserts that the Cultural Interface approach is not simply a platform for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to transition into mainstream education, but is a “source of innovation, critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are relevant for learners of any culture” (Nakata, 2001, p.8). This approach could counteract deficit views of culture and go a long way to removing tokenism, by skillling up teachers and in turn young people in the art of critical reflection without losing their own cultural standpoint.
2.9.3 Conceptual Framework in the current study

In an extrapolation of Nakata’s Cultural Interface theory, Yunkaporta (2009) developed a conceptual framework for teachers to use in teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, to help them negotiate education at the cultural interface. This conceptual framework proved useful in subcategorising themes from the data in the current study.

2.9.4 Yunkaporta’s Eight Ways Aboriginal Pedagogy Framework

While the literature focuses on the why of cultural interface, “very little explains how in terms of what actually happens in the classroom” (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009, p. 58). In an extension of Nakata’s intercultural interface theory, Yunkaporta developed his Eight Ways Aboriginal Pedagogy Framework (see 1.5.2 for diagram). This framework was useful to assist with the interpretation of the data in the current study as the themes began to emerge after the interviews took place and, as researcher, I began to consider what a Professional Development program for teachers might highlight. Participants in the current study addressed many of Yunkaporta’s elements, either because they felt they were incorporating an aspect successfully, or because they had observed it being demonstrated by Aboriginal cultural educators, but felt they lacked the skill themselves.

2.9.4.1 Summary of Yunkaporta’s Eight Ways

(i) Story Sharing

This way of learning through narrative pedagogies encompasses the act of drawing lessons from narratives to engage children and young people in reflection and analysis. This approach to teaching could be applied in all key learning areas through “the exchange of personal and wider narratives” (Wheaton, 2000 cited in Yunkaporta, 2009, p. 12). If a teacher were to start with a narrative with which the children have connection already, so much the better. The key is having the time together as interactive, not just dominated by the teacher. The sharing element becomes important as it provides evidence of student engagement and also their sense of belonging if they are willing to share.

(ii) Learning Maps

In this way of learning, the teacher and learner create “a concrete, holistic image of the
tasks to be performed. That image serves as an anchor or reference point for the learner.” (Hughes & More, 1997, cited in Yunkaporta, 2009, p.48) Important here is the collaborative aspect. It is not just the teacher telling the student what to do and how. It is a negotiated, shared experience.

(iii) Symbols and Images

This way of learning reframes “visual learning as symbolic learning – a strategy rather than an orientation” (Yunkaporta, 2009, p. 48). It links strongly to number (ii) above in that it flows from it. In number (ii) the tasks to be performed are represented holistically and in concrete form. In this way, the learning is similarly presented through images and symbols to augment the written work. In an Aboriginal way, the teacher would act as a guide utilising all the senses to build symbolic meaning to support the learning of a new concept.

(iv) Deconstruct/Reconstruct

This way of learning organises notions of holistic, scaffolded and independent learning orientations (Yunkaporta, 2009). Writing a decade before Yunkaporta developed his Eight Ways conceptual framework, Hughes and More (1997) had noted that in exploring new concepts Aboriginal children and young people benefit from concentrating on “understanding the overall concepts or task before getting down to the details” (Hughes & More, 1997, p. 28). Yunkaporta (2009) provides us with the means to achieve this: “Observing and listening first is a key element in coming to Aboriginal knowledge” (Yunkaporta, 2009, p. 29). The observation of processes to see the whole concept at the beginning although they may not necessarily fully understand it then gradually bring into parts where children and young people can make connections to and develop understandings.

(v) Community Links

This way of learning is community based, and relevant to lived experiences. In Aboriginal pedagogy, the motivation for learning is inclusive of the community (Yunkaporta, 2009), and responsive to the community. In the current study, this area was one I explored in relative depth as this could potentially be a challenge to non-Indigenous teachers.
A feature of non-verbal instruction is the use of silence and the role of body language (Craven, 2011). But this is more than just language being reduced, as it incorporates imitation and practical action as pedagogy (Gibson, 1993, Yunkaporta, 2009). In the Eight Ways framework, this allows the learner to use observation first, then trying themselves before taking a lead in the dramatisation or role-play, or in the real-life activity.

Country based learning, “this pedagogy is about learning to land and place” (Yunkaporta, 2009, p. 12). There is a strong connection between people and country, knowledge and learning, rites and responsibilities is well documented (Edwards & Buxton, 1998; Battiste, 2002; Martin, 2003; Yunkaporta, 2009).

Yunkaporta (2009), has stated that “this is the point at which western and Indigenous pedagogies are often incorrectly constructed as irreconcilable” (Yunkaporta, 2009, p. 13). He further argues, that this way of presenting learning in cyclic and indirect, common ground can be found between different ways of seeing, viewpoints and knowledge systems (Yunkaporta, 2009). This notion that learning be best effected when it is cyclical, not linear, is not idiosyncratic to Aboriginal ways of learning, nor is it new. Maria Montessori in the early 1900s, for example, used this as the basis of all conceptual teaching. It would, however, require that the curriculum learning outcomes be manipulated to achieve this balance.

2.9.5 Linking Yunkaporta’s (2009) Eight Ways to the current study

The Eight Ways of Yunkaporta (2009) provide a clear means to scaffold teachers into better meeting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in their classes. Since the overarching aim of the current study was to investigate teachers’ confidence in being able to do this and to find out what professional development they might wish to see in this area, it proved useful to have a framework to discuss the data and to take the study forward to achieve its aim.
If one links the Eight Ways of Yunkaporta’s (2009) framework to the Standards that form the basis of this study, it is clear that numbers (i) story-sharing, (ii) learning maps, (iii) symbols and images, (iv) deconstruct/reconstruct and (vi) non-verbal relate to strategies teachers can implement align with Standard 1.4 where the focus is on teachers having the ability to teach Aboriginal children successfully. The others, (v) community links, (vii) land-links and (viii) non-linear, relate more directly to Standard 2.4 where the focus is on teachers’ knowledge of Aboriginal histories and cultural mores such that they can work with all students in the furthering of reconciliation. The last one, non-linear, is not a strategy as such, but requires teachers to reassess their assumptions about students’ acquisition of knowledge and growing understanding of concepts.

Furthermore, if one looks at the elements discussed in this literature review of what research shows has worked in the past: (a) the importance of connections; (b) teachers valuing Aboriginal knowledges; and (c) teachers ability to build on Aboriginal children and young people’s ways of being, there are also clear links to Nakata’s (2007) cultural interface theory and Yunkaporta’s (2009) Eight Ways framework. To explain:

(a) The importance of connections is highlighted through other national and international research. Nakata supports this: “understandings, knowledges, identities and histories change in a continuing state of process, our “lived realities” (Nakata, 2007, p.199); additionally this is reflected in the land links and community links explained by Yunkaporta (2009).

(b) The importance of valuing Aboriginal knowledges is captured by Yunkaporta in strategies such as story-sharing, learning maps, and symbols and images, building on foundational requirement noted by Nakata (2007) requiring the starting point to be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ‘lifeworlds’ and then extending learners in the overlap with Western realities in his cultural interface theory.

(c) Incorporating Aboriginal ways of being into teaching and learning, allowing children to learn from experiences, and to glimpse the Aboriginal view of the world, is conceptualised by Nakata (2007) as “a multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations constituted by the intersections of time, place, distance, different systems of thought”. More practice-related, Yunkaporta
(2009) provides a way of achieving this through his explanation of deconstructing and reconstructing images and symbols as children’s concepts develop in a spiral way, not linearly.

2.10 Conclusion

In the current study, the themes that emerged from the interview data align with these categories of the grouped elements in Yunkaporta’s Eight Ways conceptual framework and are interpreted with reference to Nakata’s Cultural Interface Theory. The design of the study and the methodology are discussed in Chapter 3.
CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Aboriginal social research paradigm subsumes three elements: axiology, ontology and epistemology (Porsanger, 2004; Martin, 2008; Moreton-Robinson, 2013). This paradigm is informed by Aboriginal connections to country, our ancestors; our sovereignty. Moreton-Robinson (2000) conceptualised this as ‘relationality’, and Martin (2008) as ‘relatedness’. Ontology is defined as our way of being (Porsanger, 2004; Martin, 2008, p. 81) building on the definition provided by (Rigney, 1997, p. 6): ‘the theory of the nature of existence, or as what knowledge is, or assumptions about the nature of reality’. Axiology is our way of doing (Porsanger, 2004; Martin, 2008, p. 79). Epistemology is our way of knowing (Porsanger, 2004) or a ‘system of knowledge and how you come to know about your world’ (Martin 2008, p. 71). In Aboriginal ways of being country, people and spirit are intertwined, therefore axiology, ontology and epistemology are all interconnected.

3.2 Research design

3.2.1 Adult education and professional development – a framing for the current study

The current study falls within the domain of adult education and professional development. Participants in the current study were mostly highly experienced or expert teachers as described by Tsui (2009) evidencing three aspects which characterise an accomplished teacher: the ability to integrate curriculum knowledge effectively within the teaching act; relating this to their specific contexts; and being effective reflective practitioners. Within the current study, then, there was the determination to build upon these strengths, but to bear in mind the power relations within the teaching field (Widin, Yasukawa, & Chodkiewicz, 2012).

On the one hand in all adult education and professional development there is the knowledge or intellectual capital, or as Bourdieu (1992) would term it, symbolic capital. On the other hand there is the constant requirement to strengthen aspects of teaching that participants might not themselves prioritise. While there is a general dedication on the part of teachers to expand their “experience of dialogic approaches to learning, in order to respond in contingent and practical ways to the needs of learners as they arose”, there is less enthusiasm for professional
learning required to navigate “through the official institutional, policy and curriculum requirements” (Widin, Yasukawa, & Chodkiewicz, 2012, p.17). The current study followed Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009) who described professional development as more effective when teachers are able to explain the conventionality and see the effort they make as paying off in their ability to have input so that they “close the gap” between their own “moral authority and moral agency” and the external pressures imposed upon them (p. 136-137).

This framing of the research allowed for a rich and in-depth understanding of teacher perceptions, beliefs and interpretations, not only of The Standards 1.4 and 2.4 but more broadly their beliefs about the effectiveness of the role they can and will play in reducing the disparity between Aboriginal students’ achievements and that of their non-Indigenous peers, and what aspects they would like to have access to in professional development offered to them.

3.2.2 Theory of interpretivism

The current study took place in the naturalistic/interpretive paradigm. As researcher, I had tremendous concern for the individual and prioritised understanding participants’ subjective lived experiences in answering the research questions. In the current study participant voice was important as I sought to understand what meanings participants may have constructed and what their understandings were (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, participants’ contexts were expected to be complex, multifaceted and idiosyncratic. It was understood that there could well be a differences in the ways that teachers in different contexts experienced the implementation of The Standards.

3.2.3 Methodology

The current study utilised a multiple case study methodology. “Case studies provide a unique example of real people in real situations” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 289). A multiple case studies methodology was utilised to gain a range of data across five primary schools, those with high and low Aboriginal enrolment and those of both low and high SES. This range of cases was used to gain greater depth of analysis of emerging concepts and key themes which provided me as researcher with the ability to see trends common to all sites and those particular to specific circumstances. Case studies “recognize the complexity and
‘embeddedness’ of social truths ... (and) can represent something of the discrepancies or conflicts between viewpoints held by participants” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 292). Furthermore, it provides “participants’ lived experiences of, thoughts about, and feelings for, a situation” (p.290).

This current study sought to investigate the breadth and depth of teachers’ knowledge about Aboriginal histories, cultures and knowledges to inform the professional development they would like to receive in this area. Also, it sought to understand teachers’ perceived capacity to effectively teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Consequently, the advantages of multiple case study were aligned with the objectives of the research.

According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011), however, while case study is “strong in reality” it is “difficult to organise” (p.292). In the current study, this proved to be the case with permission being sought from principals, and them being extremely busy this was not a priority and in one case took several months to organise. The data, however, proved to be “strong in reality” which was deemed more important than another methodology which might have been easier to organise (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

3.2.4 Validity and reliability

While all qualitative research is less generalisable, in the main, than quantitative research, nevertheless, “[t]he results of multiple case studies are often considered more compelling, and they are more likely to lend themselves to valid generalization” (Fraenkel, Wallen, Hyun, 2012, p. 435) than a single case study.

Validity, as explained by Morse and Richards (2002) “requires that the results accurately reflect the phenomenon studied” (p.168). Addressing what reliability is, Cohen et al. (2011) explain that if research is to be reliable, it should be possible to demonstrate that if the research were to be completed with a similar group of participants, in comparable context, then similar results would be the outcome.

Qualitative research is interpretive. It is therefore subjective by definition. The research takes place at a specific time in a specific context. What is considered a fact is determined by the
individual participant’s perceptions, and the researched deduces from a particular viewpoint what is truth.

Morse and Richards (2002) recommend that to achieve validity and reliability in qualitative research, rigour at all stages of the research is vital and they note specifically, the following:

1. rigour in the design phase which can be achieved by working from the strengths of the researcher, ensuring a comprehensive background to the study, and choosing an appropriate methodology and design,

2. rigour while conducting the research, achieved by selecting appropriate sampling methods, harmonising data collection and data analysis, and ensuring reliability of coding, and

3. rigour when writing which they suggest can be achieved by linking findings to the literature.

3.2.4.1 Rigour during the design phase

In the design phase before arriving at a decision about which approach would provide the most useful data, within which theory this study should be completed, and which methodologies and methods would be appropriate, I completed a university unit in each of qualitative and quantitative research methods. As described, there were strong ontological, epistemological, and methodological links. The development of the final research questions was grounded in a comprehensive analysis of the literature.

3.2.4.2 Rigour while conducting the research

In the current study, five schools comprise the sample: these included schools with varying numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments, and high, medium, and low socio-economic status (SES) participants. During the data gathering phase, as many participants as was necessary to reach data saturation were accessed.
3.2.4.3 Rigour while writing up

Initial data analysis began at the same time as the interviews were taking place. This provided initial broad brush coding of data during data collection. From this, initial trends and themes emerged. I alone completed all the coding. I could be completely immersed in the literature, theory and data and was therefore able to interpret what people might mean by what they were saying. As recommended by Morse and Richards (2002) completing data analysis and interviews at the same time, provided me as researcher with the ability to “not only store materials but also to store ideas, concepts, issues, questions, models and theories” in the design stage (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 80). When themes emerged in a number of the group interviews, validity was enhanced (Fraenkel, Wallen, Hyun, 2012).

3.2.5 Research Questions

This interpretive study employed qualitative research methods to answer the research questions. The group interviews with teachers in each school started with two questions:

What are your current views on your capacity to meet the proficient level of Standard 1.4:

Design and implement effective teaching strategies that are responsive to the local community and cultural setting, linguistic background and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?

What are your current views on your capacity to meet the proficient level of Standard 2.4:

Provide opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages?

This was then followed by questions with regards to professional development to guide the discussion as appropriate:

What avenues of professional development do you know of in the field of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, specifically the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?
What avenues of professional development do you know of, that are specifically designed to develop your knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, languages and cultures?

Has anyone had the opportunity to participate in any professional development in the field of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education?

What are the current practices, if any, that you know of at the Eastern region for the provision of professional learning communities for classroom teachers and school leadership teams in the field of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education with respect to teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the development of teachers’ knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, languages and cultures?

Has anyone had the opportunity to participate in any professional development in the field of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education?

What are the current practices, if any, that you know of at the Eastern region for the provision of professional learning communities for classroom teachers and school leadership teams in the field of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education with respect to teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the development of teachers’ knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, languages and cultures?

What professional learning opportunities at the Regional Office would you like to see?

What are the current practices here at your school for professional development for teachers and members of the leadership team in the field of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education with respect to the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the development of teachers’ knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, languages and cultures?

What professional development would you like to have in order to meet those Standards at the ‘highly accomplished’ level?
What are the current practices here at your school for professional development for teachers and members of the leadership team in the field of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education with respect to the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the development of teachers’ knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, languages and cultures?

What professional development would you like to have in order to meet those Standards at the ‘highly accomplished’ level?

3.2.6 Ethics

Ethics approval for the conduct of the research was gained from the University Of Notre Dame Australia’s Human Research Ethics Committee (Reference Number: 012084S) on 6 December 2012. I sought approval agreement from Sydney Catholic Education for a selection of primary schools to be involved in the research project. Ethics approval from their office and this was gained on 13 January 2014.

Consideration was given to:

3.2.7 Participant sample

There are eleven Dioceses within New South Wales. The Catholic Schools of New South Wales are managed by Diocesan Catholic Schools Authorities or Religious Institutes (Catholic Education Commission NSW, 2015). Most Catholic schools today fall under the guidance of the Diocese and are known as systemic schools. (Catholic Education Commission NSW, 2015).

All of the five schools who participated in the current study are systemic primary schools within the eastern region of the Archdiocese of Sydney.

A purposive sample of teachers from five Catholic primary schools in the eastern region of the Archdiocese of Sydney was chosen. The sample comprised two primary schools with high Aboriginal enrolments (one low SES and one high SES) and two primary schools with only a few Aboriginal enrolments, and one primary school in a high SES area with no Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander enrollments. This is a representative sample of the Diocesan schools in which this study took place. Principals were contacted to seek permission for teachers to be involved in the project. Once permission was granted teachers volunteered to participate in
the study, in total 32 teachers agreed to be involved in the group interviews. Arrangements were made through the individual schools for the face-to-face group interviews to take place. Participants were given a copy of the questions prior to the interview.

Interviews took place between February and December 2014. Initial interviews were transcribed and analysed and three dominant themes clearly emerged from the data. These were used to inform subsequent interviews to confirm the primacy of those themes, but also to provide me as researcher with the opportunity to delve more deeply in other areas to ensure complete coverage of the research question and supporting questions.

3.2.8 School profiles

The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) is a measure that enables comparisons to be made across schools. A school’s ICSEA value is constructed from SES data obtained by matching enrolled student addresses to the census collection districts (CCD), in which they are located, and then allocating the census district values to the addresses (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2010).

The relevant socio-economic status characteristics of the CCD in which each student at a school lives are aggregated to the school level. The consolidation school level SES data, as well as data about the remoteness of a school and the proportion of Aboriginal students at the school, contribute to the ICSEA calculation. (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2010, p. 1)

The ICSEA value is what was used to determine high, middle and low SES schools from which to draw the sample of schools. The average ICSEA value is 1000, so schools with a lower value would be lower SES and those with a higher value would be higher SES schools.

3.2.8.1 School A

School A is a Catholic systemic school within the eastern region of Archdiocese of Sydney. The school has 22 teaching staff and 388 students of whom 11 per cent are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. The school’s ICSEA value is 1078 with 44 per cent of the student population being in the top quarter in Australia.
3.2.8.2 School B

School B is a Catholic systemic school within the eastern region of Archdiocese of Sydney. The school’s ICSEA value is 802 with only 6 per cent of the student population being in the top quarter in Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are 69 per cent of the total enrolment of 125 students with 16 teaching staff. Since 2005 the school has initiated a 'Leadership for Reconciliation' Program where a group of students join with students from School E.

3.2.8.3 School C

School C: Is a Catholic systemic school within the eastern region of Archdiocese of Sydney. The school’s ICSEA value is 1107 with 48 per cent of the student population being in the top quarter in Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students make up 4 per cent of the total enrolment of 297 students with 20 teaching staff.

3.2.8.4 School D

School D: Is a Catholic systemic school within the eastern region of Archdiocese of Sydney. The school’s ICSEA value is 1107 with 64 per cent of the student population being in the top quarter in Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are 3 per cent of the total enrolment of 354 students with 23 teaching staff.

3.2.8.5 School E

School E: Is a Catholic systemic school within the eastern region of Archdiocese of Sydney. The school’s ICSEA value is 1178 with 76 per cent of the student population being in the top quarter in Australia. There are no Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students. The school enrolment 387 with a teaching staff of 26.
3.2.8.6 Table 1: Years of Teaching

<table>
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<th>21-25</th>
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As noted earlier, participants were mostly experienced teachers, with only 8 of the 32 participants having taught for 10 years of fewer.

### 3.2.9 Data collection methods

Data were collected by semi-structured group interviews with voluntary members of school leadership teams and teachers from five schools in the eastern region of the Diocese of Sydney. At School C two interviews were conducted.

Group interviews were used to gather data. Up to six staff members from each of the purposively selected schools were invited to take part in the group interview. As the participants had been working together for a while, there was likely to be a level of trust between them and, potentially, a common goal with the research. Furthermore, since participants were contributing to the content of the professional development program to be developed, it was useful that they have heard what others have said (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

### 3.2.10 Method of data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic coding of interview transcripts: first the transcripts of the interviews were read to discover emergent themes and categories, allowing themes and meta-themes to emerge. Those initial clusters provided the broad view and the subsequent line-by-line coding allowed for higher and higher levels of abstraction to be reached.

Line-by-line coding was then followed by identification of pertinent text. This was then summarised and linked to the meta-theme and sub-theme as these developed. An example is provided below of the data analysis that took place for each question in each interview:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>School E</th>
<th>1-5</th>
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<th>11-15</th>
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<th>21-25</th>
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Table 2: Example of data analysis

**Question Two, School B, Low SES, High Aboriginal enrolment**

Q2: What are the current practices, if any, that you know of at the Eastern region for the provision of professional learning communities for classroom teachers and school leadership teams in the field of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education with respect to teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the development of teachers’ knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, languages and cultures?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Meta-theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All agree, no planned specific PD. At times PD run by CEO, nothing structured. It is at the whim of school leadership</td>
<td>PD unstructured and ad hoc</td>
<td>Preparation for 2.4</td>
<td>Teachers feel they lack of training, therefore skill</td>
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<tr>
<td>Many older participants (70% in Eastern R) did not have a mandatory unit in teaching Aboriginal students during their training</td>
<td>ITE improving; but most CEO teachers old</td>
<td>Preparation for 2.4</td>
<td>Teachers feel they lack training which leads to lack of confidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers terrified of “putting a foot wrong”, Often do Aboriginal dance or dot paintings so that they can “tick the box”, and do the same year after year because it is safe</td>
<td>PD not engaging; not effective. Tokenistic approach because of lack of knowledge and confidence</td>
<td>Preparation for 2.4</td>
<td>Teachers fear causing offence. They are uncertain how to engage parents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fear of causing offence if implement PD inappropriately meant teachers often avoided Aboriginal perspectives altogether</td>
<td>PD counterproductive</td>
<td>Preparation for 2.4</td>
<td>Teachers consider their current practice unprofessional</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aboriginal children learn in a different way. Communication different e.g don’t make eye contact.</td>
<td>Teacher difficulty articulating what Aboriginal pedagogy looks like</td>
<td>Preparation for 1.4</td>
<td>Aboriginal pedagogy absent in the classroom</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Parents of Aboriginal children do not come to school if they can avoid it. Liaison is often not with parents, rather Aunty. Family structures and relationships different. Teachers diffident. Preparation to be responsive to local community. Teachers uncertain how to engage.

Teachers noted that resources in the school in other areas far outstripped resources for teaching Aboriginal histories and cultures. Resources inferior augmenting ineffective PD. Teachers ill-equipped to critique resources. Preparation for 2.4. Lack of resources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparation to provide students with opportunities to develop understanding and respect for Aboriginal histories and culture:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Many teachers had no formal training</td>
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<tr>
<td>PD was ineffectual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers felt inadequate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers considered their current practice unprofessional</td>
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<tr>
<td>Little promotion of this area by CEO or school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use ‘safe’ and tokenistic activities</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparation to teach Aboriginal children</th>
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<tr>
<td>Children learn differently</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication with Aboriginal children is different</td>
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<tr>
<th>Preparation to be responsive to local community</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers diffident about liaison with Aboriginal families</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1** Categories identified by category for Question 2, School B

**Figure 2** Sub-themes identified for Question 2, School B

- Teachers felt they lacked training
- Teachers felt PD was inadequate
- Teachers feared causing offence
- School resources were insufficient
- This led to teachers feeling their current practice was unprofessional
- Teachers unclear on what Aboriginal pedagogy might look like
- Teachers unsure how to relate to local community

Figure 2 shows the outcome of a typical thematic analysis. This same process was followed for all thematic analyses for all the interviews.
3.3 Conclusion and introduction to Chapters 4, 5 and 6

From the literature review, the research questions were derived. Chapter 3 has provided an overview of the research design, and justification for the methodology and methods chosen to gather data most likely to provide answers to those questions.

In the Western Academy, at this point in a traditional thesis, it would be expected that the data would be reported, then that the findings would be put forward and this would be followed by a discussion linking back to the literature review in Chapter 2 and specifically to the theoretical framework.

As noted in Chapter 2 (see 2.9.1) I work within Indigenous standpoint theory. In this current study I, too, was working at the cultural interface (see 2.9.2). For the following reasons I therefore considered it preferable to weave these three aspects – presentation of the data, interpretation of the data and discussion – together, under the meta-themes identified:

(i) I found trying to construct the narrative of this thesis to fit neatly into three discrete and separate chapters was detracting from the “yarning-up” (Williams, 2013, p.8) – see discussion in 2.5.3 – that I seek to achieve.

(ii) From my perspective it would more powerfully provide the reader with a comprehensive understanding of teachers’ views if I presented what they said, explained how this related to the research questions and, bit by bit, linked to the theoretical framework of this study.

(iii) I found the actual participant words captured not only the substance of the point they were making but also demonstrated the nuances of emotion as they considered the question. I therefore used participant voice, their exact words, fairly extensively as the pivot and wove my interpretation and discussion, linking to the literature review and the theoretical framework, around them.
In this way I am able to take the reader on a journey through the themes and sub-themes ultimately lending weight to the contribution to new knowledge this thesis makes: how confident teachers feel in meeting Standard 1.4 and 2.4 and what elements they would like to see in a professional development program to more effectively meet those Standards.
CHAPTER 4 - TEACHER EFFICACY TO MEET STANDARD 2.4

4.1 Introduction

The research questions investigated to what extent teachers considered that they would meet the proficient level of Standards 1.4 and 2.4. While they are distinct in that research question 1 relates to Standard 1.4 and teacher capacity to meet the educational needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and research question 2 relates to Standard 2.4 and their capacity to provide learning such that all students can develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages, there are overlaps. In the way the interviews in the current study unfolded and to provide a more logical explication of the data and discussion of the findings, I start with the second research question.

4.1.1 Current study focus on ‘how’ to include relevant perspectives

Thematic analysis of the data in the current study showed a number of key themes that substantiate or challenge what the literature has revealed in the area of research related to teachers’ preparation to provide opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages noted in Standard 2.4. The literature review, for example, has emphasised the need to teach understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures and, further, why it is important to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across key learning areas. There has been limited research, however, conducted about the most effective way to instruct teachers on how to include these histories and cultures in their everyday teaching. The role of this work appears to have fallen to the responsibility of individual education systems of schools, with little rigorous research conducted in order to determine the effectiveness of approaches to the teaching of Aboriginal histories or about Aboriginal cultures and languages.

4.2 Findings in the current study related to Standard 2.4

In answer to research question 2, participants in the current study noted this gap in coherent practice in providing opportunities for students to develop an understanding of Aboriginal histories, cultures and languages. I divide their responses into five sub themes that relate to
this overarching theme. These are: (i) lack of training, (ii) fear of causing offence, (iii) participants’ current practice, (iv) feeling inadequate, and (v) lack of suitable resources.

4.2.1 Lack of training

Today, most first year teachers graduating from initial teacher education programs have undertaken a mandatory unit on Aboriginal History or Studies at university. But even as recently as ten years ago there was no mandatory unit in Aboriginal Studies in a number of higher education institutions. Undergraduate students would have had to choose it as an elective; in order to do so there needed to be a willingness to do so. The reality is that a majority of teachers in the Catholic system and the majority (24 of the 32) of participants in the current study undertook their study prior to that. A recurring theme across the schools that was highlighted by teachers in the group interviews was their lack of training:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{P7:} & \quad \text{It had to be offered. It wasn’t in my day.} \\
\text{P9:} & \quad \text{No, I wasn’t.} \\
\text{P8:} & \quad \text{So you are looking at probably 70 per cent of our teachers, maybe even higher, have done no formal study.} \\
\text{P26:} & \quad \text{I can say I don’t recall anything that I did at a tertiary level.} \\
\text{P29:} & \quad \text{No it was not offered.} \\
\text{P31:} & \quad \text{I did my training in England. I’ve been teaching in Australia since 1987 and accessed very little training.}
\end{align*}
\]

At the time of this study there are 32 universities in Australia that offer a core unit in Australian Indigenous or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies that are compulsory for undergraduates in the field of education. Only one out of 32 teachers interviewed studied a mandatory unit as part of their undergraduate degree at university:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{P4:} & \quad \text{We had a compulsory unit but then you could elect several more units as electives.}
\end{align*}
\]

Six out of the 32 teachers interviewed chose to do a major or elective in Aboriginal Studies as part of their undergraduate degree. This supports the findings of Moreton-Robinson et al. (2012):

\[
\text{essential teacher knowledge and skills required to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait}
\]
Islander students are principally inculcated through learning to teach or studying ‘Aboriginal Studies’ or ‘Indigenous Studies’, ‘Indigenous Education’ courses, or through ‘Cultural Awareness Training’ or ‘Cultural Competency Training’. (p. 6)

These authors go on to highlight that while these approaches have at times discomfited those undertaking the unit, their feeling of competence has been elevated; however, the long term benefit and transformational impact have not been verified (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012). Participants in the current study corroborate this, for example:

P3: Ours was only an elective. But mine was an early childhood degree, it wasn’t primary.

P12: Even at university they only had like one subject to choose as an elective.

P14: Yes, same only one.

P16: I had one subject but it was taught by a Non-Indigenous person and it was different perspectives.

P23: Yes, I did Aboriginal Studies at university. That was 35 years ago.

P30: I did when I was at University 14 years ago... But I can’t remember if it was a mandatory course or an elective because I had an interest in it... We looked at history and the effects on Aboriginal people. It was a while ago now... the lecturer was not Indigenous.

While teacher education courses are required to include a subject that provides opportunities for students to develop and understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages (ATSIL, 2011, p. 9), two recent graduates in the current study note limited focus on these aspects. They also noted a lack of focus on pedagogies that are responsive to Aboriginal knowledges and cultural identity of Aboriginal students (discussed in Chapter 5). This should be less prevalent in New South Wales schools and will become nationally less so as the AITSL Priority Areas come into effect with the national accreditation of teacher education programs. The Priority Areas are those that post-graduation surveys of beginning teachers have shown to be the areas that they feel the greatest need for up skilling. These comprise classroom management, information and communication technologies, literacy and numeracy, students with special educational needs, and students from non-English speaking backgrounds. First on the list, though, is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

The Standards are the required framework which makes clear the knowledge, practice and
professional engagement across a teacher’s career. “They articulate what teachers are expected to know and be able to do” (AISTL, 2011, p. 2). As previously mentioned this current study investigated to what extent practising teachers in the eastern region of the Sydney Catholic primary schools felt competent in meeting Standard 1.4 (discussed in Chapter 5) and Standard 2.4, discussed here. It is worth noting the initial response some teachers had when the Standards where mentioned in the introductory section of the group interview.

P3: I’ve never had to go through it.
P2: Either have I.
P30: It would be a fantastic thing to be able to do, to have these strategies. I think it’s a great idea. When did it come in? These strategies? Well just now?
P31: It is getting much more traction. We are having a big focus this year on the Standards at this school. I think it’s fair to say that our knowledge is pretty patchy, you know.

This exchange mirrors the conclusion reached by Ma Reha, Anderson & Atkinson, 2012, p.11): Even though it is acknowledged that one of the enduring impacts of colonisation is that control of the education of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was wrested from the traditional teachers, parents, grandparents, aunties, and uncles and that attempts were made to assimilate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children through western-styled education, many non-Indigenous teachers consider that it is their choice as to whether they focus on developing their formal professional knowledge in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

In the current study, there was clear enthusiasm and support for the notion of professional development around Standards 1.4 and 2.4; none of the participants evidenced any reluctance. It might be, however, that this is because those who chose to be participants in the current study were already positively predisposed to ongoing professional development in this area in order to improve the educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

The study participants indicated that the very existence of the two Standards 1.4 and 2.4 reflect that there is now the social and political will to move forward. This was further substantiated by their enthusiasm and openness to undertake professional development in the field of Aboriginal education. They acknowledged that their training does not meet current needs.
4.2.2 Fear of causing offence

Another issue that was common across all of the interviews was that teachers lacked confidence and were afraid of offending if they were to do or say something ‘wrong’:

P4: A lot of people are scared to offend.

P15: A bit scared to tread on something that we might offend.

P14: I think there is a fear of saying it the wrong way and even though the children may not pick up on it, it doesn’t matter. But there is definitely is a fear.

P18: You see it’s all those things that make you really worried that you are going to offend someone. All of the rules that you are not really aware of until someone tells you.

P25: You don’t want to offend people do you?

P27: That is often on my mind, am I doing this right? I’m not sure.

P29: I think as teachers we have a fear of letting others see we don’t know something.

This exemplifies what Nakata (2007) noted – that it is a contested knowledge space, and that there is a tension informing, “what is said and left unsaid in the everyday” (p. 216). Teachers’ reluctance of admitting to themselves and to colleagues that their knowledge is wanting, a very human reaction, captured in the last speech turn above.

What was not immediately clear, and which needed to be explored in greater detail was whether teachers have been challenge on the content they are using in the classroom, or whether they had taught something that someone deemed offensive, or was it more that they thought they would offend the local community or parents or students in their classes. On further questioning, it transpired that teachers were being so very careful not to give offence because of this fear they so clearly articulated.

P7: We are terrified of doing something more offensive, than saying nothing at all.

P15: Scared of giving it a go. Now when I pull up websites even the word “Aboriginals”. I remember at university them saying no it’s not Aboriginals, its Aboriginal people and I’m scared to use the word with the kids.

The flow-on effect from teachers’ uncertainty and concern about causing offence, was that instead of taking the risk, some would omit the perspective altogether from their programing.
Sometimes it is like walking on eggshells because you have to be politically correct all of the time.... To be quite honest I believe some teachers would avoid it if they could, teaching Aboriginal content and putting an Aboriginal perspective in.

Firstly, being ‘politically correct’ is a white concept. It is not a reality in Aboriginal ways of seeing and knowing. In Aboriginal ways of teaching and learning there is an open and honest communication within a safe space for students to be where they are in their learning, anything they do from there is just their next step. Secondly, this could be attributed to what Rose (2012) has termed *racism by cotton wool* as a result of Australian education systems overtly suppressing and devaluing aspects of Aboriginal knowledge. In absence of this knowledge, teachers who have a willingness to do the right thing but are afraid of getting it wrong take an easier option.

One teacher reflected back to fifteen years ago when a new resource was released with regards to Aboriginal perspectives when there was the tendency to blame and make non-Indigenous people feel guilty, which was counter-productive.

You’d go along and listen to what you were expected to teach and how you were expected to do it. More often than not and I know other people did too. Terrified that we were going to put a foot wrong and do something more offensive, better to say nothing at all.

In the above-mentioned examples, there was no evidence of the story sharing highlighted by Yunkaporta (2009) as the first important step in negotiating the cultural interface.

It was evident teachers are making superficial connections to what they are teaching children as a result of fear of offending. This then leads to the provision of surface level content. If this is considered in terms of Williams’s (2013) model of *Yarning up*, (see discussion in 2.6.3), teachers’ fear of giving offence was making them start, superficially with the last two aspects of Williams’s model – music, song and dance of Country and art and craft of Country – which he argues should be the culmination of the exploration of the first twelve elements. Participants maintained this led to the “tokenism” (Yunkaporta, 2009, p.xv) discussed earlier.

These were highly capable and dedicated teachers, yet they were not prepared to take risks and embark on the more authentic tasks, which they would relish trailing in other learning areas. One key focus of any professional development should be to empower non-Indigenous
teachers to feel they have the efficacy to ‘say something’ and not let the fear of putting a foot wrong get in the way.

4.2.3 Participants’ current practice

4.2.3.1 Positive learnings

In reflecting on their current practice there were some examples of teachers considering that their practice was leading to good outcomes for children and young people when Aboriginal perspectives were included in their teaching. This was noted in most interviews, but one exchange that best encapsulates this is as follows:

P26: One of the things that I found this year in terms of conversation and working on what we are doing in term 2 was it opened up a dialogue between the class and the students and their family. And so, it became this little bit of a conversation going backwards and forwards and so we wouldn’t know, we wouldn’t understand, we wouldn’t be sure about something and we would check in. So I found that was quite powerful.

P23: That is really good.

P26: Yes and sometimes it was almost an incidental that had a big impact. So we would be doing something else and a question might have been asked of (name) he might of said Oh I found out, or I talked to my Aunty. So it was really.

P23: He was a conduit?

P26: Authentic. It wasn’t forced and I think that really helped. I wouldn’t say everyone but many of the students to depth their understanding at a real level. Kind of given permission because we were talking about it so much so at some point he obviously had a shift where he became more verbal because he’s not shy, but he is a quieter boy. Like he is quite happy to chat but he’s not there sort of offering his opinion and speaking up in every conversation.... So he would say his great Aunty said because it happened to a family member, someone in his family. It just seemed to flow and then some of the other girls in particular and a couple of the boys did but chose something to research as a result of those conversations. And it was really quite emotional you know when they got into it. Very real.

Linking to the conceptual framework of the current study, this exchange is a strong example of story sharing, as identified as important by Yunkaporta (2009) as well as incorporating community links providing children and their families with the opportunity to share their
cultural knowledge and was also accomplished in a non-linear way. It was not predetermined by the teacher; it took place spontaneously and authentically.

In the literature review it was highlighted that in the past there was a tendency to blame the cultural influence of family and community and the perceived impediment that was to the learning of Aboriginal children (see 2.2.4). Here there is a shift in the students’ confidence as a result of authentic learning. Clearly the engagement of the child is apparent as he went home to check some aspect with family. He did this because he saw that his family and their way of seeing was a valued source of information.

It is interesting to note participants’ responses to the following auxiliary question that was put to them during the interview. Do you think it has a positive effect on their learning when they do start to learn more about themselves and be strong in their identity?

P25: Well it’s a nice solid building block isn’t it? A nice solid foundation point that they can say, or they don’t say that their school didn’t acknowledge, they didn’t see, or hear about Aboriginality, that it’s always been on their agenda in some way, shape or form. And it’s been valued within the school community.

P26: It gets a lot of playtime, across the year it comes up. In term 2 it’s a huge focus. So you couldn’t help but feel this is important. Like you know this is valued.

From this it is starting to become clear that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people see their identities, histories and cultures valued in their schooling and classrooms, it can be seen in their self-efficiency, their willingness to participate in class discussions and if confident in their relationship with their teacher, sharing of their experiences, learning becomes relevant through lived experience. As noted in the introduction there is an overlap between the Standards as demonstrated here with this clearly linking to Standard 1.4 relating to effective strategies to meet the needs of Aboriginal children.

4.2.3.2 Moving beyond a general perspective

In contrast to those positive examples there were other teachers who were including Aboriginal perspectives in their teaching, doing what they could with their current level of knowledge, but to little good effect. In the group interviews, a number of teachers voiced the opinion that including Aboriginal perspectives beyond a general perspective is outside their knowledge base.
At school E, when asked the question *Do you think in your school regarding Aboriginal perspectives, is it a generalisations or is it specific to your local community?* participants responded as follows:

P30: I think it is more general.

P31: Yes. It would be good if we could get something more specific to this area. Look and I really don’t know how we’d go about doing that.

P29: We have, we do the Acknowledgement which is local.

P31: I do Acknowledgement of Country every Monday. I have done since I’ve been here. I usually pre-empt that with my usual thing you know. We pay tribute to the first custodians of this land, the Indigenous people who walked on here, the Cammeragial people of the Eora Nation. And I, it’s pathetic but I wear lots of Indigenous ties and the kids say that’s nice and I say it tells a story. I’ve been into classes a couple of times when I’ve been wearing them. A number of teachers are doing lots of nice dot paintings so yes we could do an awful lot more.

P29: We could probably focus more on that Acknowledgement to Country.

P31: We need to get more training ourselves don’t we.

Participants provide evidence here of the very general nature of their school’s practice. While there is commitment to the idea, the specific practice would need to move beyond just acknowledging who the traditional custodians are.

Cultural knowledge is viewed by participants as difficult to locate; this interchange shows the various facets those teachers in differing contexts face. They provided clear examples of the elements of the theoretical framework when teachers work at the cultural interface: “complex intersections between different people with different histories” (Nakata, 2007, p. 199). In a school with few Aboriginal enrolments, they potentially face student and parent lethargy as it can seem far removed from student experience and therefore difficult to devise authentic tasks. Those with high Aboriginal enrolments have the challenge of meeting the needs of students from a variety of different ‘mobs’ and find it overwhelming to provide information to students from the local perspective of the country on which the school stands.

One teacher shared such an experience:

P24: I’ve had an experience where I upset one of the Dads because I was talking about the local mob and teaching, trying to tell some of their stories in class.
when we were doing creation. He was really upset with me because his mob weren’t these people, he was from [community name] and I was telling the wrong stories to his child.

Most teachers were saying that they adopt a general non-specific approach, however, P22 had tried to have the place-based approach as recommended by Yunkaporta (2009), Battiste (2002), and Kickett-Tucker and Coffin (2011) but this had not worked out. This is a dilemma for teachers especially when support documentation is suggesting that a place-based approach is recommended.

4.2.3.3 Link to the theoretical framework

A “contested knowledge space” (Nakata, 2007) indeed. It might be that this teacher’s introduction was not clear enough for the children, or that in relating what had happened in class, the child’s description made the father reach a negative conclusion. If it were to be introduced in such a way that the teacher explained the concept of the Dreaming and how Dreaming Stories are ways to teach children and young people about the Dreaming and law on a number of levels. Young children learn that all Dreaming Stories have three elements: the natural world, rules for living, proper behaviours, and spiritual connections to Country. Dreaming stories criss-cross every part of Australia; she could then have moved to explaining that this school sits on the Country of a particular ‘mob’ and they have this Dreaming Story… That would be a way to do it that could not be offensive, and could be incorporated as part of a professional development session. It would incorporate several of Yunkaporta’s Eight Ways (see 2.9.5) using community links, land links, and embodies the notion of deconstruct with the three elements of Dreaming Stories and then reconstruct with an actual example of a local Dreaming Story and identifying the elements within it.

Teachers also expressed deep concern about coping with potential negative reactions of children in their class and their parents. Again, noting the fear of ‘getting it wrong’ or causing offence to the local community and difficulty in locating the right information and resources, particularly when a high proportion of Aboriginal students were not from the local area, adding another layer to the multi-layered, multi-dimensional space Nakata (2007) described when teachers work at the cultural interface.
4.2.3.4 Assumptions due to lack of knowledge

The following speech turn includes a number of assumptions on the part of the teacher.

P1: In our school Aboriginal students are not traditionally from here and some don’t necessarily know where their origins are? They are quite distant from their original cultures of their mobs.

First, she assumes that children do not know where their country is and, secondly, that they are separated from their culture and way of being. Just because they do not physically live on their own country does not mean there is a disconnection; they may well still have intellectual and emotional connection to their country. Again, a teacher from another school makes assumptions about community from her perception of connection:

P18: Some of the families here probably aren’t as connected and are isolated so therefore giving them that I don’t know, that community.

This would need to be addressed in a professional development learning opportunity as participants demonstrate that teachers do not always know what they are looking at and make assumptions about what they are seeing. The building of identity is an invisible process of which community is part. With their perceived limited mandate to speak on these matters at all, there is a heightened fear of giving offence to the people whose country the school is on, or the Aboriginal children and young people who have connections to country outside of the Sydney region.

Across a number of interviews teachers mentioned that they did not know much about the local Aboriginal culture or history. These teachers commented that it was this lack of knowledge, which inhibited their teaching of Aboriginal perspectives in their respective classrooms. Within the group interviews teachers voiced their concern that their lack of knowledge could lead to superficial, tokenistic, and potentially damaging outcomes for students:

P8: Or do it on a really tokenistic level so we can tick it as done. But with no depth. Lots of us did the token art lesson

P9: Always the dot art.

P7: … even worse it might be some books that happen to be in the classroom. If a kid happens to pick it up, that’s great!

Teachers felt the need to stress that their lessons were not like this out of “rudeness” or
“intentional disrespect, we just didn’t know” (P7). As this participant noted, however, just because they did not mean to be disrespectful does not mean they were not, and she provided an example.

P7: But the other one that people would do, would be to, which was horrible. You’d go to your school library or the local library and you’d access the material there – any sort of Aboriginal culture, history, whatever invasion, settlement. I can think of some of the images, so misrepresentative and so insulting and you’d look at that and it was the only content you’d have so…

Aboriginal and Torres Strait educators have highlighted the dangers of teachers presenting Aboriginal content in their classes where children only learn superficial generalisations about Aboriginal peoples and cultures. Linking to the theoretical framework, if this occurs, as noted also by participants in the current study, and as identified by Nakata (2007), it is problematic to represent Aboriginal knowledge to non-Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander children where their learning becomes rigid and stereotypical. These participants concluded that a professional development program would need to address teachers’ insecurity about current practice by providing them with appropriate ways of thinking about their learning and teaching strategies and by providing opportunity to practice.

4.2.4 Feeling inadequate

4.2.4.1 A sense of dissatisfaction

Teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with what they were doing with regards to Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives:

P7: On a surface level, with artefacts, with information and good research sure no problem. But that still is, it’s not coming from myself its coming from information I have gathered and researched. I can comment on what I understand is how my culture would work and open the conversation. So tell me about how you would? But to me, I don’t know. What I can do depends on how good my artefacts, research, information and interest is.

P9: That’s if you are bothered to research at all. Some teachers are using the same unit they developed at their last school, so many years ago.

There are three important aspects to be drawn from this interchange. Firstly, it highlights that teachers are tentative about their own efficacy in this area, and consequently prefer to rely on the work of others; secondly, that there is a lack of engagement and a tendency to relegate the
preparation for this area to a place after other curriculum areas; and thirdly, that there is a lack of motivation on the part of many teachers to achieve the requisite pedagogical content knowledge.

Teachers, further, highlighted that there are ‘gaps’ in their knowledge:

P11: I mean, probably for us as a culture. We are not part of that culture, because we all have our own cultures. I have never had schooling on it, teaching on it, so I know I have huge gaps, huge gaps.

P15: But I don’t think we know anything. Do we? We have a kindergarten idea of it all I think.

As noted by several authors, (Martin, 2003; Yunkaporta, 2009; Nakata, 2008), it is essential that the starting point is Aboriginal lifeworlds and that Aboriginal knowledges are valued as equal to Western knowledges. This would need to be an important theme in professional development offered to teachers to assist them to feel less inadequate.

4.2.4.2 Children in a duality of cultures

At times participants mentioned strategies they currently use, that might be putting unnecessary pressure on Aboriginal students. For example, one teacher noted:

P14: I have one in my English class, a student who I have been personally turning to, to ask her questions about what we are learning about if she knows anything about it. She can share rather than it just coming from my voice.

In that group interview discussion centred on the need to be aware of the dangers in questioning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This may well be unintentional but needs to be included in a professional development program offered - a component on sensitive issues with regards to the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and being careful not to put them on the spot and making an assumption that they know or feel confident to be the spokesperson on all things Aboriginal. Another important aspect is that teachers need to bear in mind what impact it might have on an Aboriginal student if they are put on the spot and asked a question, and they do not know the answer. It potentially undermines their self-image if they think they should have known the answer; additionally, it sets them up as potentially being seen as deficient by their peers. The whole shame aspect would come into play.
Aboriginal children, living in a duality of cultures as described by Buckskin (2013), may well have quite deep and comprehensive knowledge about their people’s histories, stories and ways of being. However, if asked in the context of school, the child may well feel that this is something they talk about within family and community, not in the school context. The child, when asked about a Dreaming Story, for example, might just say “I don’t know” but they may know; they just do not feel that this is a safe and appropriate context to share their knowledge, nor are they sure if it is their place to speak about this. In their family and community context, children would discuss matters with others of their own level of knowledge, but they would never be directly questioned about it, nor would they ever speak on behalf of a person with more knowledge. In terms of the theoretical framework, these children are experiencing the tension underlined by Nakata (2007) where he explains it as “intersections of time, place, distance, different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions” (p.199).

4.2.4.3 Teachers in a duality of cultures

In School A with a significant population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, teachers were talking about the opportunities for students to learn about Aboriginal histories and cultures in the classroom, and how they do not feel confident to teach about Aboriginal culture to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The focus of discussion highlighted their feeling that it is not their place.

P4: You mentioned [addressing researcher] just then that you can’t speak on behalf of another group in terms of their culture and understanding. Obviously we are not of Aboriginal background but how does that affect us in teaching anything related to that?

In School D, which has fewer enrolments of Aboriginal students, similar uncertainty was expressed about what their role is.

P24: Or do they even want me to? Is this my role to help sing those songs, share the stories or is that not my role? Is that offensive to someone and therefore when it (The Standards) are talking about strategies? Are they talking about identified areas of need of this child in the rest of the curriculum and that I can be helping them achieve that and that is something sacred and unique to their community that they share?

This speech turn parallels the uncertainty expressed by Lee, Cosby and de Baca (2007) in the
Canadian context. It still emphasises teachers approaching the ‘teaching about’ Aboriginal cultures from the outside looking in, examining elements of cultural expression as exotic, allowing teachers and students to remain separated from the material they are studying. The literature supports the need to move beyond ‘dot’ art (Martin, 2008) and class projects on ‘tools and weapons’ and/or traditional hunters and gatherers’, beyond the surface level, “Google-able” tokenistic material culture ‘added on’ to teaching programs (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012). Yunkaporta refers to this knowledge as “exotic bookends for mainstream content” (Yunkaporta, 2011, p. 63).

Teachers need opportunities to develop their knowledge beyond surface knowledge, deeper levels of knowledge, the importance of connecting to country and all that entails, in a way that is appropriate for children and young people. This knowledge would be on many levels, physical and intellectual, to emotional and spiritual. In learning this way, one develops an awareness of connecting to ‘country’ on deep levels within oneself (Edwards & Buxton, 1998). As people grow in understanding so does their sense of country; this needs to have a strong focus in any professional learning opportunities for teachers. It is also understood that as teachers, they can only teach from their own culture, from where they are as an individual, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually (Edwards & Buxton, 1998). Teachers need to understand that the process is ongoing and underway but will take time. What it means is – one teaches the best knowledge one has for the moment.

This way, any Aboriginal knowledge of country is valued, rather than being treated like a stone-age relic, as an artefact of the past, or as one teacher stated, “token tick the box” (P8).

P6: For me, I think we’re good at outsourcing but I don’t think we’re good at still, even though I think we are down the road to other people perhaps. But I still don’t think we do much about teaching about. Partly because it’s pretty difficult not to feel it’s not your business to teach someone about their own culture. How do I know? What’s it my business teaching someone about their own culture. I can make observations about what I think. I can say is that right? Is this how it would normally go? I thought that. Or when I was talking with Mum, or remember when we had Uncle so and so here, he said. But that’s only reported speech isn’t it. It’s only saying what you have heard others say. But I don’t feel confident. It’s not my culture to speak about at a deeper level. Surface stuff, Oh yeah but you know, what do I know about it.

The focus of future professional development needs to assist teachers to move beyond the sole
use of outsourcing, or the study of discreet and unrelated approaches to Aboriginal cultures, to rather engaging with Aboriginal ways of knowing. To find a learning space, the interface between Western curriculum knowledge and Aboriginal knowledge. Participants need opportunities to “engage in negotiating a space where common ground could be determined and built upon in culturally safe, yet challenging ways” (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009, p. 56).

Genuine Aboriginal perspective “can bring Aboriginal community and place-based learning orientations to the study of mainstream content” (8 Ways, n.d). A teacher gave the example of observing an Aboriginal educator conducting a student workshop epitomising this:

P24: The best thing that you did about that day was talking to the children about that actually people would then spend a lot of time connecting the children to their land and that whereas the way that sometimes we would go through the day, being so busy, busy, busy, activity, activity, but the activity that is valued here is connecting to the land. I think that’s how children are engaged. That to me was a real paradigm shift and it’s something that is going to stay with me. And I am sure that for our kids it did too.

Yunkaporta (2009) also argues that you do not have to be Aboriginal to come to this knowledge, or to include authentic Aboriginal perspectives about connections to country and a sense of community. Additionally, being Aboriginal does not mean you can automatically do this either.

P8: So you are saying just because they’re Aboriginal doesn’t mean they are going to fit the bill for everything you need them for.

P6: We sometimes expect a lot of Aboriginal people when they come into a school, to know certain things just because they are Aboriginal.

This echoes the conclusions reached by Basit and Santoro (2011) discussed in 2.4.2 that it is too easy for one Aboriginal person to be the sole source of information and guidance leading to burn-out for that person. A professional development learning opportunity would need to include that in Aboriginal ways of being, knowledge is taken in on different levels of oneself, physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually (Edwards & Buxton, 1998). A person learns what they can according to their own growth and understanding. A program should include information such as that an Aboriginal person’s strengths will be identified early and then encouraged over time. So if a school, for example, wants someone to come and tell primary aged children a story, they should approach Aboriginal support people available to
them (Aboriginal Education Adviser, Regional Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer, Aboriginal Education Worker) and ask who the appropriate person would be. It will not necessarily be an Elder. It might be a younger person who has this knowledge.

4.2.5 Lack of suitable resources

For nearly two centuries Aboriginal people had limited voice in Australian classrooms. This is slowly changing with the increase of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored texts. Teachers, however, expressed concern about choosing ‘the right’ resources in the classroom:

P17: One of the few things that stands out for me is what is appropriate. That is the biggest challenge I think because we’ve got resources that are now considered not appropriate and for us we don’t know.

P29: Because we have not done studies on it we do not know how reliable, or how good the material is… How to select resources to use in the classroom, no training on the how to.

Participants spoke of resources that they have seen or used that focused on stereotypical views of Aboriginal peoples:

P7: Those images. I can think of some you and I have seen together. So misrepresentative and so insulting and you’d look at that and it was the only content you’d have so.

P10: Some of the backline masters. The [Name] books, some of the content was okay, I think, but the images were so stereotypical.

P7: (Acted out the stance of standing on one leg with a spear). Sometimes worse.

P32: There are so many resources about the past. Our kids have a better understanding of traditional life. We do not have many on the present, and certainly none from the local community.

This raises the question of what it might say to an Aboriginal child that doesn’t mirror the stereotypical image of what an Aboriginal child looks like – for example, a Principal talked about this: “But she has blue eyes – they can’t be Aboriginal So that stereotype is certainly still out there. That’s a big issue (P 1). Teachers need resources to make the connection for children between past and present. So Aboriginal culture is not seen as “a stone age relic” (8 Ways n.d), captured as an artefact of the past, and Aboriginal people are seen as “romantic images of the noble savage” (Phillips, 2001, p.33). In classrooms Aboriginal culture and identity should be portrayed as dynamic, adaptable, and contemporary (Nakata, 2008).
This raises interesting issues that a professional development program would need to address. If 21st Century Aboriginal children and young people are seeing themselves portrayed as described above, as primitive, with images being used set around the traditional lifestyle, there is little synergy with their current everyday, as described by Nakata (2007). There would need to be a balance in representation focussing on the fact that Aboriginal culture is the oldest living culture in the world, but equally a focus on contemporary cultural expression and identities to promote the equal recognition of both cultures as noted as vital by several authors (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012; Perso, 2012; Tripcony, 2010; Williams, 2011), and which links directly to the cultural interface described by Nakata (2008).

Participants spoke passionately about the need to reflect on past practice on how they present Aboriginal people to the children in their classes. Teachers reflected on the amount of time they had been teaching, and how this was the first time that anyone had discussed the suitability of resources with them. When asked the question: How many teachers do you think have been taught how to critique the resources being used in the classroom? They responded:

P15: I don’t think they would know.

P11: I’ve been teaching in Australia now for 15 years and this is the first year I have been shown. This is my third school, so I would say very few.

P16: Not many at all.

P17: No. I think it’s as you said the tip of the iceberg. Where do we go to find the iceberg?

In the Yarning Strong Series (Lucashenko, 2011), professional support materials, teachers are encouraged ‘to have a go’. This author has articulated the importance of checking who is talking about Aboriginal people, communities and issues. She also set a target for teachers:

Aim for 100 per cent of your sources to be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander topics. By doing this, you are saying that you are willing to have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people tell your class their side of the Australian story (Lucashenko, 2011, p. 20)

A teacher from School D highlighted the positive effect of when teachers are given the opportunity to read and reflect on text as part of their school-based professional learning.

P25: The first thing I found very powerful was an open activity was way back when, was that we all read books by either Aboriginal authors or authoresses or about
Aboriginal stories in their great variety and complexity and we shared and talked about those and how we’ve been influenced by those. We’ve had our guest speakers and returned guest speakers and we’ve been put in uncomfortable situations, sometimes-funny situations, and different situations. Getting to know different people and different stories and being allowed to, encouraged to ask questions of people about their real experiences. So knowing real Aboriginal people I think has been a powerful thing. Some famous, some not so famous, but all different people, different ages.

The same teacher explained how this opportunity to engage with a range of literary texts written by Aboriginal people, had allowed staff to be able to find the “common ground” as described by Yunkaporta (2009), but described by the participant as “common threads”. Additionally this teacher noted:

P25: And that’s been really a powerful experience too because although there are common threads to their stories as they are telling them in the 21st Century, the now. There have been different ages and there are different perspectives and you learn at the very least, you get a good example that we are not all the same. So, that’s been good. Having an Aboriginal perspective in terms of excursion I think has been good, really authentic linking, getting a good perspective, an Aboriginal perspective on this as opposed to a bit of Aboriginal history or something on the side. I think that’s always a challenge to understand what a perspective is and to overlay it in a continual way onto your curriculum as big and broad as it is. We’ve had good cause to think about that and how to do that whether we are doing it well or not that’s for some others to decide. But there is an opportunity every year to give it a go. To think about it, evaluate it and change it.

She explained that in term 2 of every year, having Aboriginal speakers once a week for ten weeks, had fostered teachers’ ability to develop increasing layers of understanding as described by Nakata (2007). For many decades Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators (Cherubini et al., 2011; Hilberg & Tharp, Martin, 2008; 2002; Perso, 2012; Sarra, 2007) have been advocating for culturally appropriate quality resources that will better equip classroom teachers so that they have the necessary cultural knowledge and skills to teach our children and young people and a professional development program would need to provide access to such resources.
4.3 Teacher identified areas for professional development

It would seem from the excerpts in the previous sections that teachers are coming from the perspective that was noted in the literature review (see flowchart Williams, 2013, discussed in 2.6.3) that teachers are starting with the last two aspects noted in the flow chart, rather than those being the final outcome of the full process. They start with the dance or dot painting, rather than having those as the culmination of concept development. In all interviews they expressed the opinion that they are not currently competent to meet Standard 2.4.

Yunkaporta (2009) in his research project investigated how teachers can engage with Aboriginal knowledge and that resulted in the development of Eight Ways pedagogy. He proposed the application of a reconciling theory of Cultural Interface to professional learning opportunities for teachers. Yunkaporta (2009) states that: “[t]he reconciling principle that grounds the work is the theory of cultural interface, the dynamic overlap between systems previously defined as dichotomous and incompatible” (p. xv). He further states the need for “authentic Aboriginal perspectives that maintain intellectual rigour” which is “currently blocked by an oppositional framing of Aboriginal and western knowledge systems, caused by shallow perceptions of Indigenous knowledges as being limited to token cultural items” (Yunkaporta, 2009, p.xvi). Aboriginal children and young people need to see their culture and language accepted and valued in their classrooms.

Future professional learning opportunities need to move teachers beyond the teaching of elements of Aboriginal culture on the same level of knowledge (for example dot paintings, year after year) so that teachers are able to engage with Aboriginal knowledge on deeper levels through reconciling processes, and integrate these new learnings into their classroom practice.

In summary, specific areas from the first meta-theme, that teachers have identified that need to be incorporated in a professional development program are:

- Aboriginal histories and cultures are everyone’s business;
- Developing efficacy to have a voice;
- Story sharing as strategy;
- Sensitivity with questioning;
• How to move beyond surface level knowledge;
• Developing connection to country;
• Community as a resource;
• How to critique classroom resources;
• Opportunities for critical reflection; and
• Finding “common ground” (Yunkaporta, 2009) at the cultural interface (Nakata, 2008).
CHAPTER 5 - TEACHER EFFICACY IN MEETING STANDARD 1.4

5.1 Introduction

Critiquing current compulsory units offered in universities today, Moreton-Robinson, Singh, Kolopenuk, Robinson and Walter (2012) maintain that:

> [e]ssential teacher knowledge and skills required to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are principally inculcated through learning to teach or study ‘Aboriginal Studies’ or ‘Indigenous Studies’, ‘Indigenous Education’ courses. (p. 6)

They argue, however, that awareness and knowledge of Aboriginal histories and cultures “must be matched with skills. This requires the development of a new Indigenous pedagogy which is clearly missing from the current offering within teacher training” (Moreton-Robinson, Singh, Kolopenuk, Robinson & Walter, 2012, p. 6). This is an important point in any professional learning opportunities offered to teachers. It cannot be assumed that even those who did complete a mandatory unit during their initial teacher education program will necessarily have the skills needed to successfully engage Aboriginal children and young people. It is an area of current development and teachers will need to continue to up-skill in this priority area as they do in the key learning areas in response to novel initiatives that are shown to improve student outcomes.

5.2 Findings in the current study related to Standard 1.4

From the data, it was clear that there is some blurring of teaching about Aboriginal cultures, histories and languages (discussed in Chapter 4), and effectively teaching Aboriginal children per se, enhancing their academic outcomes, the focus of this Chapter. There are, nevertheless, a number of clear sub-themes that emerged from the data that contribute to the discussion of this mega-theme on elements important in the effective teaching of Aboriginal children. They are: (i) lack of knowledge of students’ cultural background; (ii) quality teaching quality relationships (iii) Aboriginal pedagogy in the classroom; (iv) Recognition of Country; (v) learning from Cultural educators in the classroom; (vi) the need for high expectations; and (vii) recognition of Aboriginal languages and Aboriginal English. These findings provide rich
guidance as to what should be considered in future professional learning opportunities for teachers.

5.2.1 Lack of knowledge of students’ cultural background

While “Aboriginal students are the children of the oldest living culture on this earth, this is not yet recognised, respected and celebrated” (Western Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Council [WAAETC] (WAAETC, 2011, p. 1) in all schools. Schools should be places of learning that enhance the cultural identity and self-esteem of Aboriginal students and be a conduit to affirm cultural identity, and provide positive educational experiences (WAAETC, 2011). The literature review highlighted the importance of teachers having or developing the requisite knowledge of the cultural identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people as also discussed in Chapter 4. Participants in the current study consistently evidence fragility of confidence in this matter.

P3: Even our knowledge of Aboriginal student’s backgrounds, that’s something I’m not sure of.

P9: But I’m even thinking the graduate level in this Standard that’s a lot they are asking there. Especially for someone that’s had no experience or no background, nothing in Aboriginal education.

P29: Where many people fall down, myself included is this whole area because we haven’t had the training or we haven’t had the experience. So you can be actually in the system for years and years and years, decades and still not really come across anything in 1.4 unless you in-service yourself.

P30: Never anything about how to teach Aboriginal kids as far as 1.4, strategies in teaching. No, it was never heard of that I know.

In School A when the group discussion was with reference to teachers implementing effective strategies that are responsive to the cultural background of Aboriginal children. The following question was raised:

P3: You know how we are talking about the learning styles of Aboriginal students. Being that a lot of our Aboriginal students aren’t immersed in Aboriginal culture. Have you found that they generally still apply to students that have not had that upbringing?

Meaning and understandings are shaped through the everyday (Nakata, 2008). It is within cultural and social contexts that children and young people’s understanding of their world
develops and learning grows (What Works, 2015). “Enculturation is a life-long process of teaching and learning whereby individuals can become accepted members of community and culture by accepting norms, values and roles within the family, group and society” (Kickett-Tucker & Coffin, 2011, p.155). If the educational system or class teacher does not understand that, then it promotes a tension for the child or young person whose culture is considered other and perhaps, inferior. This may not be visible to the teacher but ways of learning are well embedded by the time children come to school. “What we call great quality teaching strategies for all children are what we call great quality teaching strategies for Indigenous children” (Sarra, 2011, p. 114). Or put another way if you teach Aboriginal children and young people well you teach all students well.

In the following exchange there is also the identification of the confusion between the knowledge of and the actual teaching of Aboriginal children.

P24: I think there are kind of two prongs there is for the way we build respect and knowledge for Aboriginal culture with our whole community. Then there’s the way that we educate our Indigenous students. And, I think sometimes we are really good at doing, well not really good, but getting better at building respect in the whole community but for individual students about them and what we do to help them, our Indigenous students that’s what I am not sure about.

P25: When you don’t know necessarily your Indigenous beyond a label. How do you view that? How do you view my role then in terms of proficiency? They don’t know they’re Aboriginal possibly. I don’t know. So how can I be proficient? When they don’t know and I don’t know what they know or don’t know. See that’s a challenge.

P26: Standard 1.4 is a little harder but they are powerful experiences not necessarily that happen in the classroom. I think in the classroom it’s more difficult for us because we don’t know enough about them and they don’t know enough about themselves.

P25: It’s not to say you don’t do it. It’s the how do you do that? What are their actual needs then?

The ignorance of teachers in terms of their background knowledge of Aboriginal students needs urgent attention (WAAETC, 2011). Teachers in the group interviews identified their lack of knowledge of students’ backgrounds as well as an uncertainty around where they go to obtain this information:
If we did want to have that background where do we go for that kind of information?

This begs the question, if teachers are unsure of their students’ cultural background how are they expected to design and implement effective strategies that are responsive to cultural setting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

One cause of concern for teachers in the Eastern Region of Sydney is that the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are not originally from Eora country where the schools are situated. Additionally, “[t]here are about 29 clan groups of the Sydney metropolitan area, referred to collectively as the Eora Nation” (Heiss & Gibson, nd.) Their ancestral connections are from a Country outside of Sydney.

From the students’ background, if they were to say they belong to this particular mob. Then where do we research about that particular mob’s culture, practices, beliefs and linguistic background, where do we go with all that?

One of the strengths of Aboriginal communities in the region is a sense of place and a sense of belonging as Aboriginal peoples. Like many other city-based communities, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are ancestrally connected to different nations. Nevertheless, Aboriginal families are ancestrally connected, historically connected, or have lived connection (Fredericks, 2004) to the Sydney Region.

Participants noted that professional development opportunities for classroom teachers in the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is extremely limited, almost non-existent at the time of this study. This mirrors the findings of Moreton-Robinson et al. (2012) and Ma Rhea, Anderson and Atkinson (2012). The majority of teachers interviewed expressed their limited knowledge of how Aboriginal children and young people learn and Aboriginal pedagogies.

I don’t think they’d realise and I didn’t until I came here. How Aboriginal children do learn in a different way. They do learn in a different way. And, you only know that when you are teaching them. If you’ve worked in a school that has no ESL children, you’d be looking at these children going, well I don’t know why they are not learning everything the way I am teaching it. But everyone else has always. I think people just don’t know.
P5: To me we are focusing on what their needs are as a person, not what their needs are as an Aboriginal student. That’s where we fall down because we haven’t got that capacity to be culturally sensitive, because we do not have the knowledge.

P28: Well I think teaching Aboriginal children, actual teaching strategies is what we need so we can be more explicit in our teaching for them.

After the first two interviews it became clear that there is some confusion amongst teachers with regards to the difference between the study of Aboriginal culture on the one hand and Aboriginal knowledges and ways of seeing on the other. Principals, teachers and students all have a way of seeing and knowing that they bring to school every day. It is important to acknowledge and value each other’s perspectives – ways of seeing. One challenge is to find common ground, the cultural interface of Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing and Western ways of knowing, being and doing (Martin, 2009).

5.2.2 Quality teaching quality relationships

In the Review of Aboriginal Education (2004) (cf 2.2.7; 2.6.2; 2.6.3) Aboriginal students, their families and communities, as well as many Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people working in schools all singled out the work of teachers as the “… make or break element” (NSW DET & AECG, 2004, p.189). Recent literature indicates that a relational approach to teaching is of critical importance to improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people (Ockenden, 2014; Stronger Smarter, 2014; What Works, 2015). Aboriginal children and young people respond best when they have positive personal relationships with their teachers. It has long been known that “[i]t is often more important who does the teaching than what is taught” (Collins, 1993, p.7). Participants in the current study noted these elements:

P8: It’s like, if the child trusts you, and knows you trust them, and like them, then they are going to engage more easily, better.

P7: But I don’t think we always know how to get them to feel like that.

Quality teaching epitomises the person being willing to develop a trust relationship with children and young people. “Critical to this is deep understanding of the cultural, historical and socio-political context from which these students come and the ability to weave this into daily practice including high expectations” (Burgess & Berwick, 2009, p. 3-4). Aboriginal
parents have also identified the personable relationships with a particular teacher when thinking about their schooling experience; “their personality rather than their knowledge of curricular and the way that they taught that gave them a sense of belonging” (Burgess & Berwick, 2009, p. 11), and a willingness to stay at school. The need for high expectations as well as good relationships would be the focus of a professional learning opportunity for teachers.

5.2.3 Aboriginal pedagogy in the classroom

Over 30 years ago in the 1980s the National Aboriginal Education Committee called for schools and education system to: “develop an education theory and pedagogy that takes into account Aboriginal epistemology”. They further asserted that: “only when this occurs will education for our people be a process that builds on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and identities” (National Aboriginal Education Committee, 1985, p.4). Almost forty years later Aboriginal educators are still largely waiting for this to be recognised and valued as a way of seeing and knowing that should be incorporated into classroom practice.

Yunkaporta (2009) maintains it is an unfair expectation placed on classroom teachers if - “[t]hey are expected to do something that nobody has shown them to do” (p.5). This raised the question of whether there is a widening of the gap between different ways of seeing and knowing. In the group interviews this discussion wove around a number of aspects. Participants noted that if all that is seen is difference – Aboriginal students’ different ways of thinking, different ways of seeing, different ways of speaking, and different ways of behaving, it could be considered aberrant. Yunkaporta argues “when one operates and comparisons are made on a surface level of knowledge people only see differences across cultures. You have to go higher and deeper, then you will find the vast common ground, the interface between different cultures” (Yunkaporta, 2009, p.5). Participants noted that other priorities set by schools and the system, as well as their own feeling of inadequacy in how to tackle the job, make it less likely that teachers would have the time, expertise and motivation to go “higher and deeper” as recommended by Yunkaporta (2009).

There is a significant body of literature suggesting that teachers are not confident in their ability to effectively teach Aboriginal children and young people (Mooney, Halse, & Craven,
Despite goodwill and the best of intentions evidenced in the group teacher interviews, many teachers expressed their concern about their limited understanding of Aboriginal knowledge, pedagogies, ways of seeing and learning. This view was expressed as quite discrete from their lack of confidence about their knowledge of Aboriginal histories, discussed in Chapter 4. Their comments focussed expressly on their competence to effectively teach Aboriginal children.

P12:  There is a little barrier because you want to do so much as a teacher but you sometimes don’t know how to approach certain things about Aboriginal culture. You don’t know if you are doing it the right way?

P27: I had [name] this year and I should have probably done things differently in my class. Which I didn’t know, I didn’t have the skills to teach her properly. Now reflecting how I was teaching at the beginning of the year and she was here for two terms. So if we did have professional development with particular teaching strategies that would be good.

A professional learning opportunity would need to explore teachers’ lack of ‘relatedness’ in Aboriginal ways of being (Edwards & Buxton, 1998), doing and knowing (Martin, 2005). Teachers need opportunities to reflect on their own standpoint in order to find common ground for building cultural competence and in turn their confidence to avoid the negatives articulated by Kickett-Tucker and Coffin (2011) discussed in 2.5.5.

5.2.4 Recognition of Country

All schools that participated in the study recognise and/or acknowledge Aboriginal custodianship of country on which there schools now stands. The ways in which the schools acknowledge this varied, from a plaque at the school entrance to every student in the school “knowing off by heart our acknowledgement” (Personal communication with D. Trindall).

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land, the Gadigal people. We pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future for they hold the memories, traditions, culture and hopes of Aboriginal Australia. We must always remember that under this concrete and stone this is and always has been traditional Aboriginal land. (School B’s Acknowledgement of Country)

School A’s Acknowledgement of Country is on a roster system of older students modelling to younger students. Recognition of country is explicitly embedded into the school curriculum. In early Stage 1 teachers talk with the children about whose country the school is on, and in
years 5 and 6 there is teacher facilitated class discussions about why, as a school, they acknowledge country, discussing connections to country and custodianship:

P3: Even doing the acknowledgement now and things like that opens the discussion, especially with the little ones. Why do we do that? There’s lots of talk about what it’s all about.

P2: We talk to the children about whose land our school is on and how it has always been Aboriginal land.

Knowledge of country and place is the foundation of Aboriginal ways of knowing. As Yunkaporta (2009) argues “this link to land and country should always be present as it ensures cultural integrity (p. 6). Schools acknowledging country, as Professor Mick Dodson (2009) has stated, is not an empty ritual. It is respectful acknowledgment of the importance of place and country for Aboriginal peoples. As discussed earlier, however, (cf 4.2.3.2) schools also need to be conscious that acknowledgment of country cannot be their only content that is place-based.

5.2.5 Learning from Cultural Educators in the classroom

Eight teachers who participated in the group interviews expressed the need to be observant when cultural educators are working with children in their respective schools, and they point out that they need to be firstly open to learning from such demonstration, not using the time for their own preparation and marking:

P7: You can’t help as a teacher because we are naturally bowerbirds, but pick up a couple of the clues as to the way the adult responds with the children. So I guess vicariously that’s professional development. But you have to be open to it.

A teacher from School C commented on the way a choreographer interacted with the children in an Aboriginal way of teaching:

P12: I think having [Name] come was really influential in the way that I feel I am able to respond to the students in my class in that group as well so to have someone come, to see her modelling the interactions and how she appreciated their cultural background and all that type of stuff. I think that was really helpful to have that, hands on.

By observing interactions with the children in a culturally appropriate manner increased this teacher’s confidence. This teacher also noticed the children response to this style of teaching in their learning, which was signalled by their proper behaviours.
P12: To see the respect of the children towards [Name] as well so that different take that she has on behaviour management. Because you are always taught over your whole university that there is certain ways to do things and you know you experiment with different ways, but unless you see it happening I would have never thought to have done it that way and the respect she got out of the children you really learn from that.

This teacher continued by explaining to the rest of the teachers in the group how the children were in a culturally safe place of trust and the respect they had for the facilitator of learning in an Aboriginal way.

P12: So it kind of developed over time instead of her expecting them to respect her, she kind of built up that respect in a certain way. She built it up over time. By the end of it I just felt the kids had complete and utter respect for her. There was no need to even manage behaviour it just eliminated that completely. And, I think I would never have thought about doing it that way or even the trust and respect thing. I’ll show you something and I can learn from you.

Another teacher from this school commented on the work of a Regional Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer and touched on the palpable engagement of Aboriginal children when there are aspects they can relate to:

P13: I think the trust in the students has been built upon as well, [Name] coming in and [Name] and the way the children react to, respond and engage with [Name].

These three participants clearly identify aspects noted as essential for effectively teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children as highlighted by Moreton-Robinson et al. (2012) and Ma Rhea, Anderson and Atkinson (2012) who note: “They also draw on what is known about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational philosophy and methods of teaching and learning also including western education traditions in their pedagogical approach (p.21).

Teachers noted Aboriginal students’ sense of pride when their culture is recognised, showcased and valued was evident, paralleling the findings of Edwards and Buxton (1998) and, more recently, Williams (2013). By incorporating Aboriginal knowledge and celebrations into the culture of the school says to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children that their culture and identity are valued, whilst saying to all students that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and identities are valued and worth learning about at school. The
participation of a local Elder allowed all students at the school to experience story and 
ceremony at the local level making connections more relevant.

Teachers at School B talked about their learnings while observing the way a male 
choreographer taught the children a kangaroo dance as part of their NAIDOC celebrations:

P9: He’s really interesting to watch, particularly with our boys because he has a 
way with them.

P7: They have more [pause] more room, more silence, more use of outdoor 
learning spaces. More non-verbal, less verbal in communication and high 
expectations.

P8: He talks in short, sharp sentences. So he’d say ‘I’m doing this action, I’m 
kangaroo’. Stop. And then do it. And they would just watch and then they’d 
do it. There was no big discussion about where you put your hands or how 
your feet go, where your fingers are positioned. It was just, this is what I am 
doing; watch me, now you do it [through a hand gesture]

P7: And he would never say they were wrong or they did it badly. But he’d say it 
in a roundabout way, and never directly at one student.

These teachers observed a number of elements used in Aboriginal ways of teaching and 
learning, one being silence and the use of body language. The use of silence is more than 
verbal language being reduced to less verbal as a form of instruction (Yunkaporta, 2009). It 
also allows time for the learner to reflect on what they are observing and in turn doing. This 
is then followed by gentle correction through encouragement. As a teacher noted, ‘never 
directly at one student’. The avoidance of singling out students, deliberately calling them out 
for correction or praise.

As an Aboriginal teacher the choreographer was conscious of the importance to young people 
of peer relationships in learning, the desire not to stand out too much. To avoid comments 
like ‘Oh that’s too shame, Sir’ (P10). Instead he praised a group of children – ‘That group of 
young fellas are dancing up a storm’. As teachers observe this was of teaching their teaching 
strategies might be applied differently (Sarra, 2011).

Teachers also commented on the eye-contact required in western society to show that one is 
attending and being polite and listening, whereas “culturally the idea of eye contact, that was 
something you wouldn’t expect for Indigenous students to make eye contact” (P4). Another 
teacher highlighted the fact that “from any other student we would see that child as being
quite rude. That is a cultural thing that we weren’t to expect” (P6). They went on to explain that one child at first didn’t make eye contact, but has now learnt to do this important behaviour in western society. Teachers were proud that they had accomplished with this child. This illustrates a conflict in expected proper behaviours. Aboriginal children are showing respect to Elders by not holding direct eye contact. It is necessary to be conscious of the age and experience of the children, as ones “level of understanding and learning expands and grows, so behaviours become more subtle and refined” (Edwards & Buxton, 1998, p. 34).

Teachers observed aspects relating to both Nakata’s cultural interface theory and Yunkaporta’s *Eight Ways*. The successful interactions had, as a starting point, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ‘lifeworlds’ (Nakata, 2001). Additionally, there was *story sharing*, use of *symbols and images*, strong *community links* and *land links*, and the *non-verbal and non-linear* featured as well – all elements of Yunkaporta’s (2009) Eight Ways.

**5.2.6 The need for high expectations**

In chapter 2 it was noted that government policies that generate funding to our systems of schools, leading to the implementation of programs, are still operating from a deficit model (Harker & McConnachie, 1985; Fletcher, 1989; Beresford & Partington, 2003; Nakata, 2007; Martin, 2008; Sarra, 2011). Participants, for example, noted the competence of many of their Aboriginal children and young people, but that they are constantly hearing about the underachieving of Aboriginal children and the ‘need for them to catch up’:

P1: Our students cross the range of abilities too, that’s the other thing. We are not looking at a remedial program we are looking at kids right across, differentiated right across all key learning areas.

P3: You always hear about the idea that Aboriginal students are underachieving, the need to catch up or close the gap.

The deficit positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people is clearly still evident in the educational system and the government expressed by the participants in the current study, and reinforcing it again with the language of ‘underachievement’ and ‘closing the gap’. Pearson (2014) has advised people working in the field of education to beware of the pervasive and destructive effect of having low expectations. Sarra (2011) has also commented on the deficit approach to Aboriginal education and the need
to avoid “the collision with low expectations” (p.287). He notes that for too long government funding and “educators have colluded too easily with the notion that Indigenous children are automatically underachievers at school. There is no basis for this belief and it is one that must be purged from our profession” (Sara, 2009, p. 8). Teachers in the current study are also asking the question of what is being done to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are performing at or above National benchmarks and high achieving students to extend their learning, the need for high expectations.

P4: What about kids in the middle bands and getting them to the higher bands? Students in higher bands what are we doing to extend those kids?

P2: We have a huge range of ability in our school.

A culture of high expectations needs to be promoted overtly and covertly by systems of schools, individual schools, parents, and families and within communities. Chris Sarra has articulated on a number of occasions and continues to stress the important fact that Aboriginal identity and the capacity for academic success are not mutually exclusive. According to Sarra, Aboriginal kids in this country are so bombarded by this negative stereotype of what being Aboriginal is that many of them end up subscribing to that negative stereotype. They think that is what their Aboriginal identity is all about, when in fact it is not; it’s a long way from the realities of what Aboriginal people say that being Aboriginal is about. (Sarra, 2007, p.33)

This view was echoed by participant P1: “We have gifted. Exactly, and I don’t know if that has ever been addressed at an in-service”. Another teacher expressed a concern of how to communicate the high expectations of students without appearing impatient.

P7: I think one of the hardest things for me is we have high expectations for our children and somehow communicating those high expectations without being impatient or pushy. The children know when someone is pushy because they care about them or they are pushy because they are pushy.

High expectations for Aboriginal children and young people has “too often been built on ‘deficit’ thinking and interpreted as meaning students should be ‘mainstream’ (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014, p.2) into the western education system. P7 provided examples of her having high expectations but this not being awkward for students because of the relationship she has with them.
This participant picked up on another interesting point – the tension for her between pursuing high achievement for her Aboriginal children and at the same time not wanting to overwhelm them by being too demanding.

P7: But I find that a very hard tension. I don’t want to wait I want their success now. And I understand it is about me operating in my culture.

It is evident from the group teacher interviews that there is an urgent need to provide teachers with professional learning opportunities about strategies to support children and young people’s learning. In a professional development program, the focus would be, as noted by Yunkaporta (2007), “not looking at what students learn, but how students learn. The difference between process and content – I’m talking about learning through culture, not about culture” (p.4) using elements identified in Eight Ways such as **community links, land links, symbols and images, learning maps and story sharing**.

Participants in the group interviews reflected on this:

P13: We still look more at how they are achieving, but not their culture and how that influences their learning.

P14: Not their culture.

P15: Or their spirituality and we are in a Catholic school. Shouldn’t we be celebrating this?

Teachers demonstrated this understanding but were not sure what they could do to counter the negative and play a positive role. They commented on their observations of a Regional Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer (RACLO) working with Aboriginal children in the classroom and what she was able to achieve and the way she worked with the children:

P11: [Name] worked with the Indigenous students and her whole focus was linking it to their heritage and what she got out of them was marvellous. She shifted them, I had never even thought about going down that track. So all of that seeing, having someone who is professional, you know that is immersed in their culture to be able to work with has been so rewarding.

In effective teaching, teachers act as a guide for the children (Edwards & Buxton, 1989; Yunkaporta, 2009). In an Aboriginal way, teachers are people who have the knowledge, experiences and understanding of a part or whole of a journey their students are about to undertake. They can deconstruct/reconstruct as the RACLO did for the children, they can link
to community and country where appropriate as recommended by Yunkaporta (2009).

5.2.7 Recognition of Aboriginal languages and Aboriginal English

In New South Wales there are over 70 different Aboriginal language groups (Board of Studies NSW, 2001, p. 15). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the Eastern Region of Sydney come from diverse cultural and language backgrounds. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s first language is Standard Australian English (SAE), whilst the first language of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children may be a language or dialect other than SAE. A key element of one’s identity is identification with a language group. Even if one is not living in country, one’s sense of belonging, family and community connections are still embedded within home country.

Teachers in two of the group interviews identified linguistic background of Aboriginal children and young people as an area in which they need guidance, as discussed earlier (see 2.6.3):

P19: And linguistic background when I look at that I need more information about that. I wouldn’t know.

P5: How do you teach a child and support them in the classroom with their language development. That has to be a factor of consideration.

Teachers were not aware of the Capability Framework Teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander EAL/D learners (2013), a project initiated by the Senior Officers National Network of Indigenous Education to support the implementation of the National Professional Standards for Teachers and noted that they would like this to be included in professional development for them. For school leadership teams, the Framework is intended to “inform whole school practice, determine staff professional learning needs and as support when undertaking performance conversations” (Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2013, p. 3) in assessing teachers against The Standards, in particular strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

The Framework is also to “inform teacher practice and self-assess their capabilities and inform professional learning goals” (Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2013, p. 3). The Framework defines Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander EAL/D
learners as students whose first languages are:

- **Traditional languages** – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages that originated prior to European colonization, some of which continue to be spoken today.
- **Creole languages** – new languages that have formed since colonization. There are Creole languages spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia.
- **Aboriginal English** – dialects of English spoken by many Aboriginal people across Australia (Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2013, p. 4).

The Framework also acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people who may not be proficient in a traditional languages, may still identify very strongly with one or more traditional languages, referring to these languages as ‘heritage languages’ (Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2013, p. 4).

Teachers also identified Aboriginal English as an area of which they have limited or no knowledge:

P17: I mean like the day you gave us those terms [referring to Aboriginal English terms] and we had to guess what it was.

Another teacher provided an example with children in her class being entertained by the Goodjarga dance group:

P19: They were saying them all. I was with the Goodjarga dance group and they were using all that terminology and all that language and I wasn’t aware of it so I didn’t know what was a good thing or was a negative thing. Yes, they were using the Aboriginal English words. I was picking up these words but I wasn’t really quite sure.

During this group interview there was a discussion around the question of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children being classed as Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE). It was also noted that past practice of teachers viewing Aboriginal English as bad English, viewing the differences between Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English (SAE), as a deficient still persist. All bar the four participants at School B (i.e. 28) noted that they would not have the skills to be able to do identify characteristics of Aboriginal English.
in a student’s work sample.

One teacher reflected on her experience growing up at a time when Aboriginal language was not encouraged to be spoken in the school setting.

P18: It’s not that we shouldn’t learn it and be able to implement it I think that’s a wonderful journey to go on. I think it’s fabulous. But I grew up in a community where Aboriginal language was you know don’t speak like that and that is how it was when I grew up in central west. So it’s interesting isn’t it? And now we lost so much of it, that we are trying to bring it back.

Aboriginal English is recognised as a dialect, as children’s home language, and should no longer be viewed as bad English (Hanlen, 2002). One participant believed that the children should have opportunities to use their Aboriginal English.

P18: And providing them with an opportunity to use it I think is the other. Like you say in the dance group they were using it. Well that’s fabulous.

The revitalisation and preservation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages is seen as a pressing issue for communities and in turn, where there are genuine educational partnerships, by educational systems.

5.3 Teacher identified areas for professional learning

From the preceding discussion it is evident that while teachers cite some instances of good practice they do not across the board feel confident in their ability to meet Standard 1.4 as they do not consider themselves to currently be competently meeting the educational needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Leadership teams and teachers need to build good relationships between staff, students and local communities and to ensure that the school is a safe and welcoming place for Aboriginal children and young people. To meet this challenge, teachers need to develop not only theoretically sound but culturally inclusive pedagogy to create a classroom culture where all students, regardless of their cultural and linguistic background, are supported and provided with the best possible opportunities to learn. Participants in this study have identified that professional development in the teaching Aboriginal students’ needs to be improved enormously to meet new National Professional Standards for Teachers. Areas they have identified specifically are:

To start with the basics and provide answers to awkward questions
When teacher where asked the following question, there were some really interesting responses:

*What avenues of professional development do you know of in the field of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, specifically the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?*

Overwhelming teachers believed that there was still much do be done. Further to this, the amount of time that has passed since accessing any professional learning opportunity and uncertainty on where to go for such opportunities were also highlighted. Teachers in all of the group interviews identified the need to move beyond the generic, to more specific knowledge of what students needs are and how they learn best. Teachers in schools A and C identified the fact that Torres Strait Islander peoples are Indigenous Peoples of Australia and how their teaching fails to provide a balanced representation of the complexity and distinctiveness of Aboriginal cultures as opposed to Torres Strait Islander cultures.

From the subthemes discussed in this Chapter, elements that I would include in a professional development program to assist teachers to better meet the educational needs of Aboriginal children and young people would be:

- Connections to Country Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing (Edwards & Buxton, 1998; Martin, 2005);
- Aboriginal pedagogies and processes;
- Strategies to engage Aboriginal children;
- Appropriate terminology;
- Information on Aboriginal English;
- Diversity of Aboriginal cultures and the distinctiveness of Torres Strait Islander cultures;
- Strength-based approach that encourages a strong sense of cultural identity and a sense of belonging;
- A culture of high expectations for all students;
- Leadership team involvement in professional development
- Critically reflective conversations on classroom practice; and
- Developing a strong culture of collaboration.
6.1 Introduction

In the literature review there are a number of studies that highlight the importance of and need for parent and community partnerships with schools to support the implementation of strategies that effectively engage Aboriginal children and young people in their schooling. However, none of these studies examine in any detail the ways in which teachers are trained to, or provided with professional learning opportunities to know how to respectfully, effectively and collaboratively engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, families and communities (Moreton-Robinson, Singh, Kolopenuk, Robinson, & Walter, 2012).

The Standard number 1, knowing your students and how they learn states that teachers at the proficient level will need to design and implement effective teaching strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, these need to be “responsive to the local community and cultural settings” (ATSIL, 2011, p.9). Therefore, an important element of standard 1.4 is the establishment of and maintaining of respectful community engagement strategies, which are multidimensional and multi-relational (Nakata, 2007) and that need to be responsive to communities.

6.2 Responsiveness to local community: A vital element in Standard 1.4

Participants in the current study highlighted several aspects that pertain to their proficiency in relating to and being responsive to local community as separate from other elements noted in Standard 4.1 and discussed in Chapter 5. I discuss these under the following sub-themes: (i) uncertainty about how to be responsive to the local community, (ii) observing cultural protocols, (iii) the need to have a conversation, (iv) kinship-roles and responsibilities, (v) cultural miscommunication, (vi) factors affecting parental engagement, (vii) vital role of Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs), and (viii) celebrating days of significance.
6.2.1 Uncertainty about how to be responsive to the local community

It is evident from the group interviews that there is a lot of uncertainty about the role of classroom teachers in building respectful, authentic relationships with parents, caregivers and local community members.

P24: I guess I’m not sure about the needs of my local community in terms of what they would like me to be sharing. Therefore, I’m not sure what strategies I need to implement in order to do that.

P26: That’s our challenge. In terms of the local community because I think there is a mystery, there is a haze about that in terms of knowing the student, and a sensitivity about pursuing that to any great degree.

The Board of Studies New South Wales (2001) produced a document Working with Aboriginal communities: A guide to community consultation and protocols. Advice in the guide was based on extensive consultation with the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) at state, regional and local levels, AEWs in all education sectors, and a range of Aboriginal community-based organisations. As such, the advice provided reflects widely accepted protocols across New South Wales.

Many teachers interviewed expressed a need for such advice and guidelines to begin the process of consulting with local Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal community consultation is a process that enables teachers and school leadership teams to become aware of local community views and sensitivities. This would involve teachers getting to know members of the local community, while at the same time opening lines of communication so community members are aware of happenings in their children’s school.

Some schools in the region with a high population of Aboriginal students have well-established connections with the local community, while in other areas of the region it may appear that there is no identifiable community or the school may perceive the community as inactive.

P16: What happens if it’s not active?

P25: Culturally is that still a lived experience here?

In this situation, advice contained in Working with Aboriginal communities: A guide to community consultation and protocols suggests schools could contact local Aboriginal community
organisations, such as: the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG). During two of the group interviews the AECG was mentioned in conversation, however, most of the teacher participants were not aware of the existence of the AECG or its role in Aboriginal education:

P7: I was just going to say I don’t know about that one.
P8: AECG? Me either.
P9: Or me. Who, what do they do?
P30: What is the AECG?
P31: I didn’t know there was such a group that could assist us as a school. There is a local AECG here?

Educational authorities in New South Wales acknowledge and recognise the AECG as the peak Aboriginal advisory body in regard to Aboriginal educational issues (BOSNSW, 2001). The NSWAECG began in 1977 as a committee of Aboriginal people invited by the then Department of Education to advise it on Aboriginal education. A community-based organisation, local and regional AECGs are available to provide advice and guidance for teachers and school leadership teams with regards to cultural protocols and the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives across key learning areas in both government and non-government schools. This is an obvious example of supports available that are not being accessed, thus missing the opportunity to make community links, one of Yunkaporta’s Eight Ways.

6.2.2 Observing cultural protocols

As discussed in Chapter 2 (cf 2.6.2) a Strong Smarter Summit was held in 2009. One contributor in addressing cultural protocols noted the following:

My passion and energies are directed towards educational pathways both culturally and academically for my kids... bridging the great divide that I see in the community where I see Elders that have a very important role of including into your younger children in the cultural protocols we grew up in... that’s very important. (Uncle Albert Holt cited in Indigenous Education Leadership Institute, 2009, p. 12)

Further, it is noted that, “[o]bserving cultural protocols when working with Aboriginal people and communities is critical to establishing positive and respectful relationships” (Board of Studies NSW, 2001, p. 1). This is difficult if teachers do not have knowledge of such protocols.
P20: You see it’s all those things that make you really worried that you are going to say the wrong thing or approach someone the wrong way. There are protocols that you are not really aware of until someone tells you.

P25: But local things as well. I’d like to know what is the local stories or how does our local community feel about us doing this? What are they happy, what would they love us to do?

In supporting leadership teams and teachers in working with Aboriginal children their families and communities it would be an important element of professional learning opportunities to build awareness of cultural protocols. If teachers can show an awareness of, sensitivity to and respect for cultural protocols this would be an essential step to building trust and integral to becoming responsive to the needs of community. It would be important to provide information to improve teachers “knowledge and understanding of the diverse cultural dynamics that exist within Aboriginal families and communities” (New South Wales Department of Community Services, 2009, p. 2). It is also important to stress the point that there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach there will be a need to tailor ways of communicating and being responsive to the needs of communities within the eastern region.

6.2.3 The need to have a conversation before…

In all of the schools included in this study teachers are looking for advice, principles and strategies to assist them in working with community. In each group interview teachers mentioned a level of uncertainty of where to go or who to contact as noted in the excerpts from two different interviews:

P6: It would even be helpful in just talking about our own system to have a few established contacts within communities that might be able to assist. I mean we have [name], but if I were at another school? I suppose I’d not know who I could go to. I might be able to go to [name] but would she be the most appropriate person? How do you know?

P1: Support from community representatives I would not know who to refer to as a community representative. Who would have that knowledge, who would have the credibility and have the acceptance of the local community to be that person of support.

Highlighting the sensitivity about connecting with Aboriginal parents and community is the fact that they have been expressing increasing concern about the quality of education being provided to their children and young people. Buckskin (2012) notes how mainstream
education systems have failed to provide the necessary support and professional
development for teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. He further asserts
that as a result of this, “parents and caregivers are now wary of mainstream education as a
whole” (Buckskin, 2012, p. 166). Parents and community members have voiced their concerns
that many teachers are not “skilled up in teaching our kids, they have no experience with our
mob. Some have never even met a blackfella” (personal communication with D. Trindall).
Because of uncertainty on the part of teachers, and the wariness as described by Buckskin
(2012), teachers will need to be provided with the skills and knowledge to be able to navigate
this “contested space” (Nakata, 2008).

A teacher also noted:

P6: I think if you did a poll the majority of teachers in our system. I can only talk
about our system. But I think it would be true for others. Probably don’t know,
let alone have a relationship with an Aboriginal person or Indigenous person.

P7: That’s what I mean. They’ve never met them let alone have a relationship. So
how do you even begin to understand and respect and promote when you
don’t even know anybody so you don’t understand it.

This concern was also mentioned by a number of other teachers in the group interviews, the
point being that within the relevant Catholic education system of schools there are teachers
who have never met an Aboriginal person. This is a reality for many non-Indigenous teachers
in Australia. They may not have encountered an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person
before they start teaching, and they only find themselves meeting Aboriginal children and
young people for the first time in their classroom (Craven, 2005).

P27: I don’t know if its appropriate but one of the things I’d like to know is it might
not be the teachers having the conversation but conversations with the family
to see if there is anything they can think of that they would be good for us to
do.

P26: So when you talk about local community would you include the parents of the
children who have identified as Aboriginal?

Authentic partnerships with parents, caregivers, community and teachers are of critical
importance, but “you can’t have a partnership without a relationship, and you can’t have a
relationship without a conversation. You’ve got to have the conversation” (National
Curriculum Services, 2009, p.2). These concerns expressed by parents and teachers alike, the
impact of this on classroom teacher’s ability to work with families and communities, clearly suggests the need for future professional learning opportunities for both school leadership teams and classroom teachers.

6.2.4 Kinship – roles and responsibilities

Knowledge and understanding of concepts and structures that exist in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities is important in building relationships. Teachers in the group interviews identified their desire to learn about Aboriginal kinship systems and extended families roles and responsibilities, how to initiate contact to start a conversation without causing offence. Understanding social structures and concepts that exist in Aboriginal families and communities are important in building authentic relationships. Participants queried, if you are a teacher in a school that has never had contact with an Aboriginal person how are you going to know?

P6: …how to speak to their parents, aunts, uncles about their children’s learning without being either offensive or completely missing the boat.

P7 And, that’s when you, when they make mistakes because when a child brings up Aunty, and they [the classroom teacher] say no I want to speak to the child’s mum. Well, Aunty is the equivalent to mum. But that teacher doesn’t know that their not being rude they just think this isn’t something I discuss with the Aunty

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a strong sense of family and community. “The family system has an extended family structure, as opposed to the nuclear or immediate family structure which is common in Western society” (National Curriculum Services, 2009, p.13). This extended family concept does not appeared to be understood by the system of school personnel so it is important that teachers, leadership teams and regional staff develop a knowledge of and understanding of this when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, their families and communities.

Sense of community happens in much the same way as a person learns about ‘sense of country’ (Edwards & Buxton, 1998, p. 40). A sense of belonging in community also begins from early teaching and the gradual building of one’s perception of one’s place within community. From a very early age Aboriginal children are taught through socialisation that they are related to through their kinship system and proper behaviours for people who are
part of your community. Besides kinship systems and extended families there is a strong concept of community as family within Aboriginal communities. The family structure is linked with the community and with this knowledge comes a complex system of roles and cultural obligations within the community (National Curriculum Services, 2009). In the interviews a number of teachers requested knowledge of kinship and peoples roles and responsibility in country and community.

Teachers were also keen to learn about the role of Elders within community. Edwards and Buxton (1998) explain with Aboriginal ways of knowing there is a need to offer and earn respect, particularly in communication with Elders. “Elder” is not simply a matter of chronological age, but a sign of the respect accorded to individuals in community who exemplify values, ways of seeing, doing and knowing in country and community. Uncle Bob Anderson describes his ways of knowing as a Quandamooka, Ngugi Elder:

Age does not denote Eldership. There is no application forms posted when a certain age is reached. People are observed and their activities noted in much the same fashion as when children are undergoing their transition to maturity. Later in life when it is felt that their minds are receptive to understanding their role in adult society, they will be invited to become a member of the Elders group not an Elder in their own individual right but for what they can contribute to society as a group (Anderson cited in Martin, 2003, p. 10).

Elders are not only holders of cultural and community knowledge but can also have a great deal of influence over when, how and who will work with schools (Board of Studies NSW, 2001). Professional learning for teachers will include skills to be able to “have a conversation” as the initial platform for starting a relationship with the local community.

6.2.5 Cultural miscommunication

Ongoing patterns of alienation from western education systems of schools can stem from persistent miscommunication between Aboriginal students families and educational professionals (Department of Education, Training and Employment, Queensland, 2013). Parents have voiced that being Aboriginal, their lived experience of the everyday (Nakata, 2007), can be at times in conflict with what is expected by schools. The next few interchanges illustrate a clash of cultures, when two different ways of seeing collide – even though it was a
good faith attempt to reach out and engage with community and a genuine belief of trying to do the right thing:

P6: The best example I’ve seen of someone meaning to do the right thing and it coming out completely wrong because of the clash of cultures. In this case was the example of, and I know you know it. A teacher wanting to speak with the carer, parent of a child. Walking down to that parent or carer in an effort to reach out and say Oh I’ll come down and chat. I want to chat about your child. I’m interested in your child. But that actually being viewed as a hostile act because that person had deliberately made the choice to be down there because they didn’t want to interact. But our culture doesn’t get that. And you know it was all good faith. And then the horrible mash that went – that reaching out with community, there is so much to know about and how to do something. It’s not enough to have a good heart and an interest. There is a definite clash between the cultures. Do you think that’s fair?

P7: We’ll have parents here where we can walk down the street. But we’ll have new families that come and find that offensive. So within Aboriginal communities there are their own beliefs too. Which is the same with any community.

P6: Any community and it’s because of who walks down the street too.

No one can work in isolation; it cannot be one person’s responsibility. It is a two way process, like all genuinely mutual and productive relationships there needs to be open communication based on respect, a willingness to listen, share and learn from each other. Teachers identified that they need to have “a good heart and interest” (P7); they need advice and practical tips to develop effective cross-cultural communication skills to reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings.

In conversation with an Aboriginal Education Worker (AEW) she stated that:

Some of our parents find it difficult to come up the hill and into the school gate, they stand over there (motion towards the opposite side of the street from the school gate), but seeing another Aboriginal person helps. With encouragement and gentle support, not in their face, our parents feel more confident. Over time find it easier, not totally comfortable but easier (Personal conversation with D. Trindall).

It all comes down to relationships and a willingness to be welcoming, “a smile and a nod is welcoming, even without words” (Personal conversation with E. Peel). The following interaction highlights how relationships are the key, and they take time to develop:

P6: How long have we had a relationship?
I was going to say exactly that. It really depends on the relationship. Relationship is the major stick here I think. It links us with this community. And, if you don’t have that relationship. Because I look at, how you can see which staff members have got the relationship with the community and who haven’t and who [the community] trust. It takes years, they won’t do it straight away, it takes many, many years for them to say it’s OK for me to let you in.

And it’s got to be gradual and not forced

Never forced

It has to come, we take a little step, they take a little step, we take a little step and sometimes it doesn’t meet.

In discussion with participants, they acknowledged that there is no “quick fix” (P18) and even with a professional learning program, school leaders and teachers can be well set up to start the process, but a process takes time (Emerson et al., 2012). Clearly to develop trust and mutual respect will take time (Andersen and Walter, 2010). This caveat was important as the professional learning, whilst hopefully enormously useful, should not be seen as a magic wand.

6.2.6 Factors affecting parental engagement

Similarly to the teachers, parents have commented on the fact that it all comes down to relationships. One parent expressed that sometimes she was comfortable in the school, while at other times she was not. “It all depends, she stated. “Who I see” and whether they “talk at you or to you. Sometimes that teacher just does not listen” (Personal communication with parent).

Relationships with the local communities varied from school to school: some were well-established relationships, others were just starting or having difficulties in starting the process of community partnerships and consultation.

Also maybe even dealing with parents. We often have issues with contacting parents. Perhaps we have a hard time because we are – school starts at this time and we need to get things done, we are in that mindset so understanding how to best deal with parents and community.

We develop such a relationship with our Aboriginal kids that doesn’t necessarily follow on to the parents.
A teacher highlighted the positive effects of personalised learning plans (PLPs) on parental engagement:

P2: 96% of our parents attended the PLP meetings. Which I don’t know how that sits significantly with other schools. But it seems quite high. Considering when we open up parent/teacher interviews we may not have that percentage overall for the school in terms of parents coming in and meeting with us. I think it probably helped having (Name) in there as well and our AEW because obviously, I am not. I was there to make sure that everything was being covered in the classroom teacher as well.

Participants noted that this confirms that Aboriginal parents are just as interested in the academic progress of their children as non-Indigenous parents, despite the stereotypical portrayal to the contrary. In another interview the Principal from School D explained that this was the first year they had implemented PLPs and parents commented on the fact that their children felt proud to be Aboriginal because the school was acknowledging the importance of their Aboriginality. Parents deeply appreciated that. Indeed, Sarra (2009) states that he has never had an Aboriginal parent that didn’t want a good education for their child. He goes on to emphasise that “We have to work hard to build stronger smarter relationships among all these individuals” (p.3). In doing so, I will attempt to empower teachers to “create classrooms as sacred spaces in which Indigenous children can be exceptional” (p. 3). This can only be achieved in collaboration with parents.

The literature and current government policies across the country all state that improving educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is enhanced when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and community are involved in decision-making concerning the education of their children and young people. The Principal of School A commented on how they have and continue to create a welcoming environment where parents and grandparents are valued as members of the school’s Aboriginal Education Parent Committee which has been operating for eleven years (formerly Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Program).

P1: Right from the start, there is a need to show that you are honest with your school community and have a willingness to listen.

A teacher commented further:
The parents through our Parent Committee really take ownership of planning the activities for all students. They really are enthusiastic about showcasing what the students (and teachers) have learnt during our weeklong celebration to the whole school community.

The Parent Committee also gives parents and caregivers an opportunity to be informed of the programs and strategies implemented in the school with regards to the education and support for their children, while actively seeking parent and care-givers advice and input for what works with their children’s learning. It is well documented that improving the educational achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people will be strongest when it is with the active participation of and supported by students families and communities (Higgins & Morley, 2014; Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012; Santoro, Reid, Crawford & Simpson, 2011; Berthelsen & Walker, 2008). This Aboriginal Education Parent Committee reflects the diversity of Aboriginal families and community, as well as a forum for the Aboriginal Education Adviser and Regional Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer to keep families and community up to date with regional developments supporting the school and their children’s education journey, epitomising community links as described by Yunkaporta (2009).

Another strategy that teachers believe has a positive effect in the development of relationships with both students and parents is the allocation of a room. A space in the school designated for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, personalised learning plan (PLPs) meetings with class teachers, Aboriginal Education Support teacher, parents and the AEW. Examples of students work are displayed, and posters of up and coming events in the school and community, all contribute to increased parent and community participation in the school.

It is a welcoming place within the school, a safe place for conversation with the AEW and [name of the Aboriginal Education support teacher]. A place of shared learnings.

In this culturally safe place Aboriginal parents and community members are comfortable and empowered to become active partners by having the knowledge of their children and ways of doing respected and valued.
6.2.7 Vital role of Aboriginal Education Workers

Of critical importance to parents, caregivers and community engagement is the role of an AEW in the school. Of the five schools that participated in the study two have a full-time AEW employed. A principal commented on the vital role of the AEW in linking the local Aboriginal community with the school leadership team and the AEWs knowledge of families and the community views and needs:

P11: Without our AEW we would not have the relationships that we have. She has close connections with the community and knows the needs of families and at times their concerns. She gently tell me what I need to know and we try as a school to respond to that. We try to listen in the right way and respond appropriately.

This relationship also stretches beyond the school gate.

P2: The children go home and talk to mum and dad about what they did at school today with Aunty (Name). This then opens the door for mum or Aunty to contact (Name) with questions or concerns.

AEWs are a point of contact and do invaluable work in creating a welcoming and culturally safe school environment. They break down the barrier of walking through the school gate. “Just walking into our school front office can be daunting and intimidating for some of our parents” (Personal communication with D. Trindall).

To counter any sort of apprehension, School C has a simple but effective strategy to counter react this, a photo wall in the front entrance of the school. Instantly, the parents are engaged with a variety of school-based events and activities. This is the first thing parents and visitors see when they walk through the front door of the school, visually it is evident that the school celebrates, values and embedded Aboriginal perspectives into the culture of the school. This school also has a Homework centre, where teachers volunteer their time to work with students and the RACLO who all avail themselves to meet with parents once a week to discuss in an informal setting their children’s progress. Teachers have noticed that parents are more open to come into the school in this setting:

P11: Parents come in to pick up their child from [Name]. I have seen more parents within the school because of [Name].
The importance of a newly established role of a Regional Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer (RACLO) within the Catholic education system of schools in Sydney was mentioned as important by participants:

P2: You can see CEO having started that process with your role and (Name) role? I know she is feeling very stretched, and that sort of thing but there is something that has started with that.

Another teacher in School A asked the question:

P3: How many AEWs exist within the region?

With a limited numbers of AEWs (4) in the Eastern Region a suggestion was made that the Catholic Education Office should consider increasing the number of Aboriginal people working within schools as a way to show that as a System they are serious about developing authentic relationships with local communities.

6.2.8 Celebrating days of significance

All of the schools that participated in the study had an assembly, a program of activities, or participated in activities to celebrate National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) week.

P3: In our school in particular I would think and hope that the understanding of is different to our level of respect that is shown to the children. While our understanding may not be as deep as we would all like it and love it to be. I think our level of respect is very high. And I’ve seen a big turn around since I’ve come here and we’ve worked on that. The NAIDOC week is huge, it a professional development, it’s an adult education for the parents as well as educating the students and teachers.

P1: The change in the attitude in the community has come from the children up. It hasn’t come from us down onto the kids.

P3: Our NAIDOC Week celebrations are a good starting.

P1: That’s why we went with a whole week because it’s not a day. It’s a week of being immersed.

P3: You are immersed in different things for a whole week. I found them really good. We are experiencing something with our kids.

P5: I think the fact that we do have such a high population of Indigenous students now that gives us a greater capacity to really depth ourselves in that field as
well without NAIDOC celebrations and all of that. Two because we do have such a high population now and we have the resources we can tap into.

Some schools are making time to celebrate significant dates for Aboriginal communities throughout the school year. Parents and the local community see that their culture is valued and celebrated in the school, which contributes to parents and community members’ willingness to participate in school activities. One teacher commented:

P2: I can see we are doing more, we have had a parent afternoon tea for new parents with children in kindergarten and our NAIDOC Week celebrations. We are trying to do more than just an event once a year.

It was noted that parent and community participation increases when there are the opportunities for more informal gatherings, sport carnivals and community events:

P7: Our school community loves a good sausage sizzle and the kids love seeing Mum, Dad, or the Aunties at school. A yarn and a feed, and all is good.

P11: Our open classrooms don’t work as well but with a cultural event and a sausage sizzle we get a lot of parents and some community as well coming through the school gates.

Personal commitments outside of school to attend community events and functions can go a long way in developing partnerships and relationships based on mutual respect. These aspects link directly to Yunkaporta’s (2009) community links and symbols and images.

However, linking back to the section discussion in Chapter 2 (see 2.5.1) on the passing on of knowledge, participants noted that when leadership teams and teachers are organising days of celebration or guest presenters in the classroom, a perception exists, that if one is an Aboriginal person one automatically knows about and has the ability to speak publicly about one’s culture.

P9: You know what I think in saying that I think that there is a perception if someone’s Aboriginal they will know everything we need to know, we will just grab that person. Not so much here but I know that other schools I’ve worked at. They think Oh we just need an Aboriginal person, just anybody that can tell us that that person may not know everything that you need to know.

Like any community, any cultural group, Aboriginal peoples will comprise some who have a deep knowledge of some elements of their culture, and some who have minimal knowledge.
on any elements of their culture. Participants suggested that this will need to be highlighted in a professional learning program

6.3 Teacher identified areas for professional development

Drawing the threads from this Chapter together, the main point is that Aboriginal education is everyone’s business and while Aboriginal parents and communities are considered as separate from the core business of schools, the reality is that no one reading or numeracy or any other program is going to be successful if not built upon authentic partnership with parents, families, and supported by the community. Participants in the current study noted this as an issue of such high importance for them that I have discussed their views in this separate chapter. They held that if they were upskilled in this area it would enhance their capacity to meet both Standard 1.4 and Standard 2.4 in both of which they felt insecure.

Principles of reciprocal obligation, mutual responsibilities and respect are needed as the foundation for any future professional learning opportunity on how school leadership teams and teachers can establish and maintain authentic partnerships with parents, families and communities to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Sarra advises:

If we are serious about improving Indigenous educational outcomes we really have to begin to take responsibility – all of us – teachers, students, school leadership, communities, families at home. We have to work hard to build stronger smarter relationships among all these individuals. By doing this we can create classrooms as sacred spaces in which Indigenous children can be exceptional (Sarra cited in Stronger Smarter Indigenous Education Leadership Institute, 2009).

Consequently, participant teachers recommended the following aspects to be included in a professional learning program:

- Cultural protocols;
- Two way learnings advice for leadership teams and teachers in working towards being responsive to the needs of parents, families and communities;
- Cultural obligations in relation to kinship and community;
• How to create a welcoming environment within our schools for students, their families and communities;

• Information on days of significance for Aboriginal peoples and communities; and

• Do not expect every Aboriginal person (including students in the school) to know about or want to talk publicly about Aboriginal cultures, families, histories or issues.
CHAPTER 7 – THE FULL CIRCLE

7.1 A synopsis

This thesis has told the story of why the Standards 1.4 and 2.4 have been developed. It sketched a clear description of Education in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and provided a summary in Chapter 2’s literature review of how Education policy continues to fail Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children and young people.

It then went on to describe the Standards and how these were new elements that all teachers need to provide evidence of proficiency in meeting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and teaching about Aboriginal histories, cultures and languages so that all can play a part in the reconciliation endeavour in Australia.

The study investigated to what extent teachers in a select group of schools feel competent to meet those Standards and asked them to provide suggestions as to what elements they would like included in a professional development program around those standards. The methodology employed was described in detail in Chapter 3, and a description of participants showed an interesting demographic of many older teachers, representative of schools in NSW in 2014/2015.

The presentation of the data, findings from interpreting those data and discussion in relation to the theoretical framework, discussed in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 have allowed me to distil quite clearly elements that I will include as I develop a professional development program for schools in the region in which I work.

7.2 Links to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks

Adult education and professional development are the framing within which the current study took place (cf 3.2.1). In considering aspects which I will include in a professional development program, following Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009), I will ensure that teachers first acknowledge the relevance of the professional learning. Furthermore, I will ensure it enables teachers to access the knowledge and skills necessary for them to see the positive outcomes from the programme. I will respond to the caution of Widin, Yasukawa
and Chodkiewicz (2012) and ensure the professional learning does not become an exercise in compliance dictated “through the official institutional … requirements” (p.17).

The theoretical framework (Nakata, 2007) has allowed me to identify key elements of the fracture points for teachers in the “multi-layers and multi-dimensional space” (p.199) that is the cultural interface at which they work when they address Standards 1.4 and 2.4. I will need to provide them with strategies to navigate the “different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses” (p. 199) within the different knowledge traditions.

The conceptual framework, Yunkaporta’s (2009) Eight Ways, provided useful parameters in the development of learnings that will enhance teachers’ meeting of Standard 1.4 – effective strategies for teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children young people. At the proficient level teachers need to demonstrate that they can design and implement effective teaching strategies hence the importance of Yunkaporta’s recommended story sharing, learning maps, symbols and images, non-verbal, and deconstruct/reconstruct in the strategies I will provide for them to utilise. The links to land and community, aspects of the conceptual framework equally provide the scaffold for them to be able to be responsive to the local community and cultural setting, linguistic background and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students which is the rest of the proficient level Standard.

In regards to Standard 2.4 – understanding and respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians teachers at the proficient level need to demonstrate that they provide opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages. In professional learning, Yunkaporta’s (2009) aspects of non-linear is pertinent to make the “Indigenous pedagogies” (p.13) correctly constructed and reconcilable with western pedagogies. Additionally, the links to land and community will clearly be applicable in the learnings provided for Standard 2.4 with the focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages.
7.3 Limitations of the current study

As discussed briefly in Chapter 1, any methodology will have limitations. The current study, a qualitative inquiry, is by definition interpretive and therefore subjective. My role as researcher and my professional role could have contributed to there being the notion of a power dynamic. Furthermore, several participants noted that previous interactions had made them almost dependent on me and it was novel for the roles to be reversed. Participants did note that because of an already established relationship with me, they were comfortable to voice their feelings on the issues under discussion.

The study took place in Catholic schools only. Consequently, the findings cannot necessarily be generalised to the public or independent school sector. However, schools in Sydney, in whatever system they may be, could well find that their teachers hold similar views, concerns, and anxieties about this area.

Furthermore, as I work in the Eastern Region of the Catholic Education Office, Sydney, the five schools which took part in the study were all in that region. It could therefore be that the findings are not generalizable even to the rest of Catholic schools in Sydney or New South Wales. However, care was taken to select schools of high and low SES, and schools with high and low Aboriginal enrolment. Therefore it is likely that teachers’ views would be similar to those of teachers in similar schools.

7.4 Future research

In 2015, following the advice of the participants in the current study, noted in the conclusion of Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I will develop a professional development program which will be implemented as part of my role in all schools in the Eastern Region. I then plan to undertake an evaluative study to gain teachers’ views on the strengths of the program and areas where it can be improved. Once the program is refined it will be offered to other Regions of the Archdiocese of Sydney, which comprises 164 schools with more than 85,000 students currently enrolled (Catholic Education Office, Sydney).
7.5 Concluding remarks

As a Yugambeh and Bundjalung woman, this research project has been more than an academic endeavour. I truly hope that it will indeed hold the potential to play a powerful part in promoting equitable educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people into the future.


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Early childhood education at the cultural interface

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Abstract

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia emphasises that children’s own identity is constructed within their given context of family and community. This paper presents the findings of a multiple case study project undertaken within five remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, Australia. Community Elders were concerned that while their children had a positive sense of self during their prior-to-school years, on entry into formal schooling they experienced a disjuncture between those experiences and the expectations of a Western curriculum. The project involved partnering one university academic to work with each community exploring ways of improving four-year-old children’s pre-reading and numeracy skills to enhance their capacity to engage with expectations on entry into formal schooling. Elders were determined to have the children be successful at school and saw success there as inextricably interwoven with their sense of efficacy to explore and to learn. Outcomes include positives such as children demonstrating increased pre-reading and numeracy skills and, importantly, the engagement of the whole community in the project. Foundational to the success was making Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing key components of learning opportunities provided to the children, supporting awareness of their social and cultural heritage.

Introduction

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) emphasises that children’s own identity is constructed within their given context of family and community. It goes on to highlight that identity is not fixed and that it is shaped by experiences. It follows, therefore, that initial experiences of children in formal schooling should be as positive as possible. For children in remote Aboriginal communities there is, at times, a disjuncture between their early years’ experiences and the expectations and aspirations of the Western curriculum they encounter on entry into formal schooling. In the Western context, the bio-ecological model (see Figure 1) is commonly used to understand and explain aspects of children’s development. This paper extends the model by weaving through it aspects of Nakata’s (2007a) Cultural Interface Theory. This proved seminal in the conceptualisation and implementation of the initiative undertaken in five remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory (NT) to enhance the pre-reading and numeracy skills of four-year-old children to smooth their transition into formal schooling. The implementation of the initiative is described, then findings from the current study are analysed in terms of the aforementioned model and theory and provide a basis for explaining the success of the initiative specifically in terms of children’s identity and sense of self-efficacy.

Theoretical framework

The bio-ecological model

The bio-ecological model is commonly used in a Western context to explain and understand aspects of children’s development. Elements within the various systems in the bio-ecological model (see Figure 1) potentially influence the self-efficacy and educational outcomes of children. Within the bio-ecological model, transactions occur when there is interplay between the child at the centre and the settings within which the child operates. It is not simply a one- or two-way interaction that occurs. As one element or system influences another in any interaction, so the influenced one changes, indeed, but at the same time the one which initiated the interplay is also affected and transformed and nothing
remains the same. In the current study, the elements pertinent to the children at the centre of the project, might be influenced by any or all of the elements noted in Figure 1.

Although the emphasis on developmental environment is familiar to educators, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) call for examination of the “multiperson systems not limited to a single setting” and “aspects of the environment beyond the immediate setting” (p. 178) challenges those concerned with the education of children in Aboriginal contexts to look beyond the tensions of high socio-economic status (SES) versus low SES, national curriculum standards versus community priorities, or parent and community aspirations versus bureaucratic goals.

Explaining the transaction dynamic, and developing his original proposition, Bronfenbrenner (1989) wrote:

> the ecology of human development is the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life course, between an active, growing human being, and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by the relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded (p. 188).
Using Bronfenbrenner’s (1989) model and applying it to children in remote Aboriginal communities, it is possible to represent the transactions likely to operate within such a child’s ecosystem in Figure 1. There are several notable points that emerge from this model which profoundly influence the way the effectiveness of an initiative, such as the one described in this paper, can be evaluated. First, the impact of interaction between the child and others is seen transactionally, not additively. Second, it is clearly explained that the settings within which the child develops are ever changing, affected by relations and transactions between the settings. Third, the unique nature and circumstances of each child’s situation are reflected, honouring the notion that needs, abilities, and barriers to learning are likely to differ from child to child.

In the current study, it was clearly evident that the initiative would be part of a “changing setting” and that non-Aboriginal partners in the initiative were not best placed to make decisions on process or even content; that would need to be led by the Aboriginal partners. Certainly, the principles remained the same, but the way they were enacted were strongly influenced by the work of Martin Nakata (2007a) who coined the term “education at the cultural interface” (p.7). In the conceptual development of the initiative, the researchers were strongly influenced by Nakata’s framework and the ensuing work of Yunkaporta and McGinty (2009) who built on Nakata’s work.

Aboriginal standpoint - relatedness

Building an Aboriginal standpoint into a theoretical framework requires more than the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander narratives and perspectives (Nakata, 2007b; Yunkaporta & McGinty 2009). It requires the recognition of the existence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems and an understanding of the complexities of the cultural interface. Therefore, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint can never be reduced to just the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content (Nakata, 2007b). Edwards and Buxton (1998) in Guyunggu explain an Aboriginal way of being as an interrelatedness of people, land and spirit. Foley (2002) conceived this epistemological standpoint as grounded in Aboriginal knowledge of spirituality and philosophy.

Supporting this view, Martin (2003) promotes a “relational epistemology supported by a relational ontology” (p. 205). This, she holds, “helps us focus our attention on our interrelatedness, and our interdependence with each other and our greater surroundings” (p. 205). In order to achieve this, Martin (2003) advocates that

Indigenist research occurs through centring Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being and Ways of Doing in alignment with aspects of western qualitative research frameworks. This alignment or harmonisation occurs in both the structure of the research and in the research procedures. (p. 209)

In the current study this was achieved by the six-month lead-in to the implementation of the initiative with the aims, aspirations, and motivations of the Aboriginal Elders in each community leading to a tailored version specific to their purposes.

In later work, Martin (2007) in highlighting the positives that come from research with Aboriginal people, as opposed to on Aboriginal people, notes that the

goal is to prepare for change so that it expands one’s autonomy, agency and relatedness and does not diminish or limit this autonomy, agency and relatedness. This must occur as coming amongst others in relatedness, so as not to silence, displace or make them invisible. (p. 18)

Later again, Martin (2010) explains relatedness further: “Indigenist research is Aboriginal sovereignty through respecting and centring Aboriginal ways of viewing the world and all things in it, of knowing, giving meaning to and valuing the world, and in the ways this is expressed” (p. 96).

In the current study, this was at the forefront of the thinking of the academics to be involved in the initiative. The Elders were the driving force in the implementation and the activities chosen to achieve the aims exemplify the relatedness to “the world and all things in it” (Martin, 2007, p. 96).
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Cultural Interface theoretical framework

In order to provide a deep level of analysis of the data in the current study, Martin Nakata’s Cultural Interface Theory provided a suitable framework as it provided a means to capture the nuanced and multi-dimensional nature of the place of non-Aboriginal teachers charged with the responsibility of supporting an initiative in remote Aboriginal communities with whom they did not have an existing relationship.

Martin Nakata, a Torres Strait Islander man, “captured this complexity and conceptualised it as a broader interface” (Nakata, 2007b, p. 198). What he has termed as cultural interface, is embodied by points of intersecting trajectories. Nakata explains as follows:

It is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations constituted by the intersections of time, place, distance, different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions, and different systems of social, economic and political organisation. It is a space for many shifting and complex intersections between different people with different histories, experiences, languages, agendas, aspirations and responses… All these elements cohere together at the interface in the everyday. (Nakata, 2007b, p. 199)

Nakata argues that the elements and relationships in this space is how one's thinking, understandings, knowledges, identities and histories change in a continuing state of process, our “lived realities” (Nakata, 2007b, p.199). According to Nakata there are three guiding principles:

Firstly, Indigenous people are entangled in a very contested knowledge space at the cultural interface; secondly, to move forward it is necessary to recognise the continuities and discontinuities of Indigenous agency; and, thirdly, the understanding of the continual tension that informs and limits what can be said and what is left unsaid in the everyday. (Nakata, 2007b, p. 215-216)

Nakata (2001) has also described the successful application of the cultural interface theory in education as requiring the starting point to be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ‘lifeworlds’ and then extending learners in the overlap with non-local realities, maintaining continuity with the past while learning skills relevant to the present and the future. He further asserts that the Cultural Interface approach is not simply a platform for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to transition into mainstream education, but “should be considered an innovation, enhancing critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are relevant for learners of any culture (Nakata cited in Yunkaporta, 2009). By 2007, Nakata (2007b) has extended this view to describe the cultural interface as a space where there is a dialogical exchange between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal systems. Taking this further in what it means for those working at the cultural interface in education, there is the acknowledgement that it is a “dynamic space between ancestral and western realities” (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009, p. 58).

This was the founding principle on which the current initiative was based. Contact with Aboriginal people in these remote communities in which the initiative took place and established links from another project, meant that the communities had ownership of the current project from the outset, taking care of the decisions regarding who would work with the children and what sorts of activities would take place. The project aimed to discover what might be introduced to improve four-year-old children’s literacy and numeracy.

Background

There is a need to generate information on critical factors that enhance the learning outcomes for Aboriginal children “if we are to mount a concerted effort to close the gap” (Nakata, Nakata & Chin,
It was elements of this “gap” that motivated the conceptualisation and actualisation of the current initiative.

Diversity

There are more than 80 Aboriginal language groups in the Northern Territory (NT), from the Larrakia nation of Darwin to the Arrernte people of the Alice Springs region. Aboriginal people account for one-third of the Northern Territory’s 220,000 population, with those Aboriginal citizens speaking several dozen heritage languages (Grimes, 2009). Darwin is home to 100,000 of the total population. Most of 72,000 Aboriginal people, who live in the NT, live in remote communities. Distances are vast, with travel to some remote communities impossible by road during the Wet season when roads become impassable. Power supply to the communities is variable and internet access often not possible. Extremes of temperature impact on life and living for all who live in the NT.

Under or un-qualified Early Childhood teachers

Despite the government’s ambition to provide four-year-old children with preschool experiences under the guidance of a four-year qualified teacher, the reality in the five Aboriginal communities where the current initiative took place, was that none of the early childhood educators had teaching qualifications. This is common in rural and remote areas of the NT.

Rationale for the current initiative

The rationale for the current initiative was to combat the fact that in Australia today, “Indigenous students at all levels experience worse educational outcomes than non-Indigenous students” (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provisions, 2007, p. 4) and to reach the marginalised (UNESCO, 2010). There are undisputed benefits to quality education in the early years (Berk, 2010; Cooper, 2011; Howes et al., 2008; Moss & Dahlberg, 2008; Woodhead & Oates, 2009). In the NT there is a shortage of Aboriginal teachers and because of the remoteness of the NT communities and the inhospitable weather conditions, it is difficult to recruit and retain qualified non-Aboriginal staff (Maher, 2010). The current study was firmly positioned in the perspective of wanting to improve the children’s literacy and numeracy skills on entry into formal schooling rather than approaching it from a school readiness (Clark & Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2008; Lara-Cinisomo, Daughterty, Howes & Karoly, 2009; Noel, 2010) stance. The intense commitment of the Elders of the communities was driven by the wish for children to staircase easily into formal schooling and not suffer a sudden crisis of self-confidence they had seen occur time and time again. Children who were extremely well-adjusted within community life, seeing themselves as efficacious learners and contributors to this life, were suddenly seeing themselves as incompetent on entry into formal schooling where the medium of instruction was not their home language and where the pedagogy was foreign to them.

Methodology

The current study was Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) funded. All the schools in the study were Catholic Schools; the Catholic Education Office of the Northern Territory provided ethical clearance for completion of the research work involving children.

The current study took place in the naturalistic/interpretive paradigm where concern for the individual is prioritised and an attempt is made to understand participants’ subjective lived experiences in answering the research questions. In this study voice was important as highlighted earlier (Martin, 2003; 2007). The researchers sought to understand what meaning and understanding the participants have constructed (Merriam, 2009) because it could otherwise happen that the Western framing noted by Nakata (2007b) and Martin (2003) would determine the initiative implementation. Care was taken not to “silence, displace or make them [Aboriginal partners] invisible” (Martin, 2007, p. 18). Furthermore, participants’ contexts were expected to be idiosyncratic, multifaceted and complex and there could be a differences in in the ways the Elders wished the project to proceed.
A multiple case studies methodology was utilised to get a range of data across five community preschools. This range of cases provided the researchers with the ability to see trends common to all sites and those particular to specific circumstances. Case studies “recognize the complexity and ‘embeddedness’ of social truths ... (and) can represent something of the discrepancies or conflicts between viewpoints held by participants” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 292). This current study sought to investigate the effectiveness of the implementation of collaborative planning and provision of learning opportunities to improve the pre-reading and numeracy ability of four-year-olds in order to smooth their transition into formal schooling.

Methods

Data were collected by interviews with the early childhood educators, interviews with the lecturers involved in the project, observation of the activities children were involved in, discussions with the Elders, journal entries from both lecturers and early childhood educators, and from minutes of meetings of the Steering Committee.

Design of the study

(i) Initial phase of implementation

A six-month period of preparation was undertaken by the university coordinator of this project, a non-Aboriginal woman, making links with the community Elders in the first place to discuss the project and seek their input into any value they might discern; the power of decision-making was left with them. It was here that the first clear example of the cultural interface was evidenced. The researcher came from the perspective of wishing to offer a way of improving children’s transitioning into formal schooling and a western curriculum. The Elders were more interested in the improved literacy and numeracy as a means of ensuring children’s well-being and sense of identity being negatively impacted before the initiative. They were mildly interested in the access literacy and numeracy would give their children to “middle Australia” as they called it; they were much more interested in their children having the tools to access the curriculum in school so that they would continue to see themselves as effective and efficacious learners.

When the Elders were supportive of the project, the university coordinator then met with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal leaders within the schools, to which the preschools were attached, to gain their perspectives, their perceived advantages and challenges and to tailor the implementation to their specific requirements. Their responses reinforced for the researchers how critical it would be to ensure the privileging of Aboriginal and local place-based knowledge in the implementation of the initiative.

The input from the Elders and their perspective guided the way the projects unfolded in the five communities. Additionally, the aim was to empower the early childhood educator, regardless of whether or not that person had formal qualifications or whether they were Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, to want to implement the program, to be able to implement the program, to be able to articulate why these strategies are important to children’s learning and to continue with the initiative at the end of two years.

Reflecting their need for assurance that this project was not yet another colonising exercise, Elders at one community wanted to know if it would mean the teacher would have to leave the community if she wanted to up-skill, in which case they would not wish to participate. At another, they wanted to be sure there would be no financial disadvantage to families if children did not wish to attend the preschool with this initiative. At a third site, where a number of different family groups, or “skin groups”, were represented, Elders wanted to know if mothers of children would still be welcome at the preschool where the teacher was not of their skin group or language. At that time the mothers, who were multilingual, translated for the children, and they wanted the assurance that the current mentoring and support would not be affected. At several sites the Elders wanted to know if their language or English would be used and, when given the choice, almost all wanted both to be used with the children, although one site wanted more English to be used. While supportive of an initiative which held the potential to improve outcomes for their children, Elders were clear that they did not want the current positives of
the preschool within their community compromised in any way. The way the introduction and the whole project unfolded ensured that they were the leaders, the decision-makers and the drivers of change of topic or focus as the project progressed over two years.

The final part of the preparation took place when the coordinator of the project met with the teachers in the preschools who would be pivotal in the success or otherwise of the program and who had already been mandated by their communities to be a part of the project. At all times, the community members were in partnership with the university academic and the researchers in the completion of this project.

Findings – two illustrative stories

The academics involved in the project worked for two years with preschool teachers, four-year-old children and their families to enhance the children’s literacy and numeracy skills on entry into formal schooling at age five. All the lecturers were non-Aboriginal but had experience in working previously with Aboriginal people. From its conception, because of the theoretical framework within which they were working, principles of the cultural interface were at the forefront. They honoured the need to harmonise with the “lived experience … the different knowledge traditions, … the many shifting and complex intersections between different people” within the communities within which they were working. Every effort was made to respect and centre Aboriginal ways of knowing being and doing, as highlighted by Martin (2003;2007;2010). The authors of this paper therefore prefer to present the finding through story-telling and narrative as exemplifying “Indigenous epistemological basis of knowledge construction” (Nakata, 2007a, p.10).

To illustrate:

(i) Literacy initiative in one site described as an example

At the start of the project in Community X, a situational analysis showed that there was little focus on written texts in the preschool. The oral tradition within the community is extremely strong, visual representation through traditional art work is highly prized and there was evidence of these in the preschool, but few books were available.

The lecturer, working with the preschool teacher who had no formal qualifications in early childhood education but who was a highly respected member of Community X, discussed how they might bring the children’s lived experience into the classroom. They trialled providing each child with a disposable camera and they took pictures of things that interested them, reflecting their lives. The pictures were uploaded into the computer and each child dictated the text for their book. Each child’s book was produced not just for that child but one for each child, and a ‘big book’ was made of each child’s story. A book case was provided to each home and the children could take their book and their friends’ books home and keep them there. They loved their books and were fascinated with their friends’ books too, “reading” them to family members and getting family members to read to them. Putting their lives at the centre was key to engaging the children and they developed an intense interest in books and reading. Many had taken photos of their tree, their river, their mountain. Some had taken photos of a fishing expedition, family members doing art work. The decision was made by Community X Elders that the text should be in English so that children would have more exposure to English prior to formal schooling. At times, however, children’s mother tongue words were used in conjunction with English if that was what the children preferred.

Next there was whole community expedition to country – their traditional lands. The Elders told dreamtime stories and they sang and danced. Photos were taken throughout and books were made of that expedition. The children were enchanted both with the stories told by the Elders, but also by the books that ensued. This was the cultural interface epitomised.

Soon, commercially produced picture books, some of which were reflective of the local Aboriginal culture, could be introduced to the preschool; by now children were completely enamoured of reading and in a preschool, which adopted a free play philosophy, the children would choose to spend protracted
periods reading, often in groups, talking and discussing, with deep concentration focussing on the fine detail of the pictures.

At the same time the teacher in the preschool became keen to up-skill and it was made possible for her to complete a Certificate III in Children’s Services during the project. There is no doubt that this early childhood educator was empowered and motivated to engage the children in literacy and numeracy activities and their transition to formal schooling has been shown to be uncomplicated in that the children had all the pre-reading skills and attitudes necessary to engage with teaching in the formal classroom (Record of Steering Committee, 2011).

Key to the success of this program was that the lecturer increasingly withdrew from being the initiator of ideas and became more coach, then mentor, then friend and equal, a learner together with the teacher. This method had several notable outcomes as it impacted positively on the positioning of the Aboriginal teacher’s self-efficacy and agency as she saw herself being successful in the western academy as well as augmenting her success and worth within her own context. Being in the role of teacher and enhancing the lecturer’s cultural capacity was a powerful outcome for both.

(ii) Numeracy initiative in another community described as an example

Community Y is surrounded by water – the ocean as well rivers and large areas becoming submerged during the Wet Season. The preschool educator quickly saw the importance of providing activities that linked to the children’s lives. At one time she therefore used the theme of fishing, with which all children were intimately familiar. Accompanied by two of the Elders, teacher and children went down to the little community harbour and counted the boats. Children chose a large leaf from a nearby tree to represent each boat they could see. Using the leaf-boats as manipulatives they then categorised them by colour. Then the teacher drew two circles in the dirt and children placed their boat in the appropriate circle depending on its categorising characteristic defined by: those that had some sort of protection from the sun and those that did not, those that had two motors and those that had one, those that had fishing rods visible and those that did not. Children moved their “boat” as necessary when the next category was discussed. One of the Elders told the dreamtime story of the formation of the river that flows into the ocean there. The children collected seashells to take back to preschool and had a picnic under a tree talking about the triangular shape of the sandwiches, the teacher also using them as concrete examples of half and quarter. On the way back to school, they popped into the supermarket which sells whole fresh fish. Children discussed the way they were set out – similar fish grouped together. They decided which were big fish and which were small fish. They counted how many of each sort there were.

Back at the preschool some children chose to make boats out of various materials available to them and to see which boats floated the best in a trough of water. Others drew fish, cut them out, and made a fish shop, then role played selling the fish to customers. Still others used the shells and sorted them by shape and colour. Soon the children were counting anything and everything demonstrating an ability to form sets; within weeks they were able to discuss how many more, how many fewer of objects there were; later many were able to combine sets. These are known to be pivotally important abilities for children on entry into formal schooling.

Fast forward to 2014

While the children in the study have not yet written a NAPLAN test which is arguably in any case not a good measure for children whose home language is not English, the children’s transition into formal schooling was much less problematic than the Elders had described in the past. Additionally, attendance rates were much better. It is not possible to say that there is a causal relationship between the initiative described in this paper and better attendance as there are just so many factors that can influence this. Nevertheless, it is the view of the early childhood educators that this has played an important and
ongoing role in improved attendance. The Elders maintain that the improved attendance is as a result of the children feeling more competent in school than previous cohorts did. Lecturers suggest that the close involvement of the Elders in the initiative had a ripple effect to the parents and that this may well have contributed too.

When NAPLAN results become available in 2015 they will be reported elsewhere. The main strength of this paper, however, is that it describes the study and its implementation within a framework that may be transferable to other initiatives that are being posited in collaboration with Aboriginal communities. These are put forward in the discussion.

Discussion

There are clear links to the model as depicted in Figure 1. At the macrosystem level, beliefs of non-Aboriginal Australians had motivated political leaders to promulgate policy and to fund initiatives to reduce the disparity in achievement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. This traversed to the exosystem level where the university was able to access the funding and conceptualise a program that might achieve those aims. At the mesosystem level the coordinator of the project, whose beliefs were influenced by her previous interactions with Aboriginal people, brought into existence a project that would have Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing as a key pillar. It was clear that the children would be developing at the cultural interface, “the contested space between two knowledge systems” as described by Nakata (2007a, p. 9). The aim of this project was to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of four-year-olds in such a way that the confluence of knowledges would help to bridge the divide, at microsystem level, between the children’s and their families cultural aspirations and those of a largely Western curriculum they would encounter on entry into formal schooling. Those aspirations encompass a broad array of elements, paramount of which is “the Indigenous epistemological basis of knowledge construction ... are embedded ... in ways of story-telling, of memory-making, in narrative, art and performance; in cultural and social practices, of relating to kin, of socialising children; in ways of thinking, of transmitting knowledge” (Nakata, 2007a, p. 10).

Driven by beliefs at a macrosystem level, the Australian government’s strategy in the NT provided funding for projects aimed at enhancing the numeracy and literacy levels of Aboriginal children on entry to formal schooling. At an exosystem level, University faculty members could access the funding and develop initiatives aspiring to achieve these aims in partnership with Elders in the remote communities. At a mesolevel, lecturers interacted with all community members, the parents, the teachers, and the children. At a microsystem level, the children and parents were engaged with the school in a common endeavour.

In the current study, it is also possible to interpret events within the nexus between transactional interactions and Nakata’s cultural interface theory. The notion has been mooted that education in Aboriginal communities is part of a larger process still ongoing in Australia – that of achieving equality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in areas of well-being, health, life expectancy and educational levels, lack of which may lead to exclusion in society. Consequently policy-makers largely embraced the world-wide trend away from deficit thinking in relation to Aboriginal people, favouring the social and bio-ecological models which see education as the ideal embraced by all as the way to have Aboriginal children stand proudly with a foot in both cultures. In terms of the model, these macrosystem elements contribute to the philosophical perspective adopted in the Belonging, Being, Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009), a national early childhood curriculum and a first for Australia. This mandatory curriculum in turn contributes to policy formation at an exo- and mesosystem level as schools analyse its potential and organise its implementation.

The move in Australia, at a macro- and exosystem level, is towards a rights based educational system that acknowledges that being, becoming and belonging will look different in a variety of contexts. While it might never be possible fully to realise social justice when we keep “wrestling with what words to use” (Tharp, 2012) to capture precisely what we mean, interpretations of social justice are usually based on the equitable distribution of social goods, and education is considered a social good
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(Buchanan, 2011; Ben-Porath, 2012). Additional aspects for interpretation are “recognition (how ... we ensure a level playing field for competition) and ... outcomes (how ... we make certain that successes are fairly distributed in relation to populations)” (Hytten & Bettez, 2011, p.11). Exclusion from the social good of education is unjust from all these perspectives when it is premised on a marginalising condition.

Therefore, at an exosystem level in Australia, education policy aspires to a system where stigmatisation and separation will cease to exist and every learner’s rights to human dignity, to education, and to equality will be realised. The literature on social justice focuses precisely on issues of ethnicity, as well as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (Applebaum, 2012; Atweh, 2011; Beswick, Sloat, & Willms, 2008; Hytten & Bettez, 2011; Ho, 2012; Jennings, 2012; Jocson, 2009; Lee, 2012; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2012) where Australia is making gains but has not been able to empower its Aboriginal people to achieve on any measures to the same level as non-Aboriginal Australians. In the proposed model, it is possible to see a positive way forward if, at an exosystem level, some adaptations indeed need to be effected to achieve successful education at the cultural interface. This was achieved with acknowledgement of the power of foregrounding Aboriginal knowledges, stories, and sense of place in the development of educational approaches. People who understand the proposed model will see themselves as having agency and not needing to lose their identity, in this case collective agency of groups within the system, such as Elders in the community, teachers, school managers, and parent groups. As such they can have an effective voice. Seen within this model stakeholders can comprehend that elements traverse all levels. If they voice criticism, dissatisfaction, suggestions, these will be heard by politicians at an exosystem or macrosystem level and changes to policy can be made which, in turn, can alter practice to the benefit of those “actors” in the centre of the model. This contribution of retaining Aboriginal identity, shown to be so important for children’s academic outcomes, is potentially empowering for people to consider as described in the current study.

The authors note the necessity of providing, within the educational system, quality education with an emphasis on all marginalised groups, however the current study brought to light the challenges of remote communities which could be informed by the challenges from Aboriginal people:

- demanding more adequate support services,
- insisting on appropriate facilities and materials,
- specifying what is currently ineffective in policies and legislation,
- voicing dissatisfaction with inadequate teacher education programs, and
- partnering with researchers to counter the lack of relevant research information.

From the findings in the current study, it is evident that local knowledge must be a non-negotiable in the curriculum. It follows, therefore, that this holds implications for initial teacher education if graduates are to be effective in meeting the educational needs of Aboriginal children in their classes. At a macrosystem level this focus has been profiled in the Professional Standards for Teachers. The focus area of Standard 1.4 is “strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students”. Standard 2.4 requires teachers to respect Aboriginal people, to understand their histories and cultures “to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians” (MCEEDYA, 2011). At a meso- and exo-system level, teacher education courses need to have a strong emphasis on specifically how teacher education students in practice have Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing in their planning for teaching to meet their needs. At a microsystem level, this can be evidenced and evaluated during their professional experience placements.

Within the proposed model, even a relatively small-scale study, such as this one, can contribute to the setting of guidelines for new studies, and as points of reference for National, State and Territory Education departments as they consider how to move forward to lessen previously described negative impacts. Policy need no longer be seen in a top-down, autocratic paradigm. Within this model, all are actors in various systems of the model. Thus, effective education for Aboriginal people can become a shared vision through ensuring an interface between cultures and not the imposition of a meaningless curriculum on children who have experiences and strengths other than those conceived of by curriculum developers.

References
Early childhood education at the cultural interface
Marguerite Maher and Lisa Buxton


Appendix A


