Indigenous Education
A Learning Journey for Teachers, Schools and Communities
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Education is an essential pathway to bridging the divide in educational attainment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. In the Australian policy contexts, Indigenous Education has been informed by a large number of reviews, reports and an extensive list of projects aimed at improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Central to each has been the investigation of the inequity of access to educational resources, the legacy of historical policies of exclusion and the lack of culturally responsive pedagogical practices that impact on Indigenous student achievement at school.

Research on best practice models for teaching Indigenous students points to the level of teachers' commitment being a crucial link to student engagement in the classroom, improvement of student self-concept and student retention rates. Most recently, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) has recognised in the National Professional Standards for Teachers, that practising teachers must attain skills in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their communities. Clearly it is time for new pedagogical practices in Indigenous education that are implemented in partnerships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

This book reports on a three-year research based study of action learning in schools that sought to enhance engagement with local Aboriginal communities, promote quality teaching and improve students' learning outcomes. The school studies come from different demographic regions in New South Wales, Australia's most populous state and showcase the achievements and challenges; highs and lows; affordances and obstacles in the development and delivery of innovative curriculum strategies for teaching Aboriginal histories and cultures in Australian schools. The findings illustrate that engaging teachers in a learning journey in collaboration with academic partners and members of local Aboriginal communities in an action learning process, can deliver innovative teaching programs over a sustained period of time. As a result schools demonstrated that these approaches do produce positive educational outcomes for teachers and students and enable authentic partnerships with Aboriginal communities.
Indigenous Education
Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy’s (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity—youth identity in particular—the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant. But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some “touchy-feely” educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education seeks to produce—literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.
Indigenous Education

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A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.


Published by: Sense Publishers,
P.O. Box 21858,
3001 AW Rotterdam,
The Netherlands
https://www.sensepublishers.com/

Printed on acid-free paper

Cover Image: Section of mural designed by Aboriginal artist Jessica Birk.
The Wellumbulla Mural is a visual acknowledgement of Country, paying homage to the Land and the Ancestors of the Northern Beaches, Sydney. Wellumbulla welcomes and celebrates the many students and their families that visit and contribute to our community.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Editors gratefully acknowledge the work of the dedicated, knowledgeable and creative group of people working tirelessly in schools or in government education departments, universities and Aboriginal organisations who have contributed to this publication. The authors of each chapter, all with a diversity of expertise and experience in the field of education, demonstrated flexibility, resolve, understanding and patience in the reiterative process of finalising each chapter.

Ethical considerations related to the conduct of research in the schools in which the New South Wales (NSW) Quality Teaching Indigenous Project (QTIP) was conducted, prevents us from naming each school and the members of the action learning teams who participated so enthusiastically in the project. Suffice to say here that all twenty schools deserve a sincere thank you for their participation in the project, for attending the project conferences with wonderful displays which detailed the progress of their work, and for communicating project outcomes to the research team through the NSW Department of Education and Training (NSW DET) (now the NSW Department of Education and Communities).

Special acknowledgement is reserved for the seven participating schools that allowed members of the research team to visit their schools, conduct interviews and focus groups, view and note wonderful examples of student work and to engage with teaching staff and the local Aboriginal community members in a collaborative sharing of knowledge, learning and expertise.

The University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) research team would like to thank most sincerely the local Aboriginal communities in which the seven schools were located for their willingness to engage with us over the lifespan of the project. They were open, welcoming and willing to share their knowledge and understandings of Aboriginal culture and history as well as their efforts to embed this local knowledge in school activities. This contributed to the overall success of the project. The academic partners who worked closely with the action learning teams also deserve acknowledgement for the advice and assistance provided to the schools participating in the project. A very special thank-you to Kerin Wood, NSW DET project officer whose was tireless in her efforts to connect regularly with each of the schools to ensure that the project progressed as flawlessly as possible given the complexities present in school contexts.

A note of thanks is also extended to members of the NSW Aboriginal Educational Consultative Group (AECG), both at the local school and state level, who provided support and advice to the project. The NSW Local Aboriginal Land Councils is acknowledged for their support of the project in a diverse range of regions in NSW.

The project would not have been possible without the commitment of funding from the Australian Government and the NSW Department of Education and Training as part of their Australian Government Quality Teacher Program (AGQTP) designed to promote quality teaching in schools.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A penultimate note of thanks to Professor John Lester from the University of Newcastle for his wise foreword to the book, to members of the Education group at UTS and the original project editorial team including Suzanne Kenney and Andrew Chodkiewicz who helped write the original report and later Kate Aubusson who streamlined the chapters for final publication. Finally, an acknowledgement of thanks to Michel Lokhurst from Sense publishing who has shown patience and support in the publication process.

We as teachers, academics and citizens of Australia, believe that education is a strong foundation for reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. We trust that this book will assist this process by empowering teachers to engage with their local Aboriginal communities and embark on a collaborative educational journey that will enrich their teaching and provide innovative and meaningful educational experiences for their students.

Nina Burridge, Frances Whalan and Karen Vaughan
I have always maintained that ‘good pedagogy for Indigenous students is good pedagogy for all students.’ The Quality Teaching Indigenous Project (QTIP) focused on improving outcomes for Indigenous students in schools hinged on the effective improvement in pedagogy that the Quality Teaching framework is soundly based. Critical areas in the Quality Teaching framework were effectively driving the project’s agenda around Cultural Knowledge. These areas included high expectations, fundamental improvement in literacy and numeracy with innovative approaches through Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and digital media technologies used successfully to engage Indigenous students. The schools involved engaged in this challenge through the effective use of Action Learning. They managed to improve student outcomes, obtain various levels of Indigenous community engagement (so essential in tackling Cultural Knowledge) and provided those Aboriginal staff, teachers and key leaders in schools, with considerable encouragement to make a difference for Aboriginal students in their respective schools. This book provides the background and achievements of these school studies to clearly articulate to varying degrees their successes. Indigenous education is primarily a game of relationships based on mutual cross cultural respect, and the hard data results of the program while critical in any evaluation, must be at least equally assessed with the quality of the learning journeys that each of the schools undertook with their Indigenous communities.

Cultural Knowledge is the element least seen in classrooms of the Quality Teaching framework in evaluations undertaken across the state by its developers Jennifer Gore and James Ladwig. Coding of thousands of teacher lessons have demonstrated that teachers seem reluctant or unsure of venturing into this space – a space, which is so critical to the ongoing successful engagement of Indigenous students in their classrooms. These school studies provide evidence that when well supported and specifically trained (or in these cases undertaking Action Learning) teachers take the plunge and engage fruitfully and meaningfully with their Indigenous community in genuine lessons around Cultural Knowledge. The school studies highlight some of the positive learning outcomes that were achieved. With the additional support of innovative teaching practices and current technologies, designed by the teachers, and in close collaboration with Indigenous workers in the schools and their Indigenous communities, Indigenous students can be engaged with improved outcomes from schooling.

Teachers and schools cannot effectively engage in teaching Aboriginal studies or perspectives without meaningful engagement with the Indigenous community and without whole school responsibility for this engagement. Indigenous community members generally give their time voluntarily, have limited time and cannot be engaged on a piecemeal basis. The school studies reaffirmed the need to ensure Aboriginal studies was clearly a holistic responsibility of the school to ensure the effective use of busy Indigenous community members. Most
critically, ensuring high quality scope and sequence around implementation of Aboriginal studies/perspectives were effectively managed and systematically implemented in each school. While there is ample evidence in the school studies of effective engagement with the Indigenous community it was disappointing to note that Aboriginal parent involvement didn’t enjoy the same levels of engagement. While at least one school mentioned the important role of Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) for Indigenous students as part of the process of increasing this level of active collaborative student management, parents/carers roles must be given at least equal levels of engagement as the broader Indigenous community partnerships so evident in the examples were afforded.

It was pleasing to see demonstrated the movement away from traditional Aboriginal society as the starting point for implementation of Cultural Knowledge. Indigenous communities rightfully demand that Aboriginal studies/perspectives should be grounded in the here and now in our communities. Obviously at some stage there will be a need for mapping back from contemporary times to building understanding of the social and cultural traditions which underpin our contemporary lives. It is so easy for unthinking, isolated educators with little or no contact with their local Indigenous community to treat contemporary Aboriginal society as invisible and only foster static pictures of traditional society captured in time and space, with no acknowledgement of the enormous changes that have taken place in the last 200 plus years. Perhaps our biggest achievement is illustrated by what Dr Robert Morgan once said to a journalist some 30 odd years ago when asked “what is the most important thing you celebrate during NAIDOC?” He quickly responded with “Our survival as peoples in this country.”

The Action Learning model encouraged in this project provided several important criteria for success. The project’s strength lay in the responsibility for the program resting with those volunteers in the school who formed the team to drive the project agenda. The most successful teams were based on a ‘facilitative leadership’ model which empowered all participants. In the stronger teams their success was further cemented with maximising genuine Indigenous partnerships with both Indigenous staff and local Indigenous communities. This model could only have existed with the support of noted school leadership which provide the mandate for such high levels of individual collaborative management freedom.

The unique capacity to be supported by academic partners together with Kerin Wood’s project management skills proved invaluable in most school sites. The success of such support was heavily reliant on the match between the academic partner’s skills, knowledge and capacity with the project’s aims and direction. There is clear evidence in this book that such partnerships were productive for teachers, students and Indigenous communities. If given the flexibility to mix and match project stages with appropriate academic partners’ attributes, the better the potential outcome. Overwhelmingly, the role and levels of positive support, especially at critical clarifying points of the project, proved invaluable.

Of critical importance in the project evaluation were the messages around sustainability of the school projects. Fundamentally it was consistently recognised that sustainability in any significant form was reliant on two prime conditions,
teachers’ limited time and funding to provide the opportunity for the key elements around aspects of action learning like teacher reflection. While I understand busy timetables and teaching responsibilities, it is professionally unsound to marginalise Indigenous education action to an additional load that needs special funding. Indigenous students demand the same attention as any group in a school and while outcomes remain minimal for these students, schools must accept their mainstream responsibilities for effectively engaging them in the day to day inclusive educational good practices like the ones demonstrated in this book. The challenge to principals and teachers is to establish the means to achieve similar outcomes through ‘bolted in’ not ‘bolted on’ strategic approaches.

I was interested and intrigued by several of the key milestones some of the hung their successful outcomes on – Aboriginal murals, bush tucker gardens, flying the Aboriginal Flag and specialised Aboriginal resource/support rooms being established. The first Aboriginal education policy was launched in 1982 and I would have thought that given its looming 30 year anniversary that schools would have moved considerably beyond such important milestones. It just reaffirms that this battle still continues and it will only be won by ensuring Quality Teaching, Cultural Knowledge and ensuring inclusive classrooms are conquered one by one as this project has exemplified.

Educational equity for Indigenous students will not come easily. Many more teachers and educational leaders will need to be recruited to make a difference. However, there is no greater indictment on our profession as the apparent inability to educate what is only around 2.5% of the Australian population. I applaud those teachers, Indigenous educators, principals, Indigenous parents/carers and community who will take the lessons here and build on them to ensure our Indigenous students’ futures in this country.

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ABORIGINAL EDUCATION POLICY CONTEXTS AND LEARNING PATHWAYS

INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal education in Australian policy contexts have been informed by a large number of reviews and reports. Central to each has been the investigation of injustice, inequity of access to educational resources, racism and discrimination that impact on Aboriginal students’ access to educational opportunities offered to mainstream students. As the recent review of Aboriginal education in New South Wales found “education systems around the nation have been unable to deliver the same levels of success for Aboriginal students as they do for other students” (NSW AECG & NSW DET, 2004, p. 12). Absenteeism and suspensions, high mobility, low (English) literacy and numeracy skills, a culturally exclusive curriculum and low retention rates for Aboriginal students have acted to alienate their engagement in school activities that offer educational opportunities to most mainstream students. Consequently the endemic gap in educational achievement and outcomes for Aboriginal students has been and continues to be the focus for successive Commonwealth and State governments. Over many decades, Australian governments and education systems have attempted to craft solutions to decisively address systemic inequalities for Australia’s Aboriginal students.

A common theme emerging from a plethora of reviews and subsequent reports is that a long history of poor outcomes for Aboriginal students is rooted in complex social, cultural, environmental, economic and health factors which in concert comprise and disadvantage the achievement prospects for Aboriginal students (NSW AECG & NSW DET, 2004). Even with the best intentions and injection of considerable funding and system-wide approaches for improving Aboriginal students’ academic achievement, governments and education systems have failed to address this achievement gap. Traditional approaches such as setting achievement targets without attention to what will change the pedagogy in classrooms and professional development for teachers and developing a deep understanding of local Aboriginal culture and history has not achieved the desired outcomes.

Clearly it was time for new approaches that focused on what could be addressed in the classroom with quality teachers who undertook new ways of including Aboriginal education in their teaching and learning implemented in partnerships with local Aboriginal communities. Junaaygam arising from the review of Aboriginal education in New South Wales were drawn from consistent messages arising from the data. Extending quality teaching and learning, applying Aboriginal cultural knowledge and collaborating in partnerships with local Aboriginal communities were the key themes along with the specific recommendations that underpinned an initiative for whole school reform through professional learning. These approaches represent only part of a solution and will have limited success if
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issues such social dislocation, disengagement with schooling, teacher negative attitudes and low expectations for Aboriginal students are not also addressed. In addition, new approaches and building greater understanding of the benefits of integrating local Aboriginal culture and history into the curriculum for all students as opposed to an “alternative curriculum” for Aboriginal students was required.

The study of action learning and Aboriginal education discussed in this book arises from a systemic vision for reforming teacher professional learning, forming and strengthening partnerships with local Aboriginal communities, by taking a new approach to including local Aboriginal culture and history through *Quality Teaching* (NSW DET, 2003). Schools’ participation in the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project (QTIP) reported in this book was a targeted initiative to address specific recommendations in *The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* (2004) highlighting professional learning on Indigenous issues found to improve Aboriginal student learning and engagement. In addition, the New South Wales model of pedagogy, as described in *Quality Teaching in New South Wales Public Schools* (May 2003), informed professional learning activities in the project schools. Teachers were selected to join school-based action learning teams and then to identify their professional learning needs and design their projects. The teams engaged in cycles of action learning to implement their projects. Among the main aims of the project was to provide teachers with the opportunity to strengthen their professional learning about Aboriginal cultural knowledge and its application in culturally appropriate pedagogical practices in the classroom. The ultimate objective was improving student engagement and learning outcomes as well as to strengthen relationships with the local Aboriginal community.

*Overview of the Chapters*

The book details a study of Aboriginal education in three parts. Part One introduces the policy context for Aboriginal education in schools in New South Wales, Australia’s most populous state. It also summarises the findings from a project for school-based professional development specifically designed to integrate Aboriginal cultures and histories into teaching and learning in twenty schools. Chapters in Part Two provide detailed commentary on seven schools who participated in the project. Each school story provides unique insights into how schools and communities can form sustained partnerships that impact on the quality of teaching and learning for Aboriginal and non Aboriginal students. Part Three outlines a way forward arising from the findings of the project.

*PART ONE*

Chapter One provides the policy context for Aboriginal education in New South Wales schools. Changes in policy direction calling for new approaches to diminish the achievement gap for Aboriginal students through investment in reforming teacher professional development are examined. Nina Burridge and Andrew Chodkiewicz provide an account of how Aboriginal education in New South Wales
INTRODUCTION

and indeed nationally, is marked by a number of distinct periods from colonial attempts to segregate and deny access to educational services for Aboriginal students to policy contexts aimed at closing the gap created by the injustices, racism and inequality created by previous policies and social attitudes. Aboriginal education policies in New South Wales provide an overview of the development of Aboriginal education in a historical context from 1788 to the present. Commentary in this chapter covers periods of major policy shifts that until the late 1960s saw Aboriginal children suffer under a system of discrimination that variously separated, segregated, excluded, ‘protected’ or removed them from their families. The contribution of the discussion on the policy shifts provides a context for a deeper understanding of current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education programs and policies that seek to enable Indigenous children and young people to gain access to educational opportunities offered to all students.

Frances Whalan and Kerin Wood follow in Chapter Two with a discussion of the historical policy contexts in ‘Action learning based professional development’ which introduces a systemic approach to whole school reform focused on integrating Aboriginal cultures and histories into whole school pedagogical approaches. This chapter further outlines how The Quality Teaching Indigenous Project in New South Wales grew from an imperative to enhance Aboriginal students’ learning based on specific recommendations from The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education (2004), while also integrating Aboriginal cultures and histories in high quality pedagogy for all students. School projects focused on making local Aboriginal cultural knowledge relevant to non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous students, and aimed to raise all students’ understanding of, and engagement with, local Aboriginal cultural knowledge. Principles for developing inclusive learning environments by focusing changes in teaching practices through school-based professional development are outlined. The importance of addressing Aboriginal cultures and histories within State curriculum frameworks to develop teachers’ deep knowledge, skills and values that strengthen the sense of Aboriginal identity and understanding among a whole community is elaborated. As such this chapter sets the scene for the following chapters that document school-based initiatives to address specific recommendations in The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education (2004).

An overview of research methods and findings is presented in Chapter Three. Nina Burridge, Andrew Chodkiewicz and Frances Whalan summarise the analysis and findings arising from an evaluation of the impact on participating schools. The research methodology was designed to capture evidence of the extent to which: teachers and their teaching practices were inclusive of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and how this changed as a result of the project; the impact these inclusive practices had on teacher and student learning, and in particular on how they enhance learning for Aboriginal students; and the effectiveness of collaboration with local Aboriginal communities in teaching and learning practices in enhancing learning outcomes for students. The analysis provided insights into teachers’ professional learning in terms of how the schools developed inclusive partnerships with local Aboriginal communities and how teachers valued the time afforded by the project resources to
INTRODUCTION

reflect on their pedagogical practices, and to work collaboratively with colleagues and community on improving their teaching practice. Finally in this chapter analysis of the data about the impact of these inclusive practices on teacher and student learning is reported.

PART TWO

The seven chapters in Part Two highlight a range of professional development practices teachers participated in to better integrate Aboriginal cultures and histories into classroom pedagogy. Each of the school studies in different contexts describes how teachers developed a deeper understanding of the importance of local Aboriginal cultural perspectives in their teaching. In Chapter Four, Stacey Quince exemplifies how engaging students through using a range of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) was the pedagogical underpinning for integrating Aboriginal cultures and histories for Year 7 students at Coral Secondary School. At this school the project focused on teacher professional development as an integral part of the reform process to ensure that teachers gained the knowledge required, both in terms of engaging with Aboriginal cultural perspectives and in developing ICT skills to support student learning. Aboriginal student engagement in the development of ICT projects gave the students a sense of ownership and identity. The school’s approach empowered the students by recognising and acknowledging in a substantial way their important personal connection with their culture. This ensured the students had a voice in how their cultural identity and knowledge was represented within their school community.

In the next chapter Nina Burridge and Christine Evans provide insights into a unique secondary school context for Aboriginal students. Magenta Secondary School hosts a very small, but significant, enrolment of Aboriginal students, most of whom come from rural and regional areas. The school action learning project team focused on developing this group of students’ self-identity through research into family histories and personal narratives. Students’ personal stories became e-narratives incorporating In Design, Photoshop, Marvin and other software programs to build interactive stories of their Country and families. In this chapter the project team’s challenge was to make connections with the parents and the home communities of their Aboriginal students. In this school, the complexities that arose from the unique residential nature of Aboriginal students’ school attendance shaped the project team’s action learning focus. Questions of whose cultural knowledge was accessed to inform the perspectives on Aboriginal cultural knowledge are examined and how the challenges were addressed by the strategies adopted by the project team.

Carmine School’s ICT focus for action learning in the development of the Wiradjuri cultural activity is highlighted in Chapter Six. Again Nina Burridge and Christine Evans capture the unique context of Carmine School that caters for students in the Kindergarten-Year 12 range with special medical needs from disadvantaged backgrounds. Students, mostly from regional and remote areas,
INTRODUCTION

attend the school for short periods of time. A significant proportion of students accessing the services of Carmine School are Aboriginal children. Digital media featured as a continual stream of activity throughout the duration of the project with teachers and Aboriginal community members confirming an increase in students’ literacy engagement as a result. The literacy-based, digital media innovation combined interactive whiteboard technology and conventionally published resources within the school collection. The teamwork of an Aboriginal teacher and a local Aboriginal community member produced an engaging and innovative teaching and learning resource that could be utilised by teachers using digital media.

The following four chapters highlight the processes of change undertaken by the school action learning teams in four New South Wales primary schools. In these schools most teachers were able to make positive changes in how they approached their teaching, in particular in their awareness and understanding of Aboriginal cultures. In this way the school projects contributed to incremental progress and positive change, in the sense that schools and school educators were acknowledging and valuing local Aboriginal cultures, histories and knowledge. This is exemplified in Indigo Primary School where the focus of the action learning project was on improving literacy for all students with particular attention to the literacy needs of Aboriginal students. This chapter makes a significant contribution to understanding how school and Aboriginal communities can form partnerships based on respect, reconciliation and shared responsibility for students’ learning through teachers’ enhanced awareness of Aboriginal cultural knowledge. Christine Evans and Geoffrey Riordan describe the inquiry process leading to defining and embracing of Aboriginal cultural knowledge that was at the forefront of the action team’s professional learning and symbolically represented in the tangible and visible recognition of Aboriginal culture at Indigo Primary School.

The next chapter recounts a different perspective on Aboriginal community engagement. Peter Aubusson and Karen Vaughan in Chapter Eight describe how the teachers at Teal Primary School were aware that they faced particular and significant challenges in educating Aboriginal students. Many teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the extent to which they had previously addressed the challenge of improving students’ literacy and numeracy achievement and they themselves identified that they were falling short of achieving what they wanted to achieve for their students. The project focus gave teachers a reason to engage in professional conversations stimulated by professional learning workshops, meeting with Elders, and consideration of a variety of strategies that supported teachers to address problems in innovative ways. The outcomes arising from the project are described in this chapter as: strengthened engagement between the Aboriginal community and the school; and teachers’ professional learning aligned to the learning needs of Aboriginal students. Fundamental to these outcomes was the development of mutual understanding and trust between the teachers and the local Aboriginal community.

In Crimson School’s story, Suzanne Kenney and Karen Vaughan describe the transformation from teachers seeking to build the students’ cultural background
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knowledge and literacy skills in Year 1 to embedding cultural background knowledge in the whole school’s Accelerated Literacy program in Stages 1, 2 and 3. This chapter describes the process teachers in the action learning team applied to lead and coordinate the embedding of a whole-school approach for teaching literacy. Fundamental to the transformation to a whole school literacy approach that embedded Aboriginal cultural knowledge was the contribution of a very active and highly valued Aboriginal Education Officer. This school study highlights how the action learning team guided and led colleagues to incorporate multiple foci using a range of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), local Aboriginal cultural knowledge and whole school literacy processes to improve students’ literacy achievement particularly in the early years.

In Chapter Ten Karen Vaughan, Peter Aubusson and Heather Edwards describe how the main focus of the project at Maroon Primary School was to improve students’ writing performance. ‘Wrapped in Writing’ engaged and developed students’ skills and understandings in Literacy (English), Indigenous Perspectives and Identities, Science and Technology, and Interactive Communication Technologies (ICT). This chapter’s contribution is a demonstration of what is possible through an inclusive approach for teaching literacy skills. The project had embraced a philosophy of inclusion ensuring Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge was represented in all Key Learning Areas in significant and relevant ways. This school story highlights the very strong and sustainable connections made with the local Aboriginal community.

PART THREE

In the final chapter of this book, Nina Burridge and Andrew Chodkiewicz summarise the central elements identified as contributing to the success of school action learning projects. They elucidate a central theme to improving educational attainment of Aboriginal students as being the level of teacher commitment to the professional development programs and strategies. Such processes focused on improving teacher quality in the development and delivery of innovative curriculum strategies for teaching Aboriginal history and cultures in Australian schools as noted in the previous chapters. They argue, teacher commitment implies not just having the pedagogical skills for quality teaching, but the resilience and the capacity to break through some of the barriers that arise in the implementation and eventual success of whole school change programs. The chapter concludes with a model schools can use to inform whole school and community approaches to integrating Aboriginal education in teaching and learning for all students. The model places teacher commitment as the central focus supported by a whole school approach and community involvement that values communicating and maintaining positive relationships with local Aboriginal communities.
NOTE


REFERENCES


A Note on Terminology

In New South Wales government agencies and organisations such as the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group policy documents use the term “Aboriginal” when referring to Australians residing in New South Wales who are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent. The term “Indigenous” is the preferred term used by Commonwealth government agencies when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, policies, programs and activities. The terms “Aboriginal” and “Indigenous” are not used interchangeably in this book. Aboriginal people, education and students are referred to except where a formal policy or context uses the term “Indigenous.”
PART ONE
1. AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION POLICIES IN THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

The history of the education of Aboriginal children in NSW since 1788 and in other states of Australia, covers periods of major policy shifts that until the late 1960s saw Aboriginal children suffer under a system of discrimination that variously separated, segregated, excluded, ‘protected’ or removed them from their families. It is important to revisit this history by highlighting aspects of these policy shifts, as they provide the context for a deeper understanding of current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education programs and policies that seek to enable Indigenous children and young people to gain access to educational opportunities offered to all students.

It is well established that before colonisation Aboriginal peoples maintained complex social, political and cultural kinship systems encompassing customary laws, lore and learning that explained their conceptual understandings of the intricate interconnections between their world, their land and their environment. As Allison Cadzow from the Board of Studies in NSW (2007) saw it, Aboriginal people had “sophisticated education practices and systems based on spoken knowledge and teaching by experience and observation”. Yet throughout the 19th and first part of the 20th centuries, Aboriginal lands were forcibly taken away and Aboriginal ways of life destroyed, with little respect, recognition or valuing of Aboriginal cultures, languages, histories or ways of education and learning.

Aboriginal peoples’ histories, cultures and experiences, and most importantly the impact of invasion on their existence has often been written out of the Australian historical record in what the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner in his seminal Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) 1968 Boyer lectures, After the Dreaming, noted was underpinned by a ‘cult of forgetfulness’:

What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale (Stanner 1969, 2009).

We cite this because it was at this point in history, following the success of the 1967 Referendum that enabled constitutional recognition of Aboriginal peoples as part of the Australian nation, (Calma 2009), that federal and state governments were empowered to address the rights of Aboriginal children to education and develop more inclusive and progressive policies towards this end.
In Australia’s federal system, education has always primarily been a state responsibility. This chapter details in brief, a number of the distinct policy periods in the state of NSW, from the early years through to the key policy developments since the 1980s to illustrate the discriminatory policies that existed in all Australian states related to the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and subsequent policies to correct this injustice. The aim is to place in a historical context, current Aboriginal education policies and the attempts to ‘close the gap’ between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students’ attainment rates. In this way the policy review provides a view into how this gap has developed. But more importantly it sets the scene for the chapters that follow, which showcase examples of school education initiatives that are consultative and seek to incorporate Aboriginal people and Aboriginal cultural knowledge and protocols into their teaching and learning.

POLICY PERIODS

The history of Aboriginal education policies in NSW in the years after colonisation, from the early 1800s through until the mid 1960s can be categorised into a number of distinct periods described by Partington (1998) as the Mission period, the Protection era, and the Assimilation period. These periods were marked variously by concern for the well being and welfare of Aboriginal children, based on a belief in the need to teach and civilise Aboriginal people, while at the same time implementing policies of exclusion, separation, segregation, and forcible removal of Aboriginal children (Parbury, 1999). In keeping with colonial attitudes of the day the education of Aboriginal peoples was initially linked with a missionary zeal to ‘Christianise’ and ‘civilise’, in order to eradicate the vestiges of what were seen as ‘primitive’ cultures and replace them with a European way of life (Partington, 1998). This led to a set of misguided policies that saw first the creation of Mission schools, then after a brief period of improved access to government schools in the 1870s the passing of restrictive regulations in the 1880s, into a period that is called the Protection Era, and from the late 1930s into what was described as the Assimilation period.

Over this time other policies were also put in place that allowed for the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families, as well as the removal of Aboriginal children from schools under the essentially racist ‘clean, clad and courteous’ and ‘exclusion on demand’ policies that began from the early 1880’s (Fletcher 1989). Removal of children from families was sanctioned under the Aborigines Protection Act of 1909, and together with the ability of schools to exclude Aboriginal children this led to the creation of a separate and inferior system of education for Aboriginal children across NSW. This system sanctioned a debased curriculum that focused on teaching manual skills under the assumption that Aboriginal people would be better suited to work as domestic labour for ‘white’ masters or employers. It is important to note here that the capacity for principals to exclude Aboriginal children from schools was in place...
in NSW until 1972, when it was finally removed from the NSW Teachers handbook (Parbury, 1999).

The Native Institution and the Mission Period

Schooling as we know it was not seen as one of the responsibilities of government during the early part of the colonial era in NSW. Any schools that were established at that time were set up and operated by churches or charities. So it comes as a surprise to discover that the NSW government, under Governor Macquarie, set up in 1814 one of the first government funded educational organisations in NSW, specifically to provide an education for what were then described as ‘Native’ children. Called the Native Institution it was built at Parramatta where it operated until it closed in 1821, and was rebuilt at what was then called Black Town, before it was finally closed down in 1830. The transcript of the legislation to establish the Native Institution shows that the Governor saw the Native Institution as a way of improving the living conditions for Aboriginal people (State Records NSW, 2003). Children were to learn reading, writing and arithmetic, with boys being instructed in agriculture, mechanical arts and manufacture, while girls learned needle-work. An important feature of the Native Institution was that it ran as a boarding school for children aged between four and seven years old on entry. Often these children had been removed from their families and placed in the care of the Superintendent of the Institution (Brook & Kohen, 1991).

One of the remarkable stories from this time was that of young Maria Locke. According to the Australian Dictionary of Biography (2006), Maria was born at Richmond in 1805, the daughter of Yarramundi who was the chief of the Richmond Tribes. Maria was sent to the Native Institution when it started. Aged 14 in 1819 she won first prize in that year’s school examination competition, ahead of twenty other children from the Native Institution and the European school students in Sydney who took part.

After this early attempt by the government to provide schooling to some Aboriginal children, schooling in general remained in the hands of church run and charitable organisations. During what is called the Mission period, which Partington (1998) dates in NSW from the 1830s, various charitable and church run mission schools were set up in a number of locations across NSW. Among the aims of the Mission schools were to teach Aboriginal children basic literacy skills, some work skills and more importantly for the children to learn about the Christian religion. Education in this period was seen, according to Partington (1998), as a way of civilising Aboriginal people, “to teach them Christianity and the Western way of life and to rescue them from their heathen ways” (p. 33).

Even so, this period also saw the first moves by the NSW government to take on a major responsibility for school education, alongside charities and churches. It did this in 1848 by establishing a secular Board of National Education that operated alongside a religious schools board. From the beginning, a striking feature of the
Board of National Education’s policies was its exclusion of Aboriginal children from all government schools. Aboriginal people were referred to as ‘Blacks’ and the Board noted that it regarded that under the existing Colonial situation, that it was “impracticable to provide any form of educational facilities for the children of the Blacks” (Parbury 1999, p. 67).

**Access to Schools and the Protection Era**

The policy of exclusion of Aboriginal children from government schools continued for the most part up until the next major policy period, the Protection Era, which began in the early 1880s. Although according to Cazdow’s timeline (2007) there were some examples of Aboriginal children gaining access to government primary schools. As early as the 1870s there were examples of Aboriginal children being enrolled successfully in government schools in NSW, for example at Rooty Hill in Sydney where at least 25 Aboriginal children lived (Fletcher, 1989). Then for a short time, limited new opportunities emerged following historic legislative action taken by the NSW Government led by Henry Parkes. It passed the *Public Instruction Act 1880* which for the first time introduced free, secular and compulsory, primary school education that was meant to be open to all children in NSW.

The Act resulted in a rapid expansion in the number of children attending school overall, including an increase in the number of Aboriginal children enrolled in local public primary schools. Figures from a census conducted by the Protector of Aborigines in 1882 showed that out of an Aboriginal school aged population of 1500, about 200 Aboriginal children were enrolled in schools, including government and Mission schools across NSW (Cazdow, 2007). For example, Aboriginal children were admitted to Botany Heads School at La Perouse in 1883 and Wallaga Lake Aboriginal School in 1887. A number of Aboriginal schools were also established, such as Warangesda Aboriginal School in 1880 and Brungle Aboriginal School in 1883 (Cazdow, 2007). While in some localities access was being expanded, in other localities public schools could at the discretion of the school principal, or as a result of objections by parents, exclude Aboriginal students, simply because of their racial origin.

After what turned out to be a very brief period of improved access to school education for Aboriginal children, government policy turned towards the notion of ‘protection’. The Aboriginal Protection Board was established in 1883 giving it the power to control Aboriginal people. Once enacted into law, this policy led to further separation of Aboriginal communities onto segregated government run stations or reserves. It also impacted on schooling, with Aboriginal children on reserves being required to attend Aboriginal only schools established on the reserves. The experiences for those outside the reserves varied, with some children, while being able to enrol in a local school, were still placed into a segregated class. Others were able to attend other Aboriginal only schools. Even so there continued to be examples of Aboriginal
children being expelled, excluded or prevented from attending school. Cazdow’s timeline shows that while Aboriginal students were able to attend schools at Botany Heads, Rooty Hill, and Sandringham, among the many expulsions and exclusions noted was the case at Yass Public School in 1883 where 15 Aboriginal students were expelled after complaints were made by parents at the school (Cazdow, 2007; Fletcher, 1989). The NSW government further increased the protection powers in 1909. Under the *Aborigines Protection Act 1909–1936*, the NSW Aboriginal Protection Board was allowed to focus on what were described as ‘neglected’ Aboriginal children and given the power to forcibly remove these children from their families and place them into institutional care.

In reflecting further on Cazdow’s timeline of key NSW schooling events, in what is overall a very bleak history of Aboriginal schooling from the colonial era through until the 1970s, there were a number of notable moments of struggle, resistance, and achievement by Aboriginal children, families and communities. In some cases Aboriginal parents struggled openly against school policies or moved their families to communities which were more accepting of Aboriginal children attending the local school.

By the mid 1920s in NSW Aboriginal people began to organise, speak out and argue for their rights. Some took part in community based actions, such as those organised by the first politically active Aboriginal group to emerge in NSW, the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA). Formed by Frank Maynard in 1924, the Association set out to fight the NSW Protection Board and its role in the taking of Aboriginal reserve lands and to secure basic civil rights for Aboriginal people. The AAPA was well organised and publicly vocal for about three years, holding street rallies, meetings, conferences, writing letters and even sending petitions to the NSW government and the King of England (Maynard, 1997). Among its concerns was the struggle against the removal of children from their families and the exclusion of Aboriginal children from schools.

At that time Aboriginal people on the south coast of NSW were also involved in a historic protest at Bateman’s Bay Public School in 1925. After Aboriginal children were excluded from the school, local Aboriginal people wrote a protest letter to the King of England George V (Cazdow, 2007; Fletcher, 1989). Although only short lived, the AAPA ceased operating in 1928 and school exclusions continued, these kinds of actions were an important step along the way towards greater recognition of Aboriginal rights and access to a better education for children.

**The Assimilation Period**

The Assimilation period emerged following the first Commonwealth and States conference on Aboriginal matters in 1937, which concluded that “the destiny of the native of Aboriginal origin, but not 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” (Parbury, 1999 p. 71).

The policy was adopted in NSW following a NSW Public Service Board inquiry in 1939 that identified major problems with the education for Aboriginal people. The Board recommended that assimilation as opposed to segregation policies were needed in school education. A year later the abolition of the Aboriginal Protection Board saw the responsibility for Aboriginal education formally transferred for the first time to the NSW Department of Education.

Towards the end of this period, according to Cazdow (2007), from the mid 1940s through the 1950s and early 1960s, resistance to segregation continued to grow and Aboriginal communities began to publicly struggle, organise and campaign for the acceptance of the rights of Aboriginal people, including the end of educational segregation and exclusion of Aboriginal students from NSW government schools.

Aboriginal people also started to make a series of notable achievements in the education field. In 1956 the first Aboriginal teaching graduates in NSW began teaching in government schools on the north coast. Important community led education initiatives also followed. A year later in Sydney in 1957, Tranby Aboriginal College began as the first Aboriginal community based co-operative centre in NSW providing adult education and training for Aboriginal people. The first Aboriginal Education Consultative Committee (AECC) in NSW was formed in 1963 to consult and lobby on education issues on behalf of Aboriginal people.

Educationally the lead up to the 1967 referendum was also notable because a year prior in 1966, Charles Perkins became the first Aboriginal person in NSW and Australia to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Sydney. While this was a major achievement at the time, as Tom Calma, the Racial Discrimination Commissioner reminded us in 2009, Australia still lagged behind many other countries, including New Zealand, where in 1893 the first Maori University graduate, Apirana Ngata, had gained a degree in political science.

STRUGGLE AND ACHIEVEMENTS AFTER 1967

A major turning point for Aboriginal people came with the passing of the 1967 federal referendum, when for the first time Aboriginal people were accorded full citizenship rights, including an important right related to education. For the first time the Australian government had the power to legislate and provide program support for Indigenous students across the country (Calma, 2009). This led in 1969 to the establishment of the first Commonwealth Aboriginal Secondary School Grants Scheme that provided a Commonwealth scholarship to Aboriginal students to assist them to stay on at primary school (Partington, 1998). Following the federal election of the Labor government in 1972, the scholarship program was expanded to include students at secondary schools. At a state level another major administrative step was taken, finally in 1972, school principals in NSW government schools were
no longer allowed to exclude Aboriginal students from school, because of their conditions at home or because of opposition from the local community.

Actions at a federal level also led to further empowerment of Aboriginal communities and the emergence of Aboriginal voices working for educational change. An important role in the development of Aboriginal education policies was played by members of the Aboriginal communities through community based advocacy organisations. In 1975 as a result of efforts by the Commonwealth Schools Commission an Aboriginal Consultative Group was set up to advise the Commission on Aboriginal education. This then led to the formation in each state of state Aboriginal education consultative groups, including the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) in NSW.

Policy Firsts

In the period that followed the steps taken in the 1960s and 1970s, a number of education policy firsts were achieved. In NSW the first Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP) was issued in 1982. As a policy document it was seen at the time as controversial and revolutionary, having its roots in the activism of the 1960s and 1970s, and driven by what was seen as the need for strong affirmative action to be taken to tackle the evident levels of Aboriginal educational disadvantage (Parbury, 1999).

As the first policy of its kind in Australia it was developed in collaboration with the NSW AECG and set out guidelines for the use of more appropriate pedagogical practices when working with Aboriginal children, emphasising the need for schools to consult with their local Aboriginal communities. This policy was complemented by support documents to assist teachers to implement the policy in their schools. In 1987 it became mandatory for schools to incorporate the policy into their curriculum (Parbury, 1999). An investigation of the policy’s implementation in schools was conducted by the NSW Department of School Education. While the results were never officially released, unofficially it was noted that very few schools had engaged with the spirit of the policy and in its implementation (Crawford et al., 1992).

It is important to note that during this period the first National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP) was released by the Australian government in 1989. It sought to co-ordinate responsibility for Aboriginal education between the various States through cooperative, long term strategies that were linked to federal funding (Paterson, 2002). The goals of the NAEP were similar to those of the NSW policy in seeking to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students across Australia. An extensive review of the policy was conducted in 1994 that included a set of 44 recommendations on specific directions for actions across all educational sectors. Under the auspices of these policies, both State and Federal governments produced additional and more specific policy documents that were geared to identified needs of Aboriginal school student populations.
After the first state and federal policies were put in place during the 1980s a number of major policy revisions followed. A revised Aboriginal Education Policy was released in NSW in 1996. It was developed after a very critical report on the implementation of the 1982 policy in schools conducted by Charles Sturt University on behalf of the NSW Department of School Education in 1992 (Crawford, 1992). The new policy was directed at all students, all staff and all schools. It also provided allocated funding to schools for the professional development of teachers to assist them with the implementation process. There was also funding for the education of parents – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents – on the place of Aboriginal education and culture in the curriculum. Importantly the policy required principals to report back to the Department on its implementation over a five year period.

The policy was again reviewed in 2004 by the Department together with the NSW AECG (NSW DET & AECG, 2004). The report concluded that while there are some schools and communities where “good things are happening, where Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people work together to prepare the next generations for positive futures” (p. 181), there were many others where the attitudes were “defensive or ambivalent” (p. 181). The report tabled recommendations surrounding the following nine themes that needed urgent attention:

- strengthening policy, planning and implementation
- extending quality teaching and learning
- fortifying identities of Aboriginal students
- engaging Aboriginal students
- applying Aboriginal Cultural Knowledge
- collaborating in partnerships
- building community capacity
- challenging racism
- advancing leadership and accountability.

It recommended that an Aboriginal Education and Training Action Plan should be developed in collaboration with other agencies of government and Aboriginal organisations in order to address these key issues.

In 2009 the policy was again revised and launched as the Aboriginal Education and Training Policy. It defined the NSW Department of Education and Training’s commitments to Aboriginal education and training in schools (including where relevant, preschools), TAFE Institutes and community education settings. It was developed in collaboration with key partners, including Aboriginal communities, to provide policy advice for all employees of the Department (NSW DET, 2009).
During this period the Australian government in conjunction with state and territory governments, revised its Aboriginal policies several times, carrying out major investigations into improving the educational attainment of Aboriginal students at all levels of the education spectrum. At the time of writing the major initiative the *Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010–2014* was being implemented. The Plan identifies national, jurisdictional and local action in six priority domains that evidence shows will contribute to improved outcomes in Indigenous education. The diagram below taken from the *Action Plan* illustrates the six priority areas to be targeted by governments.

![Diagram](Image)

*Figure 1. Conceptual overview of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010–14.*

In contributing to the goals of the *Action Plan* governments across Australia have agreed to take urgent action to try to close the gap between the life outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, including a special focus on preschool and school education. To help drive the implementation of the Closing the Gap strategy, the Prime Minister, Premiers and Chief Ministers agreed through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to six ambitious targets of which the Action Plan is one. These targets aim to:
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• close the life expectancy gap within a generation
• halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade
• ensure all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years (by 2013)
• halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade (by 2018)
• at least halve the gap in Indigenous Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates (by 2020) and
• halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade (by 2018). (MCEECDYA, 2010).

CONCLUSION

This chapter outlines the relevant early education policies related to the education of Aboriginal children in NSW as an example of what was generally happening in all states and territories of Australia. Many of the early policies were laden with preconceived colonialist, ethnocentric and civilising notions of race and culture, their implementation proved very detrimental to the well being of Aboriginal people. More recently, however, the policies of the latter part of the 20th Century were developed in a more consultative way, inclusive of Aboriginal voices, and were therefore more responsive to the needs of Aboriginal children, communities and protocols.

There have been many revisions and updates of Aboriginal education policies since the 1970s, at both a state and national levels. These policies were designed to provide the policy frameworks for academics, teachers and school leaders to implement successful education programs related to Australia’s Aboriginal histories and cultures for all students. As they are such an essential part of Australia’s unique national identity, it important Aboriginal histories and cultures are valued, recognised and respected.

Recent policies have also been designed to assist teachers to gain a greater understanding of the complexities of teaching Aboriginal students in ways that:

• value their cultural heritages
• are collaborative and inclusive of their local Aboriginal community, and
• most importantly, they teach in ways that value what Aboriginal students bring with them into their classrooms.

Finally it is intended that these policies will be implemented through a whole school approach to develop schools as learning communities that are embedded in their local neighbourhoods, who work together with their local Aboriginal communities to enhance the wellbeing of all Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

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2. ACTION LEARNING BASED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Being More Responsive to Aboriginal Cultures and Histories

The number of Aboriginal students in NSW schools is increasing but their educational outcomes continue to be compromised by low expectations for their academic achievement (Hayes, Mills, Christie & Lingard, 2006). A range of intervention initiatives have failed to close the educational gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student achievement and outcomes despite policies to match or better the outcomes of the broader community (Productivity Commission, 2009; Long & North, 2009). This is not a new challenge nor is it peculiar to NSW or Australian schools. “Challenges inherent in serving many students with different needs have been the preoccupation of educators since the identification of academic achievement gaps in research studies and by school districts. These gaps continue to be a focus ... of school reform efforts” (Santamaria, 2009). While targeting and monitoring educational outcomes continue to be a focus for national and state governments and education systems it would be misleading to suggest that all Aboriginal students suffer low achievement and compromised educational outcomes (AECG & DET, 2004). This chapter provides a contextual background for whole school approaches to not only challenging perceptions about Aboriginal education in the 21st century but also enriching learning contexts for all teachers and students to engage with the richness of local Aboriginal cultures and histories.

BACKGROUND

In the first decade of this century, the NSW State Government pledged resources to improving outcomes for Aboriginal students. The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education (AEGC & DET, 2004) found that despite Aboriginal education being one of most reviewed and evaluated aspects of Australian education “systems around the nation have been unable to deliver the same levels of success for Aboriginal students as they do for other students” (p. 12). This finding urges that it was timely to consider different strategies to reforming whole school approaches to Aboriginal education for all students.

The Review found there was, on the one hand, a level of frustration by Aboriginal students and their communities “that teachers and non-Aboriginal teaching staff in many high schools displayed little awareness of Aboriginal culture...
and history” (p. 114). On the other hand evidence collected through the Review documented teachers’ expressed desire “to gain more knowledge of both local and broader Aboriginal culture and history as well as resources to support Aboriginal education programs” (p. 114). This situation appeared to be deeply entrenched despite curriculum and syllabus outcomes that demanded pedagogy for Aboriginal students that was dependent of teachers’ deep knowledge of local contexts, families, Aboriginal community needs and resources. In the context of a whole school approach to Aboriginal education these challenges are every teacher’s responsibility for all students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

A set of consistent themes provided a clear focus for the Recommendations documented the Report (2004). The nine recommendations were couched in terms of “Do something about ...”

- strengthening policy, planning and implementation
- extending quality teaching and learning
- fortifying identities of Aboriginal students
- engaging Aboriginal students
- applying Aboriginal cultural knowledge
- collaborating in partnerships
- challenging racism

As described in Figure 2 below extending quality teaching and learning, applying Aboriginal cultural knowledge and collaborating in partnerships were the key themes that informed an initiative for whole school reform through professional learning discussed later in this chapter. In sum, the agenda for such reform was inspired by the voices of teachers who searched for a more effective way of engaging Aboriginal students as exemplified by this teacher:

My students weren’t getting success. I wasn’t getting satisfaction. I had a choice and I chose to ask for help from the local Aboriginal people. Not everything worked. We made mistakes but we learned together, we still are learning lessons about teaching Aboriginal students. But, the students – funnily enough all my students – are tasting success and I am getting satisfaction.


The national policy agenda for reforming teachers professional learning funded under the Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme (2006–2009) and the NSW State agenda for reviewing what mattered for Aboriginal education set the scene for the implementation of a model of professional development over four years 2006–2009 to address the pressing concerns identified in the Report (AECG & DET, 2004) for schools in partnership with their local Aboriginal communities.
ACTION LEARNING BASED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Figure 2. Policy context for including Aboriginal culture and history in professional learning.

QUALITY TEACHING INDIGENOUS PROJECT

The Quality Teaching Indigenous Project (QTIP) operated in partnership between school action learning teams and their local Aboriginal communities supported by Commonwealth funding from the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program matched by the New South Wales DET Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate. Integral to this partnership was the close collaboration with the New South Wales State and local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECG), regional Aboriginal consultants and school Aboriginal Education Officers (AEO). The Quality Teaching Indigenous Project in New South Wales grew from an imperative to enhance Aboriginal students’ learning in English literacy, numeracy and information communication technology (ICT) while also embedding Aboriginal culture and history in high quality pedagogy for all students. To achieve these aims the project was specifically focused on making local Aboriginal cultural knowledge relevant to non-Aboriginal as well as Aboriginal students, and aimed to raise all students’ understanding of, and engagement with, local Aboriginal cultural knowledge. In addition QTIP aimed to develop and enrich inclusive learning environments by focusing on change in teaching practice through school-based professional development. Central to the program’s theory of action was the importance of promoting Aboriginal culture and history within the curriculum to develop deep knowledge, skills and values that strengthen the sense of Aboriginal identity and understanding among a whole community. A second underlying premise in the project’s design was that the path to improving the student achievement was through connection with local Aboriginal histories and culture and the quality of the teaching. As Rowe (2003, p. 1) argues:

the quality of teaching and learning provision are by far the most salient influences on students’ cognitive, affective, and behavioural outcomes of schooling – regardless of their gender or backgrounds. Indeed, findings from
the related local and international evidence-based research indicate that ‘what matters most’ is quality teachers and teaching, supported by strategic teacher professional development!

IMPLEMENTATION

School Selection

Twenty schools with an Aboriginal student enrolment between 10 and 20 percent of their total school enrolment were identified for participation. The school nominations were confirmed by the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), in New South Wales. Seventeen primary schools, two secondary schools and one school for students with special needs accepted the invitation to participate between 2006 and 2009. The primary school enrolments ranged from one small primary school with 76 students to the largest with over 600 students. Both secondary schools had enrolments of around 1,000 students, and there was at least one school from each of the ten school regions in the state of New South Wales.

Whole School Reform Through Professional Learning

Taking a whole school approach along with the choices for designing teacher professional learning seemingly had the potential to change teaching practice and student learning. Under the funding guidelines project initiatives were designed to address the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program (AGQTP) leading principles for professional learning. These principles represented statements of best practice in focusing teacher professional learning resources on what students learn and how to address the different problems and challenges students may have in curriculum-based literacy learning. Therefore professional learning will:

- be based on analyses of the differences between actual student performance and goals and standards for student learning
- involve teachers in the identification of what they need to learn and in the development of the learning experiences they will be involved in
- be primarily school-based and built into the day-to-day work of teaching
- engage teachers in concrete teaching tasks, based on teachers’ experiences with students
- be organised around collaborative problem solving
- be continuous and ongoing, involving follow-up and support for further learning – including support from sources external to the school that can provide necessary resources and new perspectives
- incorporate evaluation of multiple sources of information on learning outcomes for students and the instruction and other processes that are involved in implementing the lessons learned through professional learning
- provide opportunities to gain an understanding of the theory underlying the knowledge and skills being learned
provide learning opportunities that are meaningful and professionally empowering

be connected to a comprehensive change process focused on improving student learning. (AGQTP Updated Client Guidelines 2005 to 2009, p. 12)

These principles framed a set of professional learning strategies that enhanced teachers’ skills in: using an inquiry approach integral to teaching and learning; building their capacity to take on new pedagogical challenges as part of school reform; and extending capacity for leadership in innovation and inquiry. Included in the AGQTP program funding in NSW was the design and implementation of a four year project representing a new approach to building professional relationships among teachers and their local Aboriginal communities.

**Aboriginal Community Participation**

The QTIP project was founded on building Aboriginal community partnerships in a number of ways. First, a consultation process with the local Aboriginal communities and parents, including the local AECG, was established to discuss the project aims. This provided an opportunity for community expectations, roles and responsibilities to be voiced and negotiated. Second, a community representative (often a member of the local AECG) was nominated to participate in the school’s project action learning team. Third, strategies were developed to provide places like a Koori room within the school for Aboriginal community members, students and parents to meet in a place where they felt welcomed and was inclusive of the whole school community. Flying the Aboriginal flag daily and ensuring that the appropriate protocols for Welcome to Country became embedded practices in a project school. These strategies were considered to be crucial to building the confidence and trust of Aboriginal communities to work with the school leadership and action learning teams.

Forming sustainable partnerships was acknowledged as a difficult process in many communities where one-off, short term projects had raised hopes of change and improvement yet failed to be sustained or make any real change in classroom practice that deeply embedded Aboriginal cultural knowledge (*The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education*, 2004). In addition, in some locations Aboriginal communities were fragmented and varied in size. Many had lost connections with their local cultural knowledge impacted by a history of dispossession and disadvantage, ongoing racism and historical barriers to access to education and opportunities (Burridge, Riordan, Aubusson, Evans, Vaughan, Kenney & Chodkiewicz, 2009). These issues highlighted the importance of sustaining a program of educational change with community participation focused on deeply intellectual and integrated approaches to deepening students’ knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal cultural knowledge.

**The NSW Quality Teaching Model**

The project design drew on the New South Wales pedagogical model described in *Quality Teaching in New South Wales Public Schools* (NSW DET 2003). This
model consists of three dimensions identified in international research as critical to quality teaching: Intellectual Quality, Quality Learning Environment and Significance. The dimension of Intellectual Quality was identified for its particular importance for the project. It refers to pedagogy focused on producing deep understanding of substantive concepts, skills and ideas, and treats knowledge as actively constructed during the learning process. It also encourages students to question and analyse content they encounter during the learning process. The treatment of Aboriginal cultural knowledge was felt to be particularly strengthened by focusing on the six elements of deep knowledge, deep understanding, higher order thinking, metalanguage, problematic knowledge and substantive communication in this dimension. A focus on the dimension of Significance, in particular the elements of cultural and background knowledge, connectedness and narrative, linked students’ prior knowledge with student and community viewpoints and different Aboriginal cultural understandings and values.

The dimensions and elements of the NSW DET *Quality Teaching* model provided a comprehensive set of criteria based in educational theory and research that teachers used to reflect upon their current teaching practices:

- To what extent do I ensure that students are regularly engaged in higher-order thinking?
- To what extent do I ensure that students are regularly engaged in substantive communication?
- To what extent do I communicate my high expectations of all students?
- To what extent do my lessons employ narrative to enrich student understanding?

Existing teaching practices were also considered in relation to general ethical principles, such as equity, concern for others and social justice, e.g.:

- To what extent are my teaching practices promoting caring personal relationships among students?
- To what extent are my teaching practices promoting multicultural understanding?

This required teachers to consider the ‘hidden curriculum’ that operates in their classes … and in their school. One effective way was to tap into the hidden curriculum to train students to conduct structured interviews with a variety of small focus groups of fellow students. Questions asked included:

- How do you feel about asking teachers to explain something again?
- How do teachers respond when they don’t know the answer to a student’s question?
- How would you attempt to have a school rule changed?

Working in school-based action learning teams, teachers used student achievement data and evaluation of Aboriginal student learning needs to inform their own professional learning. Teachers also extended their knowledge and skills through collegial networks with other schools in the project. The action learning approach contributed to improving and updating teachers’ professional understanding and
knowledge of Quality Teaching in the specific context of embedding Aboriginal cultural knowledge to strengthen understanding for all students of Aboriginal heritage and contemporary issues related to Aboriginal culture.  

The project’s learning activities were supported by an officer of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training. Project teams were also supported by academic partners from various NSW universities, who assisted their partner schools in collecting, analysing and reporting on data related to the impact of activities on teacher professional learning and student outcomes.

**ACTION LEARNING APPROACH**

*Action Learning and Action Research*

Action learning and action research are both effective approaches for professional learning. They have long been applied in the contexts of schools’ and teachers’ work. These processes focus on the teacher as a learner within schools displaying the characteristics of professional learning communities. Teachers are valued as both sources of knowledge and users of this knowledge to generate new knowledge, new ideas and new practices.

For the 20 participating schools the professional learning framework, *action learning* as distinguished from *action research* was chosen because “the emphasis of action learning is on the social interaction between the teachers as they share their experiences and learn from each other” (Aubusson et al., 2009, p. 14). Action learning uses both informal and formal methods of gathering data to reflection and evidence of change. Action learning does not necessarily involve the use of rigorous quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Action learning was about learning and working in teams and it was the team and its dynamics, the learning that each member brought to the team and the learning processes that were central to teachers’ professional learning.

According to Aubusson et al., (2009), action learning begins with teachers’ determination or curiosity to deal with troublesome, urgent matters for which there may be no immediate apparent solution. Thus, arguably the starting point for action learning may not be the desire to improve existing practice, but may be to develop understanding of an issue for which there is no present practice. In action learning the emphasis is more on the learning and searching for solutions through professional learning, rather than learning that has originated in the need for changes in practice, although this may ultimately follow. While action learning can involve research, the emphasis is not on researching other people’s practices. Action learning emphasises inquiry into a teacher’s own work practices with and for others. Improvement in practice is achieved by teachers reflecting on their work and asking, with the help of colleagues, in what ways they might do it more effectively.

Continuous feedback from teaching partners and other action learning team members is a vital component of action learning. Feedback is designed to increase awareness of progress and of the influences determining progress. Reflection on feedback received enables teachers to generate and establish new courses of action.
without delay. Action learning involves personal risk-taking. Action learning obliges teachers to put at stake an exploration of their practice and its underpinning values and beliefs. A supportive, collegial learning environment is essential in this situation. By comparison, case-based discussions, assignments and theory-exchanges are low-risk learning activities. Uncritical reporting to peers, unchallenged exhibition of classroom projects, or swapping of ideas and resources also carry relatively little risk.

The processes involved in cycles of action of observing, describing, recording, discussing and reflecting are closely interrelated. Teachers describe and record their observations and then, later, reflect upon the evidence contained in this record to help them gauge their progress during the project. Critical reflection involves teachers in considering not only *what* they are doing in the classroom … but also *why* they are doing it. Teachers’ knowledge of educational theories and research can assist in critical reflection on current practice. When teachers become conscious of the theories implicit in their practice, they are likely to be better able to determine whether there is a need for fundamental change and have an understanding of why this is critical for improving student learning.

*Action Learning for School Teams*

Action learning was employed by school project teams as they worked together to improve the learning experiences for students through the quality of their instruction. It involved team members:

- learning from their own experience, and that of their colleagues
- sharing their learning in partnership with the wider community in which they live or work
- refining their own practices informed by targeted professional learning
- seeing themselves as sources of knowledge about teaching and learning
- involving participants in conducting situational analyses, asking insightful questions and trialling possible strategies and solutions
- developing and sharing new understanding leading to changes and innovation in classroom practice.

**CONCLUSION**

The principles underpinning the action learning project described in this chapter embraced the need for transformational change in teaching practices and attitudes towards embedding Aboriginal cultures and histories into teaching and learning. It called for a new approach to school-based professional development that incorporated action learning that was inclusive of Aboriginal people and communities. A transformational view of change, as outlined by Mezirow (2000) points to the need for those undergoing major change to move through a process where they may feel initially discomfort and then move through a number of stages
of cognitive restructuring and reconciliation of their experiences and actions. Taking an action learning change approach to quality teaching initiatives has been described by Ewing (2004) as a powerful model for teachers’ professional learning, because it supports teachers to plan, learn, practice, critically reflect and share through focused collegial discussions and practices.

The key features of effective action learning teams were replicated in the school projects. Teams had a critical mass of teachers and Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs) and community members and a three to four year allocation of substantial funding to buy time and resources for the project team to meet to plan, learn and share new approaches. In addition, the teams had access to external expertise through either an academic partner and/or Aboriginal community mentor. Importantly most project school communities developed a culture that focused on teacher learning that emphasised, recognised, valued and respected the importance for student outcomes of embedding local Aboriginal cultures and histories. How schools and communities bought these elements together is highlighted in the specific school studies in the chapters that follow in Part Two of this book.

NOTES

1 The translation of Recommendations is Junaaygam in Gumbaynggir language is Things that are told. (The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education, 2004, p. 180)
2 Action learning and action research are not used as interchangeable terms in the project. Aubusson et al (2009) provide a clear distinction between these two professional learning frameworks.

REFERENCES
