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# Relationship to place: positioning Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives in classroom pedagogies

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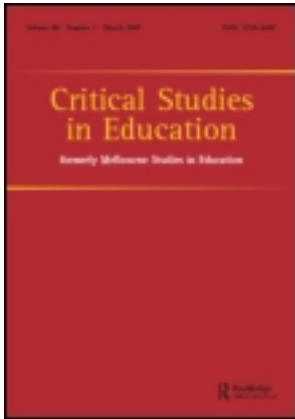
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## Relationship to place: positioning Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives in classroom pedagogies

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This project is based on research conducted with 12 schools in New South Wales, Australia. It examines how each school incorporates Aboriginal perspectives in its Kindergarten to Year 6 program with a view to identifying quality practice. As we interviewed teachers in these schools, it became clear that there is considerable confusion over the difference between *Aboriginal perspectives* and *Aboriginal knowledge* with both concepts being used interchangeably to teach syllabus content and information about Aboriginal people. We endeavour to clarify these concepts and to suggest how teachers might incorporate *Aboriginal knowledge* in their programs, without recreating some of the stereotypical representations that are often an effect of current pedagogies.

**Keywords:** Aboriginal education; Aboriginal knowledge; Aboriginal perspectives; best practice; identity; place

### Introduction

The *Melbourne declaration on educational goals for young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment Training and Youth Affairs [MCEECDYA], 2008) identifies the need for all Australian children to ‘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’ (p. 8). The Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority (2010) has acknowledged the importance of reconciliation and is currently writing Indigenous perspectives into the national curriculum ‘to ensure that all young Australians have the opportunity to learn about, acknowledge and respect the history and culture of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders’ (p. 13). The Department of Education in each of the states and territories of Australia requires teachers to embed Aboriginal perspectives across all Key Learning Areas (KLAs) from Kindergarten to Year 6 (Harrison, 2008). Of course, these goals are not new, they have had a mixed reception in Australian schools over the last 15 years (Craven, 1996, 1998; Harrison, 2010; Konigsberg & Collard, 2002).

Teachers often lament that they know little about Aboriginal people, while questioning how they can be expected to include Aboriginal perspectives in their programs (New South Wales Department of Education and Training and NSW Aboriginal Education

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Consultative Group Incorporated, 2004). Indeed, Noel Pearson (2009) draws on this perceived lack of knowledge to argue that non-Aboriginal teachers should not be teaching about Aboriginal cultures, knowledge and identity because the children really only learn stereotypes of Aboriginality. In addition, Nakata (2007) consistently identifies a problem with non-Aboriginal teachers trying to represent Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives to non-Aboriginal children insofar as the student's understandings can become rigid and stereotypical. Bill Green (2010) encapsulates this very dilemma in his lucid discussion of curriculum reproduction and representation, where he explores the very question of whether it is ever possible to break through mere representations of others to produce a learning that is authentic and (Ab)original. This paper examines how 12 primary schools in New South Wales, Australia, are endeavouring to break through many of the facile representations of Aboriginal people to produce quality teaching and learning in Aboriginal education.

### Aims of the research

In examining 'good teaching' we did not want to reinforce what Connell (2009) describes as the current 'audit culture' surrounding the evaluation and assessment of quality teaching, a culture that is usually instituted from above and governed by standardised testing regimes and 'multivariate quantitative research on school and teacher effectiveness' (p. 217). The research team did not attempt to evaluate the 'competencies' of the teacher to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives in their programs, rather we wanted to promote a critical discussion around the work of teachers and the concepts that constituted the very basis of teaching in Aboriginal education, Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives.

There was considerable confusion across all schools involved over the use of *Aboriginal perspectives* and *Aboriginal knowledge*, with the two concepts being used interchangeably to refer to the syllabus content that is taught *about* Aboriginal people, including for example, Dreaming stories and the Stolen Generations. We endeavour in this paper to clarify these concepts and to suggest how teachers might incorporate *Aboriginal knowledge* in their programs, without recreating some of the stereotypical representations that are often an effect of current pedagogies.

Aboriginal knowledge is quite different to the content and information about Aboriginal people contained in the New South Wales syllabus, it is not something that can be packaged within a unit of work and taught out of context or away from the place where it was produced. This crucial characterisation of the nature of Aboriginal knowledge will be explored and developed throughout the paper, but at this point it is important to recognise how knowledge has come to be viewed as an increasingly complex notion that is now linked to power and identity. Green (2010) argues:

that knowledge, now problematized and more thoroughly complexified, and arguably always in a dialectical relationship with power and identity, remains central to the curriculum inquiry project. In this regard, what this means is an emphasis not just on epistemology but also, and more importantly, on *representation*, with the latter to be understood, I contend, as a key and recurring issue for curriculum theoretical interrogation and elaboration. (p. 452)

We take the position in this paper that quality teaching of Aboriginal perspectives is contingent upon the teacher's conceptualisation of Aboriginal knowledge as that which is always grounded in place and only meaningful in the context in which it is produced.

Finally, we use the term *Aboriginal* in the context of the Aboriginal Education policy of New South Wales, Australia, and to refer to the original inhabitants of the state (where the research was conducted).

## Methodology

### *The participants*

There were 12 primary schools involved in the study, 8 from Sydney, New South Wales and 4 from the central coast immediately north of Sydney. The schools on the central coast were all rural schools, with student numbers ranging from 153 to 450 and with teachers who often had close links with the community. The eight schools in Sydney ranged from those located in low-income areas to a school on the high-income northern beaches. The resources available to these schools vary enormously, depending on the income of the school and its community. Enrolments ranged from 40 to 890 students with the average around 500 students. At one school on the central coast of Sydney, about 25% of enrolments were Aboriginal students, while another school had 759 students enrolled with no identified Aboriginal students. A school on the northern beaches had eight Aboriginal students enrolled. Aboriginal student enrolments therefore ranged from 0 to around 25%, with schools located in a wide variety of socio-economic areas. It should be noted that this project was designed to look at how Aboriginal perspectives are incorporated in school curricula, irrespective of whether they had Aboriginal student enrolments.

These schools offer a range of programs aimed at improving the quality of teaching. *Accelerated literacy*, *Reading to learn* and *Quicksmart* are becoming increasingly popular. A number of schools report significant improvements in outcomes from Year 3 to Year 5, despite the high rate of mobility in some locations, 40% in one case. These schools have moved students out of the bottom two bands with improvements in writing and comprehension. It was reported that NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) results in these schools improved significantly in 2008 as a result of (1) accelerated literacy (and the training of staff), (2) schools having implemented specific frameworks and programs and (3) staff having completed a cultural awareness program at TAFE.

These relatively new programs are funded through sources such as the Targeted Aboriginal Student Strategy (TASS), Quality Teaching Aboriginal Project, Norta Norta, Schools in Partnership and the Priority Schools Program. At one school in Sydney, an Aboriginal parent was employed through TASS to ring the parents and encourage them to come to the school. She ‘sat on the phone for a term’ and according to teachers at the school it worked exceedingly well. She would say things like: ‘I haven’t seen you up at the school’. She would also speak to parents in the street. Her manner and method of communication made parents feel like they were welcome at the school.

### *Recruitment of participants*

The 12 schools volunteered their involvement in the project, while many others declined when contacted by phone. The involvement of the schools was not necessarily linked to a quality Aboriginal education program that was already in place, as will be demonstrated in the discussion below. Most schools were keen to participate in our offer to provide professional development for teachers in return for their involvement in the project. The plan for the study was initially discussed with the Aboriginal Senior Education Advisor in the respective region and ethics approval was obtained through the New South Wales Department of Education and Training.

**Methods**

Each school received two visits from the research team. On the first visit, teachers from each stage and members of the school executive were interviewed to find out how Aboriginal perspectives were incorporated across the school. A list of questions was sent to the school prior to our visit, seeking information on school enrolments, teacher numbers, who has responsibility for Aboriginal education in the school, links to the community, definitions of Aboriginal perspectives, national testing results and the whole school philosophy. As we spoke with teachers about their programs, we recorded what they said in writing. The quotations in this paper are a paraphrase of what was said rather than a verbatim transcription of interviews.

During our first visit to each school, we asked teachers what they would like us to provide on our return visit. Some schools wanted to know what other schools were doing to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives in their programs, others wanted an explanation of the new Aboriginal Education and Training policy, while most schools wanted some ideas on how they could include Aboriginal perspectives in particular aspects of their program including the NSW Connected Outcomes Group of units. Five of the eight schools in Sydney and one of the four schools on the central coast noted the difficulties of connecting with their local community and wanted us to provide contacts and links with Aboriginal people.

**Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework for the approach drew on the work of Freebody (2003), Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) and on Kamberelis and Dimitriadis' (2008) explication of the power of focus groups to 'elicit and validate collective testimonies' (p. 389) in the school setting. Freebody (2003) and Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) discuss education research designed to study and solve practical problems in schools, that is how do teachers incorporate Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives in school programs? We took the position of action researchers to concentrate on 'professional self-improvement through focused collaboration' (Freebody, 2003, p. 87).

As well as asking teachers to tell us about their practice, we planned to offer ideas and activities that they could use in their classrooms. We wanted the research to have reciprocal benefits, including practical skills for the teachers along with the data for us as researchers. In accordance with the methods employed by Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2008) to harness the power of focus groups, we sought to engage the teachers in the process of reflecting on the methods they use to provide children with learning experiences of contemporary Aboriginal Australia.

In focusing on the concepts of Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives, we wanted to find out how far schools can go in including Aboriginal perspectives in their curriculum before they (unconsciously) begin to perpetuate the objectified narratives and stereotypical discourses that they are trying to interrupt. We viewed this process of objectification as teaching students a metalanguage *about* Aboriginal people and it raises the question of how teachers can avoid, what Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p. 39) cogently describes as the 'dehumanising' effects of this metalanguage.

If this process of dehumanisation is to be avoided, quality pedagogy in Aboriginal contexts must include more than a phone call to an Aboriginal dance agency or painting a mural on a school wall. We were told time and again throughout this project

about the need for schools to make serious and ongoing contact with Aboriginal people in their community if students were to leave the primary school at the end of Year 6 with a strong and enduring sense of connection to, and respect for, Aboriginal people.

### Defining Aboriginal perspectives

Most teachers struggled to define Aboriginal perspectives, opting for a gloss such as, 'knowledge about Aboriginal people and their past and culture' and 'respect', 'acceptance' and 'an awareness of culture' as 'adding an Aboriginal view across all KLAs by including information, resources'.

Through the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives at these 12 schools, we found that teachers were often developing Aboriginal perspectives in their programs as syllabus content (for example, Aboriginal shelters, foods, bush gardens, Aboriginal art and dancing) that is transmitted from teacher to student *about* Aboriginal people. The pitfalls of teaching Aboriginal perspectives as a commodity was highlighted by the Assistant Principal at an inner suburban school:

Because it [Aboriginal perspectives] is such an important area to work with, teachers need to be intellectually aware in terms of creating victims etcetera. . . . Teachers need to be aware how they are representing Aboriginal kids in the classroom. How do we teach about Aboriginal people?

This Assistant Principal spoke passionately about the need to reflect carefully on how teachers represent Aboriginal people to children when they include Aboriginal perspectives. It is not only a question of transmitting syllabus information *about* Aboriginal people, teachers also need to analyse what *knowledge* and *perspectives* are appropriate to include in the curriculum and what the pedagogy *does* to students in terms of their expectations and images and how they talk about Aboriginal people.

One of the crucial aims of this research was to position Aboriginal people in the twenty-first century through the teaching of Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives. There are myriad resources available to teach about the Dreaming, but one has to search carefully for ways of talking and teaching about Aboriginal people today. There are many readers available including ones which are appropriate for K-6 children and meet a range of syllabus outcomes in the various KLAs (for example, *Indij readers*, 2003; *Plenty stories* [Albert, 2008]). But the stereotypes and excessive generalisations are often produced through how the teacher talks about these readers in the classroom. Some teachers continue to talk *about* Aboriginal people in the past tense and to use the term 'discovery' of Australia. They talk about how the '[Aboriginal] system *was* incredible' and how 'they *lived* in harmony with the environment' (emphasis added). An Aboriginal principal at one school told the story:

I said to the kids at assembly, would you recognise an Aboriginal person if they walked in here? What would they look like? The kids replied, someone dark, someone from the NT [Northern Territory].

He then announced to the assembled children, 'well one just walked in five minutes ago' and the children all looked around to see where the Aboriginal person was. The principal then added, 'that Aboriginal person was me'.

Quality teaching is using appropriate language. It is reflected in teachers learning about the background of their students and referring specifically to the 'Awabakal boy' or the 'Darug girl' in their class and talking about Aboriginal people in the present tense, not only in the past, people who live in places like Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, rather than always in the desert or in Northern Territory of Australia.

It is important to clarify at this stage that Aboriginal perspectives are rarely *Aboriginal* perspectives in Australian schools, given that most of the teaching is done by non-Aboriginal people. Students are not learning *Aboriginal* views or perspectives, rather they are learning about their *non-Aboriginal* teacher's perspective on Aboriginal Australia. They are learning their teacher's meta-narrative *about* Aboriginal people. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p. 39) observed above that as soon as we begin to talk and teach about others, we position them in an objectified and dehumanising metalanguage. Our project searched for ways that teachers could avoid positioning Aboriginal people in these objectifying narratives. What would quality pedagogy look like that did not recreate stereotypical representations of Aboriginal people?

### Aboriginal knowledge taught in-place

Some of the schools in this research invite Aboriginal parents to their school to talk about their relationship to place and to work with children on art projects and smoking ceremonies. For example, at an inner suburban school of 420 students in Sydney:

Parents of Aboriginal kids get involved in the school. Last year [an Aboriginal parent] did a mural based on a dreamtime story in 2008. She has now moved to [the country]. Parents are made to feel involved and welcome. They are made to feel that their knowledge and contributions are worthwhile and valuable so that they are happy to return.

A Senior Education Advisor remarked at one of our meetings with a school on the central coast:

Collecting peoples' stories is so important to teaching the kids in terms of supporting the [Aboriginal] kids' identity and sense of place. What would it be like growing up not knowing where you are from, or where your grandparents were born? Some of our kids are like that.

One school on the central coast reported that they had worked with their Aboriginal community to create an outdoor learning area (see next section) and through the teaching there, the children learn how the stories of Elders are embedded in their relationship to place and history. Verron and Christie (2007, p. 80) remark that 'knowledge traditions' refer not only to a knowledge of place, but also the performance of that knowledge of place and its people through social traditions. The stories that are sometimes told to children by Aboriginal Elders of the school are a performance of Aboriginal knowledge and identity rather than a representation of it. Aboriginal knowledge is produced in-place through the stories of Elders, rather than presented to children out of context and divorced from the very people who own it.

At another small school, the staff agreed that quality teaching in Aboriginal education is 'about respecting Aboriginal people as the traditional knowledge holders'. Two of the schools in this project involved Aboriginal parents and Elders at all stages of planning and curriculum design. They maintain power and control over the Aboriginal knowledge that is 'taught' and how it is presented. This will be demonstrated in the following three examples.



### Quality teaching in Aboriginal education contexts

This section draws on the experience of six schools in the study to suggest three key ways in which teachers can incorporate Aboriginal *knowledge* in their programs without recreating some of the stereotypical representations that are often an effect of current pedagogies. These three approaches are presented as quality teaching practices in Aboriginal education and include *relationship to place*, *a strong culture of collaboration among the school and community* and *transition to school programs*. Each of these will be examined below.

#### *Relationship to place*

All schools recognised the Aboriginal custodians of the land upon which the school stands. One school on the central coast of New South Wales reported:

Awabakal are the custodians of the country. They are recognised in many different ways in the program and around the school grounds. For example, Boomerang Mountain which was created as an outdoor learning area for the students. It was built by Pop Simon and volunteers from the Aboriginal community and it was built as an outside classroom where students can come together on National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee [NAIDOC] Day and read stories or do fun activities.

At this school, *acknowledgement of country* is incorporated explicitly into the school pedagogy. Teachers talk with children about *why they acknowledge country* and they discuss the concepts of custodianship, connection to Aboriginal land and tradition:

When we have acknowledgement of country, it is about this school. We explain to kids *why we do it*, what is a traditional custodian, what is Aboriginal land, why this school has always been on Aboriginal land. Our kids talk about Pop as a story-teller.

However, at another school the principal and assistant principal did not know the *name* of the Aboriginal custodians of their area and they did not have any links with their local community or with their local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG). The local AECG is an essential contact for schools because its members know Aboriginal people in their community and more importantly the right people to speak for that community.

#### *Strong culture of collaboration among the school and community*

One school on the central coast of New South Wales reported on its attempts to build community trust and collaboration through providing ‘strong evidence of Aboriginal cultures around the school’. Every parent (100%) comes to the school to discuss the child’s Personal Learning Plan (PLP). The school employs various methods for getting parents involved, observing that ‘once parents know it is a positive experience they are more inclined to come to the school’. The teachers here stated that having a person who knows how to communicate effectively with parents and is able to phone and speak with them helps to maintain the school’s 96% Aboriginal student attendance (in 2008). They added that the inspirational leadership of the school executive also makes it happen.

The teachers at this small school reported that their approach to doing business with parents has changed dramatically since 2006, which is evidenced in their statistics on suspensions. In 2006, there were 386 suspensions at the school, in 2007 there were 170 suspensions and in 2008 there were 17 suspensions:

It's been an overall approach to Aboriginal education of the school that has brought parents into the school. . . . Elders come in to talk in the classroom and to share their stories. The message goes out to the community that we're alright, we are respectful and we don't know everything.

Connell (2009) links good teaching to a 'strong culture of collaboration among the teachers' (p. 226). This is certainly the case at 6 of the 12 schools involved in this study where teachers work together to weave Aboriginal knowledge into the fabric of the curriculum through careful negotiations with Aboriginal Elders and the community generally. Quality teaching in these contexts is governed by strong collaborations among teachers and the community. Mick Dodson (2007) adds that one of the key elements of every successful model of Aboriginal education is 'intense community involvement' (p. 3). This community involvement positions Aboriginal knowledge in the school as alive, performative and reflective of the place where it is produced.

Another school reports strong support for Aboriginal cultures and this is evidenced in the appearance of the school. The symbolic has become an extremely important indicator of school desire to be involved in the community. Art works in the school grounds (totem poles, murals, paintings), dedicated learning spaces and flags make the school and its grounds into a welcoming place for Aboriginal parents. The symbolic also appears to reduce the divide in the minds of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in these schools. One school reports, 'Now kids at the school do not see Aboriginal kids at the school for their colour'. These practices also include symbolic gestures in teaching materials such as number cards. Another school provides sufficient car parking for parents and visitors so that they feel welcome in the school. A school in western Sydney endeavours to make 'the teachers accessible to parents'. However, at another school, a number of teachers did not know that there were five Aboriginal students enrolled at their school.

It should be recognised that installing political signifiers in the school grounds can have the opposite effect of reinforcing a homogenous Aboriginal culture, motifs more associated with a traditional society than with contemporary Australia (Russell, 2001). And this is where our project started, with a desire to instantiate images in classrooms related to contemporary Aboriginality. This was also the desire of many teachers. They have many resources based on *traditional* Aboriginal society, but few relating to twenty-first century Australia, such as the *Indij readers* (2003).

The symbolic is a beginning in the desire to build relationships with the community. The Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, highlighted in his *Sorry speech* to Parliament in February 2008:

For us, symbolism is important but, unless the great symbolism of reconciliation is accompanied by an even greater substance, it is little more than a clanging gong. It is not sentiment that makes history; it is our actions that make history. (Sydney Morning Herald, 2008, p. 6)

Most teachers reported on the difficulties of building relationships with their community:

We had a teacher who was Gamilaroi and wanted to teach Gamilaroi. We went through the protocols and the program started. But it stopped when he left at the end of the year. It is difficult for us to access local members of the community, even to know who to access and ask. We have an excellent local dance group. People come and go. We find it difficult to maintain continuity in our Aboriginal programs. People in the community move on and we lose contacts.

One of the most requested items of assistance from us included ideas on how to make contact with the Aboriginal community, including local Elders, the AECG and regional consultants from the NSW Department of Education and Training. Of course, the AECG and Department of Education are only a phone call away.

The review of Aboriginal education (New South Wales Department of Education and Training and NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated, 2004, p. 95) observed that many schools find the political terrain referred to in the following as extremely difficult to traverse:

Factions are formed along kinship lines and have kept Aboriginal communities strong since time immemorial. Schools that have developed strong partnerships with their local Aboriginal communities are able to identify Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who are able to work within and across factions.

It did become clear throughout the project that Aboriginal cultural knowledge and identities must be valued by teachers if schools are to be taken seriously by the Aboriginal community. One school's approach to doing business with the community is currently evidenced through its attempts to talk *with* and reach out to parents, to involve them in curriculum design and in their children's day-day education, for example through PLPs and through symbolic displays around the school, which help to make the parents feel at ease. Most importantly, those schools which report 80–100% Aboriginal parent involvement, also ensure that Elders and parents are positioned as teachers in their program. Teachers in schools need to know who their Aboriginal students are and whether they have Aboriginal students in their class (given that the school administration has this information through enrolments).

### ***Transition to school programs for Aboriginal children***

Transition to school programs allow teachers to make connections with Aboriginal families and to understand what is culturally appropriate. The program can establish a reciprocal relation between the pre-school centre and the school, as was the case at one school. In particular, it prepares the children for the culture of the school and helps to build formal educational cultural competence among Aboriginal children, for example knowing how to answer questions. The principal explained to us that there are many children who do not experience this 'culture' at home, they do not experience questions and answer style communication at home, while the style of communication at school is often foreign to them. At home they are told what to do. Best practice will demonstrate to students how to fit-in with the timing and organization of the school timetable, for example explicitly discussing the time to eat at school and when to put your hand up. Most importantly, good teaching is governed in these schools by building trust with Aboriginal Elders in the community. A teacher in a transition class tells the story:

Nan and pop came into the class and just sat there for days on end. I didn't quite know what to do with them until one day they never came in. I subsequently heard that they were coming in to make sure that I was OK to teach their children.

This particular teacher had developed strong relationships with the school's Aboriginal community and much of what she did in her classroom was negotiated and developed with parents and community.

## Conclusion

I mentioned at the outset that many teachers lament that they do not possess the knowledge to teach about Aboriginal Australia. Many of the school principals involved in this study are enrolling their teachers in TAFE courses to ensure that they are 'culturally competent'. Staff at most schools receive some training (about one hour) in the New South Wales policy on Aboriginal education, although several in this study were not aware that a new policy had been released for the state in 2009.

Generally schools take the grand slam approach to Aboriginal education, including observance of Sorry Day, hiring a professional Aboriginal dance troupe to perform at the school, asking Elders to work with children on a mural or to tell stories and engaging children in NAIDOC week activities. Many schools have also established a 'bush-tucker' garden in the schoolyard. Several schools devote a day of activities to teaching children about Aboriginal culture, with one school reporting:

Aboriginal Cultural Day is a big day at the school. We set up stations for each stage – art, music, games. Kids dress up in black, yellow and red T-shirts. These days help to get the parents into the school. They give the kids a place in the school and help them to identify.

While these types of activities are sometimes criticised for being bolted on to the program rather than being integrated into daily practice (New South Wales Department of Education and Training and NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group incorporated, 2004; MCEECDYA, 2010), we have suggested in this study that these approaches may indeed be the more effective way of producing Aboriginal knowledge in schools because Aboriginal Elders, Aboriginal parents and Aboriginal Education Officers are directly involved in these learning experiences.

The school's interaction with an Aboriginal community including its Aboriginal Education Consultative Committee *is* the value of including Aboriginal perspectives in the New South Wales primary curriculum. The learning for the children and teachers alike is constituted through these interactions with Aboriginal people. These interactions in turn produce an understanding of a relationship to place and identity. Unfortunately, this kind of learning is not one that can be replicated across schools. Aboriginal knowledge is told and relived in that community and hence the learning is local, it is produced in context and place. When this knowledge is packaged in a book and read in other places, it can be understood as an objectified narrative, which is alienated from the place of its production.

It is through the telling of these stories in schools that Aboriginal people are performing a relationship to place, while children are learning to understand what a place might mean to the Aboriginal person telling the story. Of course what the Aboriginal person has in mind and what the children learn (as an understanding of an Aboriginal person's relation to place and history) may be entirely different and this represents the difficulty of assessing such learning. Such performances constituted through the telling of local stories and histories characterise the very essence that is most difficult to transmit and teach in the classroom. This essence is the interaction itself. An understanding of this interaction can be produced between Aboriginal parents and Elders and children and teachers in the classroom and through their mutual planning and negotiations to include Aboriginal knowledge in the curriculum. These interactions will also represent the unconscious work of reconciling Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in schools.

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## Notes on contributors

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