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Cultural learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people: Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in New South Wales schools

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Cultural learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people

Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in New South Wales schools

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
School of Education,
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January 12, 2016
I certify that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text, and that the material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

I acknowledge that I have read and understood the University’s rules, requirements, procedures and policy relating to my higher degree research award and to my thesis. I certify that I have complied with the rules, requirements, procedures and policy of the University (as they may be from time to time).

Signed .................................  Date .................................
Abstract

From the 1980s, the knowledges, perspectives, histories, cultures and languages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples began to be acknowledged and included in dominant New South Wales school education policies and curricula, following a century of denial. Such inclusion aimed to address practices of institutionalised discrimination and inequality, but was often contested. From an educational perspective, the emphasis is on the contribution of cultural learning to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes through engagement with, and motivation for, schooling. However, less is known about the students’ own views of learning their knowledges, perspectives, histories, cultures and languages: what they are learning; how this learning contributes to understanding of their positioning in Australian society, and of the multiple educational, social and systemic forces affecting such learning in schools.

In NSW, Aboriginal peoples comprise the majority of the Indigenous population, with a smaller proportion of Torres Strait Islanders living in the state. This is reflected in NSW Aboriginal education policy, which states the term Aboriginal includes Torres Strait Islander peoples. This research, co-constructed with the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) seeks, through conversations with 38 Aboriginal students and one Torres Strait Islander student within three primary schools and three secondary schools in the land of the Gumbaynggirr nation in the state of New South Wales, Australia, to understand the nature and extent of the students’ cultural learning. Further, the perspectives of Aboriginal educational support staff, Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) members, principals and teachers, highlight factors affecting the learning of cultural knowledges and perspectives in the schools, including assumptions, beliefs and attitudes—overt and covert, positive and negative—employment,
community involvement, leadership, teaching practices, attitudes, and the resourcing of cultural learning.

The research is informed by the theories and methodologies of indigenous research and the sociology of childhood, and is underpinned by the affirmative, non-hierarchical philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to emphasise the potential in learning, and the interrelatedness of student and adult contributions. The research outcomes extend understanding of cultural learning in six schools through mapping the perspectives of students with educational and institutional forces in the following three major ways.

First, the research found the extent and nature of cultural learning for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students varies through a continuum across and within the schools. This ranges from stereotypical, historical practices with limited contemporary connections to higher order learning, through to critical thinking about the knowledge and expression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, local customs and language. Second, the conversations with Aboriginal and non-Indigenous adults clarify understanding of the positive and negative forces affecting the production of cultural learning in schools, such as affective relationships, the employment and commitment of educational professionals, assumptions and cultural awareness, institutional and political discourses, resourcing and training issues. Finally, the research identifies through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ comments, the possibilities of cultural learning in producing for the students a sense of themselves, to understand through the past and the present, and how they are positioned in Australian society. This should be a responsibility of schooling in this country.
I conclude that through learning the histories, stories, knowledges and customs of their continuous cultures within dominant schooling, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have the opportunity to embody cultural knowledges and understand their positioning in contemporary Australian society. In foregrounding the students’ views, this research provides insights into the potential of cultural learning for the students’ holistic understanding of their place within and between two cultural worlds, of *becoming-other* than their present selves, of moving beyond a singular dominant society and schooling, and opportunities for extending such learning and the equal positioning of Indigenous knowledges alongside Western knowledges in the Australian education system.
Acknowledgments

I acknowledge the custodians of the land of the Gumbaynggirr Nation where I live and in which this research has taken place. I thank the members of the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) who agreed to work with me, and without whom this research would not have taken place. I thank the participating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and Aboriginal educational staff members who shared their stories and allowed me to enter their community. I thank the school principals and the teachers who shared their schools and experiences. I acknowledge and thank my three supervisors for their enduring support. Dr. Judith Wilks principal supervisor, thank you for this opportunity, for your guidance and support. Dr. Loretta Kelly, thank you sista, for your insights, knowledge and wise advice. Professor Neil Drew, thank you for your expertise and time.

My family and friends are an integral part of this long and large thesis project. I thank my parents who gave me a passion for learning, questioning, reading, writing, and a sense of equality among all peoples. I thank my sister Julie Wilson for her moral and practical support throughout, my sister Janet Wilson for encouragement and graciously sharing her extensive knowledge and experience, and my mother June Howard for her active interest and support. Many thanks to Charlie Bellemore for sharing his experiences and the many valuable conversations we had about the research. Thank you to my good friends and colleagues at Southern Cross University, Annie Kennedy and the Bellingen PhD group for support and advice. I thank and acknowledge at the highest level possible the love and support of Vic Manuel who has had so often to talk to my back (face to computer) and live around my moods, and for sustaining me with your cooking.
Publications Arising from this Research

(at time of submission)


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Seminar and conference presentations

Wilson, K. (2014). ‘Years 7, 8, 9, 10...we didn't learn anything about Aboriginal history': Indigenous students' learning experiences. AARE/NZARE Conference, Brisbane, Australia.


Terminology

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous

In this thesis, I use the terms ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’, ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘Indigenous’ interchangeably when discussing Australian Indigenous peoples and their knowledges and perspectives. The term Aboriginal is used in New South Wales policy documents, where it is defined as including Torres Strait Islanders; by NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups; and, by school staff who identify as Aboriginal. The majority of student and staff research participants were Aboriginal, but one primary school student identified as a Torres Strait Islander, and thus when discussing the students collectively I use the terms ‘Aboriginal’, ‘Indigenous’ and the phrase ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ depending on context. Some Aboriginal students preferred to use Indigenous and localised terms such as Koori. I use the name of the people of the Gumbaynggirr nation when referring to the location of this research.

However, I also note that the terms ‘Aboriginal’, ‘non-Aboriginal’, ‘Torres Strait Islander’, ‘Indigenous’ and ‘non-Indigenous’ are contested, because the words and their usage are constructions originating in Western discourse, and can have the effect of both polarising and generalising about groups of people and populations (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002; Nakata, 2007b). The term ‘indigenous’ refers to the original inhabitants of a land who have specific rights, and is used in this thesis within broad and international discussions of indigenous research. I use the terminology of particular authors when quoting or referring to their work.
Use of the plural ‘peoples’ recognises the distinctive and differing languages, nation groups and customs of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Island peoples in Australia, and indigenous peoples worldwide.

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives**
Within educational policy and curricula, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives incorporate histories, cultures, stories, peoples, ways of life, ways of being, ways of thinking, experiences and viewpoints. I use the plural ‘knowledges’ to indicate the multiplicity and diversity of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, and the multidimensionality of indigenous knowledges worldwide (Dei, 2000; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008). I have adopted the phrase ‘cultural learning’ to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in schools. The usage in relation to school education expands the concept of learning within a cultural group (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2004) to include cultural knowledges, customs and local stories, as well as historical and contemporary issues of relevance to both groups of Australian Indigenous peoples, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and peoples; for example, governance, policies, land rights, recognition, status and national legislation.
Abbreviations

ACARA
Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, responsible for developing the national Australian Curriculum and administering NAPLAN tests.

ACG Aboriginal Consultative Group; a national representative body appointed in 1974 by the Schools Commission.

AECG Aboriginal Educational Consultative Group Inc. NSW; a network of representative groups throughout NSW.

AEO Aboriginal Education Officer

AEW Aboriginal Education Worker

AIATSIS Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Closing the gap Policies and programs of the Council of Australian Governments to reduce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage in the areas of education, employment, and health, for which the Australian government reports annual progress quantitatively on targets via statistical outcomes.

COAG Council of Australian Governments (Commonwealth, state and territory)

Mainstream
In the context of mainstream education in Australia, schools teach Indigenous and non-Indigenous students following state-adapted national curricula emphasising dominant Western, Judeo-Christian histories and values, with varying levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curricula knowledges and perspectives. English is the primary language of instruction.

NAIDOC National Aborigines and Islander Day of Observance Committee
NAPLAN National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is an annual assessment for students across Australia in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, that has been administered since 2008.

NATSIEP National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy

NSW DEC New South Wales Department of Education and Communities

PISA Programme for International Student Assessment, an international assessment of 15-year-old students’ mathematical, scientific and reading literacy.

RCIADIC Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody

TIMSS Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, an assessment designed to inform educational policy and practice by providing an international perspective on teaching and learning in mathematics and science for students in Year 4 and Year 8.
In this preface, following the Māori custom of declaring whakapapa (ancestry) through pepeha (introduction), and Aboriginal custom and protocol, I provide information about my Māori heritage. I discuss my inspiration and motivation to undertake research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

*Ko Taranaki toku Maunga; My mountain is Taranaki*

*Ko Tokomaru toku waka; My canoe is Tokomaru*

*Ko Te Atiawa toku iwi; My tribe is Te Ātiawa*

*Ko Ngāti Te Whiti toku hapu; My sub-tribe is Ngāti Te Whiti*

I am of Māori and Pākehā (English, Scottish) descent. My mother learned of her Māori heritage at the age of 13 when, at a school event celebrating pioneers in her home region of Taranaki, a teacher identified her as a descendant of a pioneering English whaler, trader and later landowner. Questioning further, she was told that her English great-great-grandfather had been married to Wakaiwa (Rawinia), the daughter of Eruera Te Puke ki Mahurangi, a leading Ngāti Te Whiti chief, in return for assistance and translation in negotiations with European settlers. The Englishman also assisted settlers with purchases of Māori land in the region. The family’s Māori heritage was not a secret in my mother’s family; however, it was just not talked about before her discovery. My English grandmother researched the family history recorded and stored in the local museum because of the Englishman’s settler prominence in the area. My grandmother bequeathed to me the genealogical documents, photos and newspaper clippings that she had gathered. My family grew up with the knowledge of our heritage and connection to Māori culture and people.
I shared my first years at school with Māori students in a rural area of Taranaki, where my mother taught. Later we moved to the city of Wellington, where she taught in a small railway settlement populated by Māori families from other parts of the country. As teacher, my mother was regarded as part of the Māori communities she worked in, and along with her family was always invited to, and participated in, community events.

I completed my education to Bachelor of Arts level at Victoria University of Wellington, Aotearoa, and then moved to Australia to join family, study and work. In Aotearoa, although colonial, Euro-Western orientations dominated education, a Māori renaissance beginning in the 1970s revitalised the Māori language and refocused attention on the rights of Māori through the Treaty of Waitangi. Australia was a different story. I knew of the white Australia immigration policy, but when I moved to Australia to live, I discovered a majority European, white population which did not acknowledge or learn of the country’s first peoples. Deliberate assimilationist and education policies had aimed to separate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from their ways of life. Australia’s Indigenous peoples are not recognised in the Constitution and a treaty was never proclaimed. Education curricula for many generations excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ lives, histories, customs, and languages. To learn more, one of the first books I bought was a hardback copy of Living Black: Blacks talk to Kevin Gilbert (Gilbert, 1977).

My interest in the research topic emerged from previous qualitative research I conducted with children and young people in schools in the NSW north coast region about their experiences of social exclusion and their educational aspirations (Wilks & Wilson, 2012). Aboriginal students participated in group discussions in three schools, and their observations and comments included awareness of differences, and some tensions within the education system. In one
school in a region where much of the Aboriginal population lived in a defined area, the one participating Aboriginal student commented that there should be more Aboriginal cultural learning.

In another school, the school selected students to take part in the research. Some Aboriginal students who participated were also part of an anger management program arranged through the school, and a teacher’s aide to attend the research discussion group in order to monitor these students. However, the students participated with enthusiasm and provided articulate, meaningful and sensitive responses to the discussion questions. Afterwards, the deputy principal commented that “the kids loved it” and we could come back any time. The students had responded positively to being asked for their opinions. These experiences demonstrated how articulate children and young people can be when asked what they think, and the value of research that places young participants in the forefront. I learnt the importance of relationships and connections in Indigenous research: one student was excited to discover that she shared a last name with me.

The spirit of these students has accompanied me, connecting with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students participating in this doctoral research as I seek to extend understanding, knowledge and praxis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural learning in six New South Wales schools. This research is unique in its focus on the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students regarding their cultural learning in primary and secondary schools.
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Chapter 1: Positioning the research

...the key to success for our children is to obtain a first class education without compromising our cultural knowledge base ... where real education is personal and individual, where students are individuals. Kaye Price (2012b, pp. 17-18)

…when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. Yet you know you exist and others like you, that this is a game with mirrors. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding—to resist this void, this nonbeing, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard. Adrienne Rich (1987, p. 199)

1.1 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges and Perspectives in Education

We didn’t really learn anything, when I done history in Years 7, 8, 9, 10, we didn’t learn anything about Aboriginal. All we learnt was, uum, Aboriginal people being killed and being slaves and stuff. We didn’t learn anything about Aboriginal history.
The above statement from Derrin (a pseudonym), a Year 11/12 student in this research, makes two significant points regarding the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, histories and perspectives in dominant, mainstream education in a NSW secondary school. First, Derrin distinguishes between Aboriginal perspectives and non-Aboriginal perspectives of and within Australian history, as learned in the first four years of secondary school. A history of violations and control of Aboriginal peoples presents a colonial viewpoint of oppression. Disrespectful photographs of Aboriginal people in chains illustrate history textbooks. While such events did occur, the impression is one of negativity, an objectifying history about the treatment of Aboriginal people, which excludes their knowledges and perspectives. Second, this comment indicates that through more recent learning (in Year 11), Derrin came to understand that a distinct, “material reality” of Aboriginal history exists, apart and separate from non-Aboriginal accounts (Jones & Jenkins, 2008a, p. 125). Derrin’s comment crystallises the positive and negative positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, histories and perspectives in school education.

This thesis is located within a complex and contested environment of school education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. In this space, a multidimensional legacy of colonial, political, discriminatory and racist discourses has dominated and determined policy-making in education through generations since the arrival of European colonisers and settlers in the 18th century (Gray & Beresford, 2008; Whatman & Duncan, 2005). The current approaches incorporate both ideological and practical aims at “a cultural interface …a contested space …of tension…” that defines and limits the teaching and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Nakata, 2011, p. 2). Through undertaking the research for this thesis, from negotiations and interactions with
participants, and from the literature, I have come to understand the meaning of the above statements. The research concentrates on two areas of this complex space: one, the meaning and value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, perspectives, histories and cultures in schooling from the standpoints of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; and two, understanding the social and political forces embedded in the production of the students’ cultural learning from the views of Aboriginal education staff, community members, non-Indigenous principals and teachers.

In 1982, the government of New South Wales (NSW), the most populous state in Australia, introduced an *Aboriginal Education Policy* that aimed to address two centuries of multiple forms of discrimination against Aboriginal peoples in education (Aboriginal Education Unit Department of School Education, 1982). This discrimination included the denial of Aboriginal customary education practices; the exclusion of knowledges, perspectives and histories from educational curricula; the inadequate teaching of Aboriginal students, with limited curricula; the exclusion of Aboriginal students from public schools; and, the official role of education in a national policy of assimilation and deculturation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The 1982 *Aboriginal Education Policy* aimed to address discrimination through enhancing self-esteem and educational opportunities for Aboriginal students, and through providing opportunities for all students to gain knowledge of Aboriginal contemporary society and cultural heritage through the teaching of Aboriginal perspectives in all subject areas and the new subject of Aboriginal Studies. The policy recommended the participation of Aboriginal communities in development of curriculum and school environments. Support documents included *Guidelines for teaching Aboriginal Studies* (Cook, 1982b) and *Strategies for teaching Aboriginal children* (Burney, Lester, & Riley, 1982).
Subsequently, the Australian Government, as well as other state and territory governments, developed similar policies. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1989) provided direction for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy in all states and territories. The Australian Government continues to provide some educational funding and policy guidance in this area.

The 1982 NSW Aboriginal Education Policy included five mandatory components:

i. consult with the Aboriginal community
ii. conduct staff awareness and developmental programs
iii. promote positive educational outcomes for Aboriginal students
iv. add an Aboriginal perspective to subject areas
v. ensure that resource allocation is appropriate to enable Aboriginal perspectives/studies to be meaningfully implemented.

(Aboriginal Education Unit Department of School Education, 1982).

This was the first time Aboriginal knowledges and perspectives had been acknowledged and included in NSW school curriculum (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2009b). However, as ground-breaking as this may appear, implementation of the policy was contested and inconsistent. As a departmental policy it was regarded by some schools as “controversial and revolutionary" (Wammarra Aboriginal Education Centre & School of Teacher Education Charles Sturt University, 1992, p. 16). Initially, implementation took place only in schools with Aboriginal student populations and was ignored by some schools, for example, those without Aboriginal students. Since 1982, multiple policy reviews and analyses have identified the following limitations of the policy’s implementation:
inadequate and poor resourcing, preparation and support for teachers; lack of accountability of schools regarding implementation; and, inadequate collaboration and consultation with owners of Aboriginal knowledges and their communities (Cook, 1995; NSW Department of Education and Training & NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc., 2004; Wammarra Aboriginal Education Centre & School of Teacher Education Charles Sturt University, 1992).

In 1987, the NSW Department of Education attempted to reinforce the mandatory policy requirements regarding the inclusion of Aboriginal knowledges and perspectives in all NSW public schools, and to suggest this was the responsibility of all teachers (Kleeman, 2012). At different times, in the intervening period to the present day, departmental mandatory declarations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in NSW public schools have had varying levels of adherence and implementation (Kleeman, 2012). Since the policy mandated acknowledgement and inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in NSW schools through curriculum, cultural events and community participation, knowledge of cultural learning from the position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ is limited.

1.2 The Research Questions

This thesis contributes to understanding the significance and value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives, in other words, cultural learning, in NSW primary and secondary schools. The research sought the views and opinions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from their standpoint; of the extent and nature of cultural learning in schools, related cultural activities, and community participation in their cultural learning. Further, through the views of Aboriginal school staff, members of the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), and school principals and teachers, the
research sought to understand the production of, and the multiple forces affecting, the positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in the schools. The three research questions are as follows:

1. **What is the nature and extent of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are learning in mainstream school education in New South Wales?**

2. **In what ways do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reflect on the extent and nature of their cultural learning?**

3. **What are the systemic policy, structural, institutional factors and individual attitudes that mediate and affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ cultural learning?**

The research centres on the responses of 38 Aboriginal students and one Torres Strait Island student to education that includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, histories, languages and cultures. The students discuss what they are learning, and how this cultural learning impacts on understanding of their positions in contemporary society. From these discussions, the research considers the relationships that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students develop with cultural knowledges and perspectives; the potential of cultural learning for students to develop a “counter-discourse” to the social and educational discourses surrounding them (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 56; Herbert, 2012; Tiffin, 1995); and cultural learning “‘where difference is creative, positive and productive’” (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 526). The focus in NSW is primarily on Aboriginal knowledges, customs and histories. However, learning incorporates Torres Strait Islander perspectives at a national Indigenous level in terms of rights and legislation, and distinctive knowledges and customs at a specific level for the Torres Strait Island student participating in this research.
1.3 Defining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and Perspectives

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in curriculum have different definitions and understandings. In the NSW 1982 *Aboriginal Education Policy*, Aboriginal perspectives were defined as:

...the infusion into all areas of the curriculum of a general sensitivity to and awareness of, Aboriginal culture and society either in the form of an Aboriginal viewpoint, a viewpoint sensitive to Aboriginal society, culture and history, or the infusion of Aboriginal content matter (Cook, 1982a, p. 4).

The term knowledge does not translate directly into Aboriginal languages (Martin, 2003b), and indigenous knowledges are difficult to package and encapsulate in curriculum (Aikenhead & Michell, 2011; Dei, 2008). Knowledge “‘transcribes’ reality” and its inclusion in curriculum is political, embodying the representation of knowledge (Green, 2010, p. 464). Further, the synthesis and commensurability of indigenous knowledge systems and Western knowledge systems in educational curricula and pedagogies is debated academically and contested at all levels of education (Dei, 2008; Nakata, 2007a). Difficulties associated with the equal positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges in Australian schools are ongoing. A persistent colonial narrative in curriculum often favours assumptions of the dominant society’s knowledge and perspectives (Kerwin, 2011; Kerwin & Van Issum, 2011; Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013; Nakata, 2007b, 2011). Where Indigenous material is included in curriculum, the focus is often superficial, on what is regarded as discontinued traditional ways of life of the past, and less on a holistic, ongoing culture that
incorporates unique Indigenous knowledges (Kerwin & Van Issum, 2013). Including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in schooling in Australia ensures that “our perspectives are represented in the delivery of content” (Nakata, 2011, p. 7). However, the practice of incorporating and teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges can be tokenistic, an add-on that is not integrated into existing curriculum (Kleeman, 2012; Nakata, 2011; Yunkaporta, 2009b). Further, because of the continued public and political discourse surrounding the policy, selecting and teaching Indigenous perspectives in Australian mainstream education is often ideological (Nakata, 2011). Recent politically inspired criticisms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curriculum perspectives in the *Australian Curriculum* (Wiltshire & Donnelly, 2014) exemplify the continued ideological nature of this debate. Moving beyond such a debate, is the concept of an educational “cultural interface” in which the focus is on quality teaching, learning and appropriate content selection taking account of Indigenous experience, and which does not perpetuate a separation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges (Nakata, 2011, p. 2).

For the purposes of this research, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges in curriculum encompass ways of knowing, being and doing (Martin, 2003b), expressed through language, stories, practices, histories, connections and collaborations with local people, communities and NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups, as taught through Aboriginal or Indigenous Studies, cross-curriculum perspectives and languages across key learning areas in NSW schools. Current policy documents and agreements (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) & NSW Department of Education and Training (DET), 2010) express aims to improve the “educational outcomes and wellbeing” of Aboriginal students, knowledge of and respect for Aboriginal cultures, values and histories for all students and staff (NSW Department of Education and Training,
2009b, p. 13). Thus, the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in curriculum has three broad aims: to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with education through cultural knowledge and community connections; to repair the imbalance in historical, social and scientific knowledge; and to increase the non-Indigenous population’s understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. NSW Aboriginal education policy “refers inclusively to all Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islander people” (NSW Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate, 2009, p. 6).

I use the phrase ‘cultural learning’ to denote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in curriculum, including performative accomplishments in dance and music; activities and events in schools acknowledging and celebrating the diverse, distinctive cultures, knowledges and heritages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and, community participation in cultural learning.

1.4 Focus and Rationale of the Research

Over the last 35 years, education of, for and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia has become highly researched, politicised and publicised, and is discussed continually in the media through public statistics and government reports (Vass, 2012). In the 1980s, comparative statistics identified major gaps in government policy areas such as education for Indigenous students, in comparison with non-Indigenous students, and the slow pace of improvement led to *National Indigenous Reform Agreement: Closing the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage*, which came into effect on 1 January 2009 (Lingard, Creagh, & Vass, 2012). Closing the Gap provides funding for building blocks of education, employment, health, housing, safety, governance and leadership, and reports annually on
progress in meeting the target areas within set timeframes (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2008). While the funding is important, statistical reports of slow national progress in academic outcomes, attendance and retention of Indigenous students, and the accompanying government rhetoric and public responses present a negative orientation and deficit indicators of Indigenous educational achievements (Pholi, Black, & Richards, 2009).

Within the field of Indigenous school education, some research explores the self-esteem, motivation and academic outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australia (such as Bodkin-Andrews, O'Rourke, & Craven, 2010b; Craven & Parente, 2003; Craven & Bodkin-Andrews, 2011; Martin, 2006; Ministerial Council for Education, 2011; Munns, Martin, & Craven, 2008). This is valuable and important research, but less is known of what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students are learning from education which includes their own cultures, histories, customs and stories, and how such learning contributes to students’ views of themselves. In other words, the students are the object of policy, and government discourse, and in research they are situated more often as the object of teaching and educational processes, but less as subjects who have views and opinions. The principle of indigenous perspectives in curriculum often is accepted in policy, but a gap between theory and practice persists, as Kanu (2011) noted in Canadian research. Asking indigenous students about their cultural learning can begin a "dialogic and transformative curriculum" (Kanu, 2011, p. 205).

Internationally, and in Australia, research exploring the role of culturally relevant or culturally responsive education in recognising students’ cultural knowledge, emphasises the potential to engage indigenous and non-dominant students with mainstream education and
improve their learning outcomes (Bishop, Ladwig, & Berryman, 2014; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; David Unaipon College of Indigenous Research, 2009; Perso, 2012; Sleeter, 2012). However, evidence of causal connections between culturally responsive or culturally relevant pedagogies and student learning outcomes is often inconclusive (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Causal links are difficult to measure (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010), and indicators of cultural learning are noted as absent in government evaluative reports into Indigenous disadvantage (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2014). Policy success is measured in relation to tangible outcomes such as literacy skill acquisition, attendance and retention (New South Wales Auditor-General, 2012), but not the value and impact of learning that imparts values and intangible elements of cultural heritage, knowledge and wellbeing. These aspects are immeasurable within the current skills and outcomes-based education systems, or excluded altogether (Grieves, 2006). When that which is “immeasurable” in learning is not understood, recognised or valued, it becomes less visible and difficult to speak about (Carini, 2001, p. 175; Tuck, 2010).

This thesis extends the potential and less understood elements of cultural learning, in three ways. First, it seeks to understand from the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in six NSW schools, a significant but under-researched aspect of their education: the extent and nature of their understanding of their histories, knowledges and perspectives (cultural learning) through schooling. Second, the research seeks to understand the value, meaning and the potential (Massumi, 1987) of cultural learning for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within school education. This differs from quantitative, statistical measurements of students’ learning outcomes, and does not evaluate teaching competencies or pedagogies. Third, through the perspectives of Aboriginal school staff, school principals and teachers, and by reviewing attitudinal and educational trends in the
literature, the research seeks to understand the multiplicities of social, historical and systemic forces (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) affecting the nature and extent of cultural learning in the students’ schools.

1.4.1 Location of this study

This research took place in three primary and three secondary schools within the land of the Gumbaynggirr nation on the mid-north coast of NSW (see map in Figure 1 indicating the mid-north coast region of NSW). The research location covers an area to the north, or top, of the map, of approximately 1500 square kilometres of a mix of coastal, agricultural lands, forests and national parks, populated by numerous small to medium sized villages, towns and larger regional centres (see Chapter 4). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population comprises approximately four per cent of the region’s population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). In the schools studied, the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students ranged from three per cent in the smallest primary school to 18 per cent in one of the larger secondary schools. For ethical and confidentiality reasons the school names are not provided.
Figure 1: NSW mid-north coast region in the southeast of Australia (included with permission).
The location and the small proportion of Aboriginal students in this region differ from communities and schools in more remote areas in other states, such as the Northern Territory, and western NSW where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations are larger proportionally. Sociocultural and demographic characteristics of remote areas include high student mobility and ongoing teaching and administrative staff turnover (Prout, 2009). By contrast, in some regional NSW schools, such as the location of this research, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are often in a minority, and teacher employment is more stable (NSW Department of Education and Training & NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc., 2004).

1.4.2 Scope

In this thesis, I did not measure objectively the students’ educational achievements, pedagogies or teaching methods, but sought to learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students the meaning and value of curricular perspectives and knowledges. Further, through the participating adults and the literature, this research delineates the multiple social, economic and political forces mediating the students’ cultural learning and knowledge, such as school cultures, staff professional training and development, resourcing, leadership and systemic inequities (Kanu, 2007).

The research takes place within a particular microcosm and point in time or a “snapshot of reality” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 214) for 39 young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, who were a small number both in their school population and in their residential population. Each of the six schools is a separate case study, with similarities and differences emerging among the students’ cultural learning experiences and school situations. The conversations of the participating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reflect their
cultural learning in the schools at the time of the research. As with much qualitative, case study research, it is important to note that the students’ positions in this research do not represent the views of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the schools, nor does it infer universal generalisations to be extrapolated to the whole state of NSW or Australia. The research contributes to understanding and provides important insights into the students’ cultural learning through considering their unique positions.

1.5 Researching Responsively and Respectfully

This research responds to international indigenous standpoints and practices that emphasise the viewpoints and positions of indigenous peoples in research (Berryman, SooHoo, & Nevin, 2013c; Martin, 2008b; Smith, 1999, 2012). Two further approaches inform the theoretical framework of the thesis: sociology of childhood research that prioritises the views of children and young people (James & James, 2008), and research that recognises the value of student insights into their education (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003; Cook-Sather, 2010). I discuss these approaches briefly in this introduction, and more fully in the discussion of the research methodology in Chapter 4. Further, I reflect on the impact of assumptions, social and historical forces that operate within the milieu of cultural learning (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; St. Pierre, 2011), particularly in Chapters 7 and 8.

1.5.1 Researching with indigenous peoples

Indigenous peoples continue to contest and challenge research that takes place within and about indigenous communities. Such contestation responds to practices of so-called objective, Western research methodologies and research by outsiders, embedded in colonial and paternalistic practices that have denied collaboration with, and the inclusion of, the perspectives of indigenous peoples (Martin, 2008b; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009;
Smith, 1999, 2012). In Australia, Indigenous scholars have identified research principles through the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews and knowledges, and social, historical and political contexts. Such research incorporates epistemology, ontology and axiology that emphasise reciprocity in ensuring benefits flow to the community, building relationships, relatedness between peoples and place within the research process (Martin, 2008b; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; Nakata, 2007b; Rigney, 2006).

Research with indigenous peoples, which non-indigenous researchers initiate and/or conduct, may still embed colonial and paternalistic assumptions (Aveling, 2013; Bishop, 2005). Non-indigenous researchers cannot and should not assume the right to conduct or even to initiate research with indigenous peoples (Martin, 2008), but must approach indigenous communities for agreement to proceed, and to co-operate in research design. To address such concerns, in recent decades, Australian research institutions have adopted guidelines and protocols for all researchers undertaking research with Indigenous communities and peoples (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), 2012; National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), 2007). Universities follow human research ethical procedures that aim to protect both Indigenous peoples and children and young people during the conduct of research. The formal University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) process specifies that researchers submit all research instruments such as information and consent documents, discussion and interview questions, before proceeding with research. In NSW, a network of Aboriginal Educational Consultative Group Inc. (AECGs). This requires an ethical undertaking to work with the community to define the research topic, research together,
share research understandings, and agree on the distribution of outcomes. I discuss this process further in Chapter 4, Co-constructing the research.

1.5.2 Researching with children and young people in education

The sociology of childhood research challenges social constructions of childhood as innocent, passive, or romantic (Hendrick, 2005; Prout, 2011). Children’s rights to participate and express their views, proclaimed in Article 12 of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2005), have become a fundamental element of current social research with children and young people. Principles of research with children and young people emphasise including their perspectives, not just adults’ views, and the value of their participation in the research process in terms of thinking about and expressing their views (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, & Bottrell, 2015).

This research also acknowledges and is informed by a growing body of research that highlights the value of consulting with students regarding their learning and educational experiences, and integrating such perspectives into teaching practices (Bishop et al., 2003; Cook-Sather, 2009; Lodge, 2005). Student insights can “promote awareness of the dynamic interplay between perspectives, between ideas and practices, and between educational possibilities and actualities” (Cook-Sather, 2010, p. 559).

1.5.3 Relatedness: "first know thyself"

For Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, the process of research with Indigenous peoples and communities involves working from the inside, knowing “thyself” (Martin, 2008b, p. 93), understanding that research involves responsibility and accountability to, connecting with, forming relationships with, and learning from, the community members. For the researcher, the practice of research also involves a “process of undoing” (Somerville,
2007, p. 230) and rethinking. This involved examining my knowledge and understanding of: ethnographic, qualitative inquiry practices and theories; indigenous research, through the writings of indigenous scholars; and my intentions and research practices through “self-reflexive interrogation” (Martin, 2008b, p. 140). As an outsider to the community, I did not assume control in the research, but respectfully approached the educational community group for permission to proceed (see Chapter 4).

This research took place from within predominantly non-Indigenous educational systems (university and school), with embedded assumptions and practices in terms of dominant ways of doing (ontology) and thinking (epistemology). To maintain relatedness to the research and the participants, at times I had to resist and rethink ethical, protective practices and attitudes within the systems towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and children and young people. For example, I reconfigured the ethics process to ensure that the local Aboriginal education community participation was more than consultation; that it was a co-constructive process. To minimise the perhaps intrusive effect on the students’ cultural safety or level of comfort in speaking out, in discussion groups, I arranged for an Aboriginal person to fulfil the requirement for AECG presence and NSW departmental duty of care, where possible.

Two separate groups of people and events have accompanied me throughout this doctoral research. First, the inspiration for the thesis came from a number of Aboriginal students whom I had met in earlier research with school students in the north coast region of New South Wales, about their educational aspirations (Wilks & Wilson, 2012). A small number of Aboriginal students participated passionately and enthusiastically, welcoming the opportunity to express their views. One Aboriginal student expressed a desire for more
Aboriginal cultural learning (see Preface). Second, in conversations about my research, several non-Indigenous Australians with whom I spoke made disparaging and discriminatory comments about the worth and value of undertaking educational research with young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Such comments strengthened my resolve through the research to understand and counter discourses and epistemologies of ignorance (Malewski, 2013) and negativity within Australian society (Healy, 2008; Langton, 2007).

Researching and writing from a position of an outsider with indigenous peoples and children and young people requires awareness of working from a space in between two cultures (Jones & Jenkins, 2008b; Somerville & Perkins, 2010) and generations. This includes understanding the importance of maintaining difference in researching from a “colonizer-indigene hyphen” (Jones & Jenkins, 2008b, p. 473), particularly in education where the “difference” hyphen is often moderated to achieve equal educational outcomes. Recognising and acknowledging generational differences between the perspectives of children, young people and adults is a key consideration (Mayall, 2008). This research prioritises the unique, significant viewpoints of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and of the Aboriginal educational community members; positions that may differ from, but complement the interpretations and applications of curriculum and policy by principals and teachers.

1.6 Significance of the Research

A multiplicity of research and reports review and evaluate the educational performance and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within the Australian education system. For example, students’ performance and academic achievement is
measured by national and international standards such as NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) (Hughes & Hughes, 2009); PISA (Programme of International Student Assessment) literacy and numeracy; levels of attendance and retention (Dreise & Thomson, 2014; Munns et al., 2008); and in mathematics and science in TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, an assessment of teaching and learning in mathematics and science for Year 4 and Year 8 students). Such measurements portray the Indigenous population with lower achievements in comparison to the non-Indigenous population. Such research, policy and statistical reporting including programs with reform agendas such as the annual Closing the Gap reports (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2008), depict Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as a national, homogenous population group, differentiating them only from non-Indigenous students and not considering the impacts of regional, remote and urban conditions. Such quantitative reporting ignores the complex and diverse forces in the lives of indigenous peoples (Bishop, 2005; Marker, 2009; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; Smith, 2005). Some studies consider the support needs and obstacles in schools with Indigenous students (O’Keefe, Olney, & Angus, 2012), examine contextual factors of parental education, socioeconomic background, geographic location and access (Biddle & Cameron, 2012; de Bortoli & Thomson, 2010); and economic outcomes (the human capital model) (Biddle, 2010).

A further body of research discusses teaching and pedagogy in relation to Indigenous knowledges and perspectives from the standpoint of the teaching profession (for example, Harrison, 2007; Harrison & Greenfield, 2011; Yunkaporta, 2009b; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009), and the education of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous pre-service teachers (for example, Hart, Whatman, McLaughlin, & Sharma-Brymer, 2012; Herbert, 2011a; Phillips,
Educators and scholars have examined the nature of Indigenous content in curriculum and as taught in schools (Kerwin, 2011; Lowe, Backhaus, Yunkaporta, Brown, & Loynes, 2014).

A small amount of research has explored Indigenous cultural learning and the cultural and racial dimensions of schooling experiences from the standpoint of Indigenous students. Australian research with Year 11/12 Aboriginal, and some non-Aboriginal, students explored their reasons for studying HSC (Higher School Certificate) Aboriginal Studies in terms of self-esteem and engagement with education (Wray, 2006). Further research with Australian Indigenous students has focused on understanding their schooling experiences in relation to racial and cultural identity, and educational aspirations (Kickett-Tucker, 2009; Ma Rhea & Atkinson, 2008; Nelson & Hay, 2010; Reid, 1999). In Canada, a study of the integration of Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum included the perspectives of Aboriginal students (Kanu, 2011). Research with Māori students about their perspectives of schooling in Aotearoa sought to understand their engagement with education to inform the development of an effective teaching profile (Bishop & Berryman, 2010). This thesis acknowledges and builds on such qualitative research with Indigenous students.

This research has sought to understand, through the viewpoints of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in six NSW schools, the extent, meaning and potential of their cultural learning, as well as the multiple forces inhibiting and restricting such learning. As qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), the intention was not to produce generalisable outcomes or causal links between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ cultural learning and their educational achievements, but to understand the students’ relationships with their cultural learning. I sought not to prove or disprove a
hypothesis of pedagogy or learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in schools, nor to build the research around "predetermined concepts and categories for explaining experience" (Nakata, 2007a, p. 12).

The thesis has probed understanding of cultural learning in schools from the position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: what they learn and how the learning affects them. The views of adult educators, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, contribute to understanding the sociopolitical, historical factors, conscious and unconscious, affecting the production of cultural learning. The research finds the potential of cultural learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to become-other than they are now, as one student expressed, to become something more than I am today (Neil, Year 11/12), despite layers of constraints. Highlighting the potential of cultural learning and the interrelatedness of student and adult contributions (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, 1994), the research seeks to understand the potential, and explores the multiple forces affecting educational theory and practice (Cole & Masny, 2012; Semetsky, 2006). Thus the theoretical framework of the thesis is sociological but it is also philosophical.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

In this thesis, the sections within each chapter link to each other (Massumi, 1987) in understanding the position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in relation to their cultural learning from within the milieu of educational systems and curriculum.

Chapters 2 and 3 review historical and contemporary educational literature forming a background to the milieu of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural learning. In Chapter 2, I review historical background to the education of, and for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students in Australia. I discuss attitudes, beliefs, educational practices and policies since colonisation, beginning with the earliest Aboriginal educational
missionary institution in the colony of New South Wales, segregation and exclusion through to the first inclusive NSW and national Aboriginal education policies. The second section traces and reviews the development and implementation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives into schools and curricula. In Chapter 3, I review Australian and international literature in relation to cultural learning, culturally relevant and culturally responsive education and curriculum, and discuss the gap in research—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ views regarding their cultural learning. Following indigenous beliefs that all knowledge is related and connected (Martin, 2008a; Wilson, 2008), these chapters provide context for the thesis.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the methodological and theoretical understandings forming the backbone of the research, designing the research and reaching agreement with the AECG, the methods and techniques employed. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 present the views of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adults, regarding cultural learning and teaching in schools in the land of the Gumbaynggirr nation where this research took place. In Chapters 5 and 6, I present and discuss the accounts of the 16 primary and 23 secondary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students of their cultural learning and activities from two student discussion groups at each school. In Chapter 7, I discuss and review the contributions of adult participants that were shared in different ways. First, through informal yarning sessions in which Aboriginal school staff and AECG members shared their school and educational experiences. Second, I spoke with teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and language, whose classes I observed. Third, in formal semi-structured interviews, school principals, and other staff invited by principals, discussed their philosophies and approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in their schools.
In Chapter 8, I discuss the potential and the opportunities cultural learning within curriculum and schools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to understand themselves and their positioning in terms of their potential to become different from their present selves. I draw on the concept of *becoming* from Deleuze and Guattari (1987), not in the sense of the students becoming the other, dominant culture, but of *becoming-other* within and acknowledging the distinctiveness of the two worlds they inhabit (Semetsky, 2006). I discuss historical, educational and political forces emerging from the research that challenge the praxis of incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and perspectives into the schools, and a role for teachers in *becoming-other* than their present selves, through interactions with students. Finally, I discuss the limitations of this research.

In Chapter 9, I make some recommendations for further understanding and extending the practices of cultural learning within the location of the research. The thesis is structured in the conventional manner. However, readers may prefer to read the accounts of the participants first before returning to Chapters 2, 3 and 4 for the literature reviews and discussion of the methodology and research processes (see Figure 2 for an alternative reading).
Figure 2: Alternative thesis reading
Chapter 2. Historical Background: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Educational Policies and Curricula

Cultural learning for Indigenous students in New South Wales (NSW) takes place within a complex historical, educational and regulatory space that is shaped and underpinned by a multiplicity of policies, attitudes, educational theories, assumptions and beliefs. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the educational and policy background to this research. I review historical and contemporary assumptions and beliefs, as well as educational policies and practices that segment, control and mark out the milieu within which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student cultural learning takes place. The chapter begins with an overview of the historical impact of colonisation on the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. I review educational policies in NSW since 1982, and the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policies introduced in 1990. Finally, I review the place of cultural learning through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in school education curricula; the key focus of this thesis.

2.1 Education and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

Within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies, education is a lifelong process involving knowledge holders passing on to individuals and communities a complex set of knowledges, skills and customs, through rituals and ceremonies. This process sustained communities for thousands of years (Cross-Townsend, 2011; Valadian, 1992). From the late eighteenth century, the influx of explorers, colonists and convicts into Aboriginal nations
and the Torres Strait Islands disrupted the lives of the original inhabitants. The occupying colonisers imposed European standards, beliefs and practices on the first peoples; disrespected, disregarded and outlawed their indigenous customs and traditions, including education. Disruption of existing social structures through decimation of the population fractured the entire fabric of social and family life. Land dispossession, dislocation and the enforced movement of the first peoples onto reserves and missions weakened existing kinship structures and relationships and prohibited the passing on of knowledges, languages and customs through existing educational processes (Kerwin, 2011; Valadian, 1992). Within a belief system that followed evolutionary thinking of the nineteenth century, Europeans represented ‘native’ peoples as being at a comparatively ‘primitive’ stage of development (Kerwin & Van Issum, 2013; Nakata, 2002). An assumption of superiority determined official government policies which, under the guise of paternalistic, ostensible protection, controlled the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the separate colonies by legislative practices that continued when the colonies became federated as Australia in 1901.

In NSW, for example, the Aboriginal Protection Board legislation and policies removed many Aboriginal children from their families, making them wards of the state. The children received minimal education from untrained staff in institutions, missions and reserves, skilling them only for menial tasks and as cheap labour (Behrendt, 2003; Dunn, 2001). English was the language of missionary education and speaking language” (Beck & Somerville, 2002, p. 5) was prohibited; “knowledge, both tangible and intangible … Aboriginal knowledge systems became invisible” within the European dominated society (Kerwin, 2011, p. 251). School educational curricula actively excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, cultures, languages and histories.
The earliest imposed formal educational program was a “Native Institution” for Dharug Aboriginal children in Sydney, NSW, established in 1814 by the colony’s Governor Lachlan Macquarie and missionary William Shelley. The founders ‘persuaded’ some Aboriginal parents to send their children to the school where they were treated as “candidates for civilization” ("First Aboriginal Feast Day at Parramatta 28 December 1814," 1814). A key intention of the project was to create a source of farm workers, labourers and domestic servants through attendance at the institution (Fletcher, 1989). The school trained Aboriginal children “as a cheap labour force” (Kerwin & Van Issum, 2013, p. 4), to be farm workers and servants (Cadzow, 2010), setting a precedent for ongoing treatment in the colonies. For the Dharug Aboriginal community, the school curriculum was irrelevant and Elders rightly feared the destruction of Aboriginal values (Kerwin & Van Issum, 2013). One Aboriginal student received awards for scholastic achievement (the school taught basic literacy and numeracy skills), but the colonial founders considered the school a failure in resocialisation or deculturation of the students (Fletcher, 1989).

After changing locations twice, the Macquarie/ Shelley institution closed in 1827 with five Aboriginal and three Māori children (originally from Aotearoa) attending. As well as establishing educational practices, the institution was an early example of the official practices of forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, institutionalisation, and deliberate separation from their cultures. This was a prototype of the practices of the ‘Stolen Generations’ (Read, 2006), the term adopted in a 1980 report by Peter Read (1983) requested by the Family and Children's Service Agency in Sydney. In 1997, a National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families publicly exposed the impact of these practices on
generations, practices which continued into the 1970s (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

Soon after the demise of the Native Institution in NSW, missionaries began to establish schools on reserves and missions and take responsibility for the education of Aboriginal children and young people (Cadzow, 2010). Unqualified teachers with limited or no training presided over poorly resourced schools and inadequate curricula (Whatman & Duncan, 2005). A pattern of policies and practices excluding Aboriginal knowledges and cultural learning, and denying full access to the dominant society education for Aboriginal students persisted into the twentieth century. A brief period of equal access to education for Aboriginal children in NSW occurred with the introduction of the Public Instruction Act 1880, which established compulsory education for all children (Fletcher, 1989). Aboriginal parents subsequently enrolled their children in public schools (Cadzow, 2010). However, non-Aboriginal parents soon began to request the exclusion of Aboriginal children from many schools where those children were in a minority (Bosa, 2009; Foley, 2013). This led to a practice of ‘exclusion on demand’, which remained a stated policy in the NSW Teachers Handbook until it was removed in 1972 following the publication of letters of complaint (Cadzow, 2010; Fletcher, 1989).

The anthropologist A. P. Elkin, Chair of Anthropology at the University of Sydney between 1934 and 1956 exerted enormous influence on Aboriginal policy (Caruso, 2012; Wise, 1985). Elkin became the ‘expert’ and spoke for, but not on behalf of, Australian Aborigines (McConaghy, 2000; Wise, 1985). He was also an Anglican minister, member of the NSW Aborigines Protection Board from 1939 and vice-president of the renamed Aborigines Welfare Board from 1941 to 1962 (University of Sydney Archives). Elkin’s
staunch views on Aboriginal learning, education and curriculum informed and influenced NSW State Government policies after the state’s Department of Education assumed responsibility for Aboriginal education from the Aborigines Welfare Board in 1940 (Cook, 1995; Fletcher, 1989). However, Elkin often made contradictory statements. He acknowledged the traditional education of Aboriginal peoples and their successful adaptation to European ways following colonisation (Wise, 1985). He conceded that views of the limited intellectual capacities of Aboriginal people were not based on evidence and noted the cultural inappropriateness of intelligence tests, yet cited evidence from “departmental intelligence tests” (Elkin, 1937, p. 490). Further, based on such evidence, Elkin determined differences in learning achievement existed between "full-black children…half-castes … and white children” (p. 496). At one point, he suggested an “experiment…with curricula …divested of certain heavy burdens, e.g. mathematics” to ascertain if Aborigines could complete primary school and proceed to high school (Elkin, 1937, p. 499), but also noted the need to include some cultural learning.

Elkin’s forceful views were based on theories that he adopted but rarely tested before implementation (Wise, 1985). For example, from the theory of G. H. L. Fox Pitt-Rivers expressed in The Clash of Culture and the Contact of Races, Elkin embraced the hypothesis that pure species did not adapt as easily as hybrid species. This became the basis for his theory of assimilation as an attempt to halt Indigenous population decrease (Wise, 1985, pp. 84-85), although his expressed views on assimilation were ambivalent (McGregor, 1999). Elkin was accepted as an expert, and his views on social adaptation influenced the direction of the Australian Government’s 1939 policy that promoted the assimilation of Aboriginal peoples into European civilisation, including the removal of children to missions and government institutions. Elkin’s hypotheses about children of Aboriginal and non-
Aboriginal parents established the Croker Island Mission in the 1940s, a social experiment to train, Christianise and civilise “half-caste Aboriginal children” (Caruso, 2012, p. 279) from North and Central Australia in isolation from their families and communities. Education was complicit in assimilation policies (Craven, 2011a; Cross-Townsend, 2011), denying cultural and linguistic identity and self-determination to Australian Indigenous peoples (Herbert, Anderson, Price, & Stehbens, 1999; Nguyen & Cairney, 2013). In addition to practices of separation and isolation of children from family, community, culture and customs, the prohibition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and languages in schools and in society forced many Indigenous peoples to learn only a European version of Australian history and to speak only English.

Attitudes of colonists and politicians, based on assumptions of the ineducability of ‘native races’ which questioned their need for a Western education, prevailed in a discriminatory environment influenced by both scientific and religious beliefs of colonial times (Elkin, 1937). An attitude of “cultural incommensurability” (McConaghy, 2000, p. 100) assumed that Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures were separate and unable to be reconciled. Through this approach, the dominant Western society characterised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures as different, untouchable and requiring translation by cultural experts such as anthropologists. The question of separate, different and irreconcilable knowledges and cultures continues to dominate education policies and practices in Australia in terms of learning styles, self-determination, and incorporating an indigenous perspective alongside a dominant Western body of knowledge (Nakata, 2013). This is discussed further in the following chapter.
In summary, from the establishment of the colony of New South Wales in the late eighteenth century until the 1980s, governments explicitly determined limited education for Aboriginal children and young people through practices and policies of denial of education, partial or incomplete education, racism, segregation, assimilation and integration. Australian governments and society determined futures of disadvantage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living within a Western dominated society, through practices and policies of inadequate education, and the prohibition and exclusion of Indigenous knowledges, customs and languages.

### 2.1.1 Changing attitudes

In the 1950s and 1960s, global political advocacy and movements of anti-discrimination and anti-racism led to the investigation and exposure of discriminatory Indigenous policies in Australia (Cross-Townsend, 2011; Fletcher, 1989; Maniam, Patel, Singh, & Robinson, 2004; Reid, 1999). In 1954, A. P. Elkin attended a UNESCO conference on race relations in Hawai’i and discovered that international views on racial difference had changed following the abuses of race in World War II. Racial difference was now a sensitive topic (Wise, 1985). However, in opposition to changing viewpoints expressed at the conference and by other researchers and anthropologists in the field in Australia, Elkin still believed in racial or cultural differences, albeit from an academic, anthropological perspective (McGregor, 1999).

In the 1960s, Aboriginal activism and protests such as the 1965 Freedom Ride led by members of the University of Sydney SAFA (Student Action for Aborigines) drew attention to racism and discrimination in rural New South Wales, and in education (Cadzow, 2010; Perkins, 1975). Charles Perkins, an Aboriginal student activist and chair of SAFA, together
with other executive members, was one of the instigators and organisers of the Freedom Ride (Curthoys, 2002). After a long campaign by the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) and supporters, in 1967, a successful referendum resulted in two changes to the *Australian Constitution*. An amendment to Section 127 of the *Constitution* enabled counting of *all* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the national census; and an amended Section 51(xxvi) enabled the Australian Government to enact special legislation in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including education (Attwood & Markus, 2007; Herbert, 2012). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and communities campaigned against unequal educational opportunities and for the preservation of Indigenous knowledges and ways of life through schooling. However, with limited opportunity for representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander views to government, little changed in education until the 1970s and 1980s (Herbert, 2012).

In 1973, the reformist Whitlam Australian Labor government invited Aboriginal peoples to present their proposals for education to government, leading to the establishment of a national Aboriginal Consultative Group (ACG) in 1974. Its report, *Education for Aborigines* (1975), outlined concerns and made recommendations for self-determination in education: schooling to be used for the retention of Aboriginal identity; greater Aboriginal involvement and control in the education of their children and young people; and teaching Aboriginal Studies to address the lack of understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in wider Australian society.

We see education as the most important strategy for achieving realistic self-determination for the Aboriginal people of Australia...as an instrument for creating
a...community with intellectual and technological skills...with our own cultural values and identity. We wish to be Aboriginal citizens in a changing Australia...we believe that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island culture should be retained and that Aboriginal identity should be actively developed through education (Aboriginal Consultative Group, 1975, pp. 3-5).

In 1977, the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) replaced the ACG and became an advisory body to government, acknowledging and representing Indigenous views and educational needs (Herbert, 2012). Australian government commissions and inquiries in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries recommended equal access to education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and education for all Australians about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. These objectives recognised, and aimed to counter, racism, Indigenous disadvantage, as well as non-Indigenous Australians’ misunderstanding and lack of knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. The report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) noted the absence of Aboriginal Studies as core curriculum in most schools and recommended that all school curricula “reflect the fact that Australia has an Aboriginal history and Aboriginal viewpoints on social, cultural and historical matters. It is essential that Aboriginal viewpoints, interests, perceptions and expectations are reflected in curricula, teaching and administration of schools” (p. 308). The Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997) recommended the compulsory inclusion in primary and secondary curricula of the “history and continuing effects of forcible removal [of children]” (Appendix 9) from their families between 1910 and 1970.
2.2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policies

After almost two centuries of European settlement, state and national governments began to recognise the impact of discriminatory education policies, curricula and practices on the social and economic position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the resultant misunderstanding and prejudices of many non-Indigenous Australians. Governments gradually introduced policies designed to address educational disadvantage and ignorance. The NSW and national policies provide context and background to this research.

2.2.1 New South Wales Aboriginal Education Policy

In 1975, the Whitlam Labor Australian Government passed the *Racial Discrimination Act*. The NSW State Government followed with the *Anti-Discrimination Act, 1977*, declaring it “unlawful for an educational authority to discriminate against a person on the ground of race” (*Anti-Discrimination Act 1977*). Together with criticism and changing awareness discussed above, these two pieces of legislation provided the impetus for examining racial discrimination in NSW government. The NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, established under the NSW *Act*, reviewed government departmental policies and practices for discrimination, particularly against Aborigines and women (Fletcher, 1989). In 1978, the Board reviewed the Department of Education policies and identified a lack of Aboriginal parental consultation, biased testing and assessment, racism and the absence of Aboriginal perspectives in textbooks. The Board recommended that the department complete an Aboriginal education policy to address discrimination towards Aboriginal people, to take place in consultation with the Aboriginal education community; and to include Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum (Fletcher, 1989; Whatman & Duncan, 2005).
In 1982, the NSW Department of Education introduced an inclusive *Aboriginal Education Policy* (AEP) in consultation with the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. (AECG) and with input from the NSW Teachers Federation. Acting on the Board’s recommendations, the 1982 AEP aimed to provide: equal learning opportunities for Aboriginal children “to contribute freely to and experience success in school life”; “an Aboriginal perspective” in the curriculum; for all children to learn “about other cultures”; and encouragement for teachers to understand “the educational needs of Aboriginal children” (NSW Department of Education. Aboriginal Education Unit, 1982, p. 6).

The introduction into school curricula of specific Aboriginal Studies modules with an emphasis on contemporary society and cross-curriculum Aboriginal perspectives aimed to address policy objectives of improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal students, and discrimination. Initial support materials included teaching guidelines, chronological history and a list of resources (Cook, 1982a, 1982b, 1982c, 1995; NSW Department of Education. Aboriginal Education Unit, 1982). However, the curriculum model agreed to by the NSW Department of Education and the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) lacked a theoretical basis (Cook, 1995). Further, the policy represented a major departure from the previous 200 years of entrenched practices and beliefs within education systems and schools and attitudes held by school personnel. The adoption and implementation of this new policy was inconsistent, as discussed below.

Only some schools implemented the 1982 NSW *AEP*; other schools claimed that it was not applicable if they had "no or few Aboriginal students/and or community" (NSW Department of Education and Training & NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc., 2004, p.
At this time, a less centralised NSW education system provided more autonomy for schools and community decision making, but lacked a structure for developing curriculum at school level (Cook, 1995). An independent evaluation of the 1982 policy implementation by the Wammarra Aboriginal Education Centre at Charles Sturt University (1992) identified a number of shortcomings: insufficient commitment from the Department of School Education; a bland policy document with insufficient copies; language was inaccessible, especially in Aboriginal communities; practical assistance and preparation for teachers was limited and inadequate; support documents were more suited to primary than secondary; and, the impact was greater in "Aboriginal schools" (p. 3).

Aboriginal education policy implementation throughout NSW continued to be inconsistent, as shown in repeated reviews, revisions and mandatory declarations. In 1987, a NSW curriculum document declared the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives to be mandatory and to be fully implemented in all NSW schools (Kleeman, 2012). In 1996, a revised policy emphasised education for all students and staff about Aboriginal Australia, and required annual progress reports by all schools (NSW Department of School Education. Aboriginal Education Unit, 1996). A wide-ranging review of Aboriginal education in NSW schools and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges in 2003 and 2004 consulted with Aboriginal communities and families, interviewed 4,000 students, parents and teachers as well as school principals and departmental staff “to hear the voices of Aboriginal people as well as those directly involved in education” (NSW Department of Education and Training & NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc., 2004, p. 16). The review identified ongoing issues of inadequate policy implementation, limitations and repetition in the teaching of Aboriginal Studies, and insufficient consultation with Aboriginal parents and families. Some of the “most penetrating and articulate voices were those of Aboriginal
students themselves” (p. 198). Recommendations included extending Aboriginal perspectives to all subject areas; the significance of community knowledge and consulting with Elders and communities; greater accountability and reporting by schools; and, addressing prejudicial and disrespectful attitudes of school staff towards Aboriginal peoples and cultures.

In 2008, a revised *Aboriginal Education and Training Policy* (AETP) expanded to incorporate NSW Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges and community education institutes. Further revised in 2009 (NSW Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate, 2009; NSW Department of Education and Training, 2009a), the current policy focus continues that of previous policies, emphasising Aboriginal cultural learning and the responsibility for policy implementation across all sectors of education, staff and students, denoting it as “core business…everybody’s business…everyday business” (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2009b). The policy rhetoric emphasises the broadening of responsibility for the policy outcomes designed to address inconsistencies identified in the 2004 review, as well as to reflect national policy directions.

A recent report by the NSW Auditor-General (2012) of the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) practices regarding Aboriginal students’ literacy, found limited evaluation of the “cost-effectiveness of most interventions and cultural initiatives” (p. 8) such as cultural awareness and language programs designed to involve community as well as improve student attitudes to education. In 2012, the DEC and NSW Aboriginal Affairs consulted with Aboriginal communities who identified language as a key focus for intergenerational healing. In response, the departments established five Aboriginal Language and Culture nests to “revitalise, reclaim and maintain …traditional languages”, to
build students’ language programs and increase engagement with education through healing and improving wellbeing (NSW Aboriginal Affairs, 2013; NSW Department of Education and Communities, n.d.-b; Williams, 2011).

2.2.2 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy

Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy is administered through a complex arrangement that reflects the federal nature of government in Australia. The states and territories have primary responsibility for education provision, with the Australian Government contributing overall strategic policy and funding for Indigenous education in co-operative agreements with the states and territories. This shared government responsibility became possible following the 1967 referendum and amendments to the Australian Constitution (Attwood & Markus, 2007). However, it was not until 1988, six years after the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy, that the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force, chaired by educator Paul Hughes, called for a national policy to “achieve broad equity between Aboriginal people and other Australians in access, participation and outcomes in all forms of education” (Hughes & Australia Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force, 1988, p. 2). On January 1, 1990, all Australian states and territories agreed to a joint National Aboriginal Education Policy (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1989), later the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, NATSIEP. The two final long-term goals addressed the teaching of Indigenous knowledges and histories:

Goal no. 20: To enable Aboriginal students at all levels of education to have an appreciation of their history, cultures and identity; and Goal no. 21: To provide all Australian students with an understanding of and respect for Aboriginal traditional and contemporary cultures (p. 15, emphasis added).
The NATSIEP framework recommended curriculum that accommodated cultural differences (Bin-Sallik, Blomeley, Flowers, & Hughes, 1994, p. 9; McConaghy, 2000). However, the focus on lack of policy co-ordination and cultural difference as an explanation for disadvantage and low achievement ignored the dominant structural and systemic impediments to Indigenous education (Nakata, 1995). Further, the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in the national policy as static and unchanging, through reference to the “erosion” of culture (Nakata, 1995, p. 50), suggesting a singular notion of culture, ignored individual and community diversities. Further criticism identified “culturalism as a set of epistemic assumptions” in Indigenous education policies and pedagogical practices (McConaghy, 2000, p. 43). Building on Nakata’s criticism of systemic prejudice, McConaghy (2000) proposed a “post-cultural, postcolonial Indigenous education” (p. 265) to disrupt structures and authorities that legitimised colonial representation of culture. This analysis of the culturalist traditions exposing the political and ideological influences in Indigenous education is logical and valuable, but left unanswered the question of how to implement a post-culturalist education acknowledging the rights of Indigenous peoples to learn their knowledges and cultures. Further, from a critical realist standpoint, the post-structuralist views of McConaghy and Nakata are seen as denying the reality and experiences of Aboriginal life, and the right to a separate Aboriginal identity (Sarra, 2005).

The means by which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and knowledges are located in the education of children and young people, and by whom, is a complex issue that continues to be debated by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators. A review of the NATSIEP chaired by educator Mandawuy Yunupingu (1995) identified the frustrations of
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in not being heard by policy makers and education systems. The review recommended measures to provide "culturally appropriate education" (p. 23) and "both ways’ or ‘two ways’” curriculum (p. 85), where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, cultures and knowledges are taught equally alongside mainstream curriculum and developed with local communities. As a Yolgnu nation school principal, Yunupingu had implemented ‘both ways’ curriculum successfully in his community through the Gänma philosophy of two knowledges flowing into a lagoon, the saltwater and the freshwater meeting and mixing, bringing new ideas (Burarrwanga et al., 2013). Both ways enables Aboriginal peoples’ control of curriculum to support their epistemologies (Ober & Bat, 2007). Some criticism has regarded ‘both ways’ as oversimplifying and “othering” Indigenous cultures and peoples (Ober & Bat, 2007, p. 72). However, for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, two ways-both ways pedagogy represents a partnership approach, a “neutral, negotiated …’third space’…where the two primary cultures of Australia meet” (Purdie, Milgate, & Bell, 2011a, p. xx) and epistemologies, ontologies and knowledges co-exist as equals (Kerwin, 2011). The both ways/two ways philosophy endures in some educational practices and research (Andersen, 2012; Christie, 2006; Ober & Bat, 2007; Purdie, Milgate, & Bell, 2011b).

The current Indigenous Education Action Plan 2010-2014 (Ministerial Council for Education, 2011) expresses how each state and territory will achieve targets espoused in the National Indigenous Reform Agreement: Closing the Gap agreement (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2008). The Action Plan identified and targeted a gulf between the educational achievements of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Public targets and aims for statistical equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples such as these continue to suggest a deficit that perpetuates stereotypical thinking (Pholi et al., 2009),
ignoring Indigenous diversities and political and economic relations (Altman, 2009). On the other hand, Herbert (2013) points out that identifying the gaps and the measures to close them maintains a political focus on inequalities which for many decades have been obscured from public view. A recent evaluation of the Action Plan 2010-2014 found inconsistent national data for assessment purposes, and noted the lack of recognition and promotion of cultural knowledge and experience within the plan; this and inadequate cultural competence and awareness can limit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student educational outcomes (AcilAllen Consultants, 2014). By corollary, valuing these elements is critical in support for improving student achievements.

2.2.3 Multiple policy objectives

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policies are complicated by the presence of three interrelated objectives addressing different stakeholders, and creating tension in achieving their aims. The first objective focuses on the educational performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools: to meet English literacy and numeracy standards, measuring and comparing educational motivations, achievements and outcomes with those of non-Indigenous students, and co-related issues of behaviour such as attendance and retention beyond Year 9. In NSW, until the 1980s, the education system was legally required to educate Aboriginal students only to Year 9 (Foley, 2013).

A second objective offers opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to learn Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in curricula, including school-based activities and events recognising and celebrating Indigenous cultures and communities. This connects with the first objective through assuming that culturally inclusive curricula increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ self-esteem and identity and lead to more
positive engagement with mainstream education. However, the assumption of causality is difficult to substantiate, as is measuring such an objective (see next chapter). Further, measuring culture in terms of outcomes often fails to consider the meaning of culture (Dockery, 2009). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultural knowledges and perspectives in education relate to self-determination objectives, continuity and retention of culture through connection and consultation with community (Aboriginal Consultative Group, 1975; National Federation of Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (Australia), 1994). In practice, the extent of community involvement in curriculum consultation is inconsistent (Lowe, 2011; NSW Department of Education and Training & NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc., 2004).

A third policy objective to educate non-Indigenous Australian students about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories aims to address the exclusion and misrepresentation of such knowledges in education leading to misunderstandings by many generations of non-Indigenous as well as some Indigenous Australians (Kerwin, 2011). In the 1990s, reinstating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and perspectives into Australian school curricula became controversial and subject to political challenges. Until the turn of the twentieth century, early colonial documents include the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australian histories, historian Henry Reynolds (2000) argues, but such knowledge disappeared in conjunction with the 1901 federation of Australia and the emergence of nationalism. The conservative Howard Coalition Australian Government and some historians criticised these views and curricular changes, labelling them as “black-armband” history that undermined Australia’s national identity (Attwood & Markus, 2007, pp. 68, 78; O'Dowd, 2012, p. 105; Reynolds, 2000). This position resonates with Reynolds’ argument that the disappearance of Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander peoples from history since 1901 coincided with nationalist positions. Much of this rediscovered history “remains buried within a white viewpoint of the past” (Maynard, 2007, p. 118), as some students in this research noted (see Chapter 6).

The aims, outcomes and target audiences embedded in the three objectives outlined above lead to a multidimensional policy with multiple stakeholders stretching the outcomes and resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education unevenly within and across schools. Further, these multidimensional top-down policies complicate the learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, histories and cultures, as discussed in the next section.

2.3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the inclusion of indigenous knowledges and perspectives in school and higher education curricula is part of a worldwide movement to decolonise knowledge (Dei, 2008; Hart et al., 2012; Kanu, 2011). Pedagogically, this move is located within the broader sphere of culturally responsive, relevant and sustaining pedagogies recognising the experiences, languages and cultural knowledges which students bring to schooling (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012) (see Chapter 3). However, views differ on the extent and nature of indigenous perspectives and knowledges in educational curricula, and definitions are complex and challenging. Indigenous knowledge is multi-faceted and does not translate to one concept (Aikenhead & Michell, 2011). In Australia, for example, Karen Martin (2003b) has identified “ways of knowing, ways of being, and ways of doing” within Aboriginal worldviews (p. 208).
As discussed in Chapter 1, in this research, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges in curriculum encompass: the ways of knowing, being and doing expressed through language, stories, practices, histories; connections and collaborations with local people and communities as taught through Aboriginal/Indigenous Studies; and cross-curriculum perspectives and languages across key learning areas in New South Wales schools. Current policy documents and agreements (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) & NSW Department of Education and Training (DET), 2010) aim to improve the “educational outcomes and wellbeing” of Aboriginal students, knowledge of and respect for Aboriginal cultures, and values and histories for all students and staff (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2009b, p. 13).

The practical application of policy objectives to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and knowledges has been a challenge since the introduction of the 1982 NSW AEP and the 1990 NATSIEP (Cook, 1995; Kerwin & Van Issum, 2013; Reid, 1999; Wammarra Aboriginal Education Centre & School of Teacher Education Charles Sturt University, 1992). In 2012, when this research took place in schools, the NSW curriculum included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in two ways: horizontally as cross-curricula perspectives; and vertically as a predominant focus in units of Aboriginal languages and Aboriginal or Indigenous Studies (Rigney, 2011a). All K-12 syllabus materials include Aboriginal perspectives as “cross-curriculum content” (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2009). Aboriginal/Indigenous Studies and Aboriginal languages are taught as mandatory standalone units for all Years 7 to 10 students in some secondary schools. Years 11 and 12 Aboriginal/Indigenous Studies is an optional Higher School Certificate (HSC) unit for all students. Two related teaching approaches exist: the Aboriginal/Indigenous Studies model where one teacher develops and teaches a curriculum;
and Indigenous perspectives across curricula involving many teachers. Both models have high levels of requirements for resources, pre-service training, curriculum and professional development (Rigney, 2011a). These issues dominate and continue to impact on the delivery and successful teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in schools, as the following discussion identifies.

2.3.1 Cross-curricula perspectives

Definitions of the term Aboriginal perspectives within NSW policy documents are inconsistent and variant, leading to multiple interpretations by schools and teachers. An architect of the 1982 AEP defined Aboriginal perspectives in a curriculum document as:

...the infusion into all areas of the curriculum of a general sensitivity to and awareness of, Aboriginal culture and society … This can occur in subjects as varied as Home Science and Mathematics, where the aim is to teach the particular subject, but where possible utilising an Aboriginal perspective or referring to Aboriginal society, culture and history. (Cook, 1982a, p. 4)

A more recent NSW Department of Education and Training curriculum support document (2008) defined Aboriginal perspectives as aiming to:

- recognise and affirm Aboriginal identity and cultures
- include Aboriginal viewpoints on events and issues
- maintain curriculum and cultural integrity
- achieve a balance between contemporary and historical content.
In a Human Society and Its Environment (HSIE) K-6 curriculum syllabus document (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2011), developed in response to the recommendations from the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1991):

The term Aboriginal perspectives refers to Aboriginal points of view on particular issues and events. Where possible Aboriginal subject matter and perspectives should be explored in consultation with Aboriginal people in the local school community. (n.p.)

Two definitions above prescribe inclusion and community consultation in school curricula, but only suggests this only happen “where possible”. While curriculum documents suggest examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curriculum perspectives, the guidelines leave practical application open to local school and individual teacher adaptation. The limited number of Indigenous teachers (1 per cent) means the teaching of Indigenous perspectives in schools is more often through Western understandings (Butler, 2000). Some school-based implementations can be tokens of compliance (Nakata, 2011), but examples of successful practice also exist (Ainsworth & McRae, 2006; Craven, Bodkin-Andrews, & Yeung, 2007a). The inclusion of Indigenous perspectives is controversial and ideological and in practice “they will be contested” (Nakata, 2011, pp. 7, emphasis in original). The “cultural interface” model (Nakata, 2011) aims to break down the political and ideological nature of such inclusion by emphasising a less prescriptive place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait knowledges, not as separate, but normalised and accumulated in the curriculum, integrated into national history, and into both Western and Indigenous knowledge schema.
Achieving an equal position for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in curricula continues to be a challenge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, communities, curriculum writers, schools and teachers. The denial of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and presence in Australian history was "the great Australian silence… a cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale" (Stanner, 1968, pp. 18, 25) (pp. 18/25). As the work of Elkin, Reynolds and others discussed above demonstrates, this invisibility was deliberate, planned and determined by a set of colonial beliefs, attitudes and policies. However, more recently, the change to contemporary public thinking of culture is seen as at the expense of rights: depicting a “warm, cuddly cultural Aborigine” sidelines an “economically empowered, free-thinking, free-speaking Aborigine” (Langton, 2007, p. 153). The category Aborigine or Aboriginal in current discourse and representation continues to embed history and racism (Healy, 2008).

The public and political controversy surrounding the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australian history continues. The “so-called History Wars” (Kleeman, 2012, p. 25, italics in original) complicated the introduction of Aboriginal perspectives into NSW geography curriculum in the mid-1990s. Ideological and political challenges to education policies and curriculum design have contributed to increasing complexities in teaching and learning in school and pre-service teacher education. The contestation of Indigenous perspectives indicates the persistence of a “Terra Nullius mindset” (Butler, 2000, p. 95) continuing the colonial view that excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from European society and affording them no rights. The exclusion of Indigenous histories from the Australian national identity as articulated by Reynolds (2000) can occur in some non-Indigenous student resistance to learning if national identity and Indigenous knowledges and histories are taught uncritically, for example, to fulfil mandatory curriculum
requirements in schools and universities (O'Dowd, 2012). Critical thinking, historical and social analysis, and cultural learning is needed in order for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to understand an Indigenous perspective (Lowe et al., 2014). However, curriculum is a political instrument, and challenges to the equal place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in educational curricula continue. This is discussed further in the section on the Australian Curriculum.

2.3.2 Aboriginal/Indigenous Studies

A key element of the 1982 NSW Aboriginal Education Policy was the introduction of Aboriginal Studies programs to K-12 school curricula (Cook, 1982a, 1982b, 1982c, 1995; NSW Department of Education. Aboriginal Education Unit, 1982). In policy guidelines, Cook (1982b) defined as Aboriginal Studies “the study of past and present Aboriginal culture and society, emphasising contemporary Aboriginal society as a focus” (p. 3). An expanded definition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies is: “the study of the Aboriginal societies or Torres Strait Islander societies past and present, including histories, cultures, values, beliefs, languages, lifestyles and roles, both prior to and following invasion” (Craven, 2011a, p. 3). As a “national priority”, such study has a social justice role for schools in developing recognition of the “equal validity” of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and knowledges in Australia (Craven, 2011a, p. 3).

Aboriginal Studies or Indigenous Studies is offered in some NSW secondary schools from Year 7, and in 1991, became a Higher School Certificate (HSC) subject choice for all students in Years 11 to 12. However, Aboriginal Studies or Indigenous Studies is not offered in all schools, or not every year. Students may have to study the module online through distance education (Herbert et al., 1999) or travel to other schools. Aboriginal or Indigenous
Studies HSC enrolments reduced from 670 to 440 over three years from 1996 to 1999 (Herbert et al., 1999), and continue to decrease: in 2013 the enrolment was 376 (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2013). Students may not select Aboriginal Studies for the HSC because of its ideological positioning, its perceived low contribution to a university entrance score (Herbert et al., 1999), perceived academic difficulty, or assumptions that the unit is for Indigenous students only (C. Bellemore, Personal communication, August 2014).

Despite national and state policies, Aboriginal/Indigenous Studies may be excluded from both school and university curricula for any number of logistical reasons (Phillips, 2011), such as limited resources, lack of suitable or available teachers or insufficient student numbers (see discussions with principals, Chapter 7). Aboriginal languages are not yet included within the 37 languages offered in the NSW HSC. However, recently the Board of Studies NSW (2014, November 28) announced the development of a “Stage 6 Aboriginal Languages Content Endorsed Course” that will be offered as an HSC study course in Year 11/12, but the grades will not contribute to a student’s Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). The rights and the positive potential of cultural learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Dodson, 2011; Herbert et al., 1999; Kerwin, 2011) is ensnared within multiple views about the role of curriculum. Attempts to locate a place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in the national Australian Curriculum continue to be political and ideological, as the following discussion highlights.

2.3.3 The Australian Curriculum

In 2008, all Australian government Ministers of Education agreed in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Ministerial Council for Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 2008) to develop the
first national school curriculum to be taught in all states and territories. The curriculum was designed for the twenty-first century, meaning, to promote “deep knowledge…advanced learning…general capabilities…analytical thinking” (p. 13), where “all students will have the opportunity to access Indigenous content where relevant” (p. 14). The “Indigenous content” referred to in the Melbourne Declaration emerged, in the *Australian Curriculum* as one of three cross-curriculum priorities addressing contemporary issues:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures
- Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia
- Sustainability. (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2012b, p. 15)

From 2014, the Australian Curriculum has been progressively implemented in schools across Australian states and territories. Curriculum writing began in 2010 and included a process of public consultation with communities, teachers, academics, parents, business and industry (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), n.d.). Critics of the consultation process with communities regarding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curriculum priority criticised the process as being too late, with inadequate time for wide consultation as required in accepted protocols (Burgess, 2009; Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013). Some writers of the *Australian Curriculum: Geography* resisted and contested what they regarded as the imposition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander “content descriptors and elaborations” in a cross-curriculum priority (Kleeman, 2012, p. 25) (p. 25). In an analysis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in the *Australian Curriculum*, Lowe and Yunkaporta (2013) identified a lack of “high-quality learning” in relation to histories and cultures (p. 3). They argued that
intangible concepts such as “Indigenous ‘ways of knowing, being and thinking’” cannot be learned as facts but only through “Indigenous protocols, values, processes and systems” (p. 4).

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curriculum priority is presented as an elaboration throughout the Australian Curriculum framework. Thus, it is not mandated as core content required to be taught, but is documented as a choice for teachers or students. For example, in the 2014 NSW History K-10 Stage 4 syllabus depth study, a student can choose to investigate one of four historical developments: “Mongol expansion; Black Death in Asia; Europe and Africa; the Spanish Conquest of the Americas; or Aboriginal and Indigenous Peoples, Colonisation and Contact History” (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2014). The elaboration approach is regarded as contrary to “the policy requirement that mandates the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives” (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013, p. 5). Further, individual states and territories interpret and adapt the curriculum to their own syllabi (Kuehnel, 2012), diluting the impact of a national curriculum. Recent government critiques of the Australian Curriculum (Donnelly, 2014; Pyne, 2014, January 10; Wiltshire & Donnelly, 2014) challenge the positioning and extent of Indigenous perspectives and maintain a political emphasis.

In its first year of implementation, 2014, the Australian Curriculum was the target of renewed political attack from conservative commentators and the Australian Government, reigniting ideological battles over curriculum. Kevin Donnelly (2011), later appointed one of two reviewers of the curriculum, favoured redefining the curriculum "in terms of Australia's Western heritage and Judeo-Christian tradition" (2011, p. 87) in opposition to the cross-curriculum priorities of sustainability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories
and cultures, and engagement with Asia. Following government criticism, the chair of ACARA, the body responsible for the Australian Curriculum (McGaw, 2014) confirmed the position that including elaborations such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in the curriculum is an optional choice for teachers and schools. The recent government commissioned review of the Australian Curriculum (Wiltshire & Donnelly, 2014) found too much emphasis on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures and recommended embedding the cross-curriculum priority “only where educationally relevant…where justified on epistemological grounds” (p. 247) in particular subject areas, although relevant is not defined. The review expressed concern about potential tokenistic teaching of Indigenous content, but also as a threat to Western influences. These views raise questions about the incommensurability of Indigenous knowledges and Western knowledges in education, recognition of the tangible presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australian society, in education, and challenge the recommendations of government inquiries in the 1990s, discussed previously.

Indigenous critiques of the Australian Curriculum found a lack of critical analysis and argued for greater scrutiny of Australia’s colonial history and Western influences (Lowe et al., 2014), for the benefit of both non-Indigenous and Indigenous students. They identified a “flawed rationale and framework” for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curriculum content that limits the capacity to support teachers in creating quality learning experiences for all students (Lowe et al., 2014, p. 84). Further, these critics argued that an ongoing colonial narrative in the curriculum reflects “entrenched and commonly presumed as facts of Australia’s national pre-historic heritage” (p. 84). Political and historical factors continue their presence in the educational space in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students find themselves. Further, limiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
knowledges, histories and cultures ignores the benefits for non-Indigenous students of learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational policies, practices and curricula since colonisation, shaped by historical forces including beliefs, science, anthropology, human rights and politics. Global activist movements from the 1970s forced Australian governments to address educational inequalities. Resulting ideological tensions continue to politicise and complicate the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, cultures and languages in education. Countering this are movements of resistance and change, Indigenous expression in education and curricular change. The ongoing discussions and controversies affirm the continuing relevance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, histories and cultures in education.

The exclusion and contested repositioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, histories and cultures in education and society over the last 200 years collectively stratify a complex learning environment through which young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students navigate. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in this research identified some educational advances in moving beyond historical invisibility to acknowledging their contemporary presence and valuing their ways of being (customs) and ways of doing. However, students also recognised limitations in their learning such as inflexibility in curricula, assumptions among staff and lesser involvement with community. The next chapter reviews literature relating to assumptions, beliefs and theories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and learning; the measurement of cultural
learning, culturally responsive education; and identifies a gap in knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ perspectives of cultural learning.
Chapter 3. Literature and Research: The Milieu of Indigenous Education

As discussed in the previous chapter, assumptions and beliefs, which included nineteenth century notions of evolutionary development, informed the restricted participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia’s colonial education system and the systematic denial and disavowal of their own ways of being, doing and learning. Prevailing theories of superiority, social Darwinism, race, and religion (Anderson & Perrin, 2008; Smith, 1999) relied on quasi-scientific research, but limited educational research, and ignored the existence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples’ own knowledges, philosophies and complex education systems (Cross-Townsend, 2011; Nakata, 2007b). Responding to global activism and awareness of the effects of racist policies and practices following World War Two, Australian governments from the 1970s began to examine discriminatory policies. Education was one area of reform, and more inclusive policies aimed to address the inequality of education provided for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, without associated changes in societal attitudes and appropriate educational theories, the education of, and for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students came to be regarded as a problem. A substantial body of research literature within the field of Indigenous education, both internationally and in Australia, reveals and reflects multiple variations in theories, strategies and policies.

Within Australia, the research field is confused further by a failure to distinguish between the education and performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, cultural heritages and peoples,
both historical and contemporary, for all students within mainstream education (Vass, 2012). However, the two are intertwined. While this thesis focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ learning cultural knowledges and perspectives, such learning cannot be separated from the wider milieu of Indigenous education.

In this chapter, I review literature that addresses both of the above aspects, and has two objectives. First, I explore the changing emphases in research and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia, as well as international research into culturally relevant, culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogies. Second, I review qualitative research that includes the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students regarding their cultural learning in education. This reveals a gap that is central to the purpose of this thesis: to probe the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to understand cultural learning in schools and in curricula from the students’ positions. In reviewing the literature, I explore historical, educational and attitudinal forces which dynamically interact in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural learning. These multiplicities of forces include influences, and extend to practices resulting from the beliefs, policies and research in terms of static, unchanging elements, and positive movements of change across the milieu of education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

3.1 Assumptions, Beliefs and Theories

From the mid-1960s, following periods of global human rights and local activism and increasing awareness of the destructive effects of colonisation and racism on indigenous populations, Australian governments began to address the inequalities and inequities in education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Attwood & Markus, 2007;
Malin & Maidment, 2003). Educators and researchers grappled with explanations for the disparities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ learning outcomes within the dominant education system. As if beliefs about, attitudes towards, and treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were not sufficient reason for such disparities (see Chapter 2), various theories and related practices have proliferated, some supported or initiated by research, others by particular values and assumptions. These include: deficit and difference; learning styles; the psychological impact of self-esteem or self-concept on the motivation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; and neoliberalism. An evolving educational and political discourse reflects the changing positions, attitudes and hypotheses purporting to explain and address the disproportional educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

3.1.1 **Deficit, disadvantage, difference**

In the 1960s and 1970s, deficit views of the abilities and capabilities of Indigenous peoples limited their access to, and participation in, education in Australia, along with other colonised countries. The cultural deficit view attributes the responsibilities for perceived educational deficits of children of indigenous or non-dominant populations to their families, homes and cultures, but takes less account of the effects of attitudes predominant in classroom interactions and embedded in education systems (Vass, 2012). This view leads to explanations for cognitive, scholastic and lifestyle behaviour, together with assumptions and expectations of academic performance and health outcomes (Nelson, 2010). A cultural deficit view is “pathologizing… a mode of colonization used to govern, regulate, manage, marginalize, or minoritize, primarily through hegemonic structures” (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005, p. x). Further, the deficit position assumes a dominance in education by non-indigenous languages and cultures that is unattainable by indigenous peoples, and as such
denies the value of indigenous cultures and languages (Paris, 2012). Of relevance to this thesis, repositioning education of non-dominant students is possible through creating “new stories”, hearing new voices, listening to the discourses and getting to know the students (Shields et al., 2005).

In Australia, beliefs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander intellectual and cultural inferiority have formed the basis of many educational practices, policies and research, and are indicative of a power imbalance that assumes superiority of the dominant culture (Cross-Townsend, 2011; Nakata, 2007b). Such discourse attributes deficit views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and cultures to students’ educational outcomes (Herbert et al., 1999). For some policy-makers and educators in Australia, deficit thinking attributing lack of success to individuals and to cultures, persists as an assumption or a truth that has to be disproven by normative and conforming behaviour (Langton, 2007; McConaghy, 2004; Styres, 2008; Whatman & Duncan, 2005). Further, the deficit/disadvantage view that continues in current ‘closing the gap’ policies through a focus on students as the problem (Lingard et al., 2012), fails to acknowledge or address embedded systemic, political and societal factors. This approach continues a colonial legacy, impinging upon equal educational opportunities and expectations, and narrows the outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Educational policies and models driven by a dominant, non-Indigenous agenda also do not recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance and control of education (Bunda, Zipin, & Brennan, 2012), culture and language, beyond the attempted equity of community consultation (Lowe, 2011).

Research in Aotearoa challenged dominant, non-Indigenous school educational practices and assumptions through isolating the presence of deficit and systemic limitations in the
education of Māori students in schools (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Bishop et al., 2003; 2012). Bringing the expressed views and experiences of Year 9 and 10 Māori students in mainstream schools to the attention of teachers, the study identified systemic assumptions of deficit thinking among school staff. The researchers developed an Effective Teaching Profile (ETP) to provide teachers with positive “alternative discourses that offer them solutions instead of those that reinforce problems and barriers” (Bishop et al., 2012, p. 696). The profile and knowledge was offered to teachers in a non-coercive manner, using the Māori “metaphor of a ‘koha’” or gift to build a relationship or connection between hosts and visitors (p. 696). This approach helped teachers acknowledge that they cannot change social structures but that they can revise their discourses and practice through understanding the experiences of Māori students, and to “work towards changing the power imbalances” (Bishop et al., 2003, p. 17). The research highlights that assumptions such as deficit thinking in relation to indigenous populations have continued to persist. Further, the research demonstrated the value of including student views in seeking to understand the milieu of indigenous education.

3.1.2 Learning styles

In the 1970s, educational praxis in Australia began to focus on Indigenous learning styles as an explanation for, and a way of approaching, indigenous education. In 1984, through work with the Yolngu community in the Northern Territory, Stephen Harris (1992) developed a concept of Aboriginal ways of learning, in comparison with Western learning styles. This influential position proposed that Aboriginal students learned differently, for example, through “observation and imitation ... personal trial and error ... learning by doing ... learning in real life ... learning 'wholes'” (p. 38). Learning styles came to be promoted almost as a pan-Aboriginal style of learning and a method of teaching that in practice was inappropriate
and limiting. When adopted in other Aboriginal communities by non-Indigenous teachers who were teaching a Western style, dominant curriculum, the so-called Aboriginal learning styles were found to be inappropriate (Harrison, 2005; McConaghy, 2000). Depicting “Aboriginal learning styles can decontextualise them and separate them from the worldview from which they are derived and therefore deprive them of meaning and relevance” (Martin, 2008a, p. 74). Later Harris (1992) realised that, through removing the learning styles from their context, they became inauthentic Aboriginal attributes.

A further approach outlined five principles of Aboriginal ways of learning and how they should be embedded in “white schooling” to develop an ‘Aboriginalised’ curriculum (Christie, 1988/1994, p. 86). By the 1990s, the idea of separate or different Indigenous learning styles had established a foothold in Australian education. Although the different learning styles approach became controversial and was criticised as limiting and perpetuating stereotypes of cultural and racial difference (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner HREOC, 1999; Cross-Townsend, 2011; Reid, 2004), its legacy has persisted into recent practices (see Chapter 7). What many define as Indigenous learning styles are better interpreted as "Indigenous philosophies, values and epistemologies" Cross-Townsend (Cross-Townsend, 2011, p. 72) (p. 72). However, the equal positioning of culturally identified ways of thinking within Western education systems continues to present difficulties.

3.1.3 Cultural difference

In the 1980s, the concepts of cultural difference and cultural diversity emerged as explanations of Indigenous difference informing educational method through the recognition and acknowledgement of diversities in languages and cultures, although not
necessarily emphasising maintenance of such heritages (McConaghy, 2000; Paris, 2012). However, this approach also has limitations through suggestions of exoticism (Ashcroft et al., 2002), and of imposing a white view of indigenous cultures as being static, for example, in the notion of traditional ways of living. The concept of cultural difference, influenced by anthropological approaches to culture, can lead to a view of "incommensurability" of indigenous and non-indigenous knowledges (McConaghy, 2000, p. 100). Further, attributing and “assuming that all group members share the same set of experiences, skills, and interests” in education (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003, p. 20) overgeneralises and takes no account of students’ previous experiences, practices and knowledges. The view of cultural difference is negative because it involves comparison with identified separate categories (Deleuze, 2004). Differences that may be identified as cultural, or racial, are not all “inferior to others, or impediments to learning and teaching” (Martin, 2008a, p. 75). In adopting the cultural difference stance, the focus remained on individuals or cultures and less on systemic or historical legacies, forces and assumptions underlying indigenous education. Educational instruction that was altered and applied on the basis of group membership (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003) often led to pedagogical practices of cultural difference such as special, remedial and Aboriginal-only programs that limited Aboriginal student learning opportunities in Australia (Hewitson, 2007).

The multiplicity of understandings discussed above developed over 30 or more years of attempting to fix the Aboriginal or Indigenous education problem, with limited success. Many cross-cultural theoretical and practical teaching methods did not extend the educational outcomes of Indigenous peoples in Australia (Harrison, 2005). In the 2000s, psychoanalytical approaches to education for Indigenous students began to focus on the role
of teachers in developing Indigenous students’ self-image (Harrison, 2007), individual self-esteem and motivation.

### 3.1.4 Self-esteem, self-concept and self-identity

In Australia, research moved from explanations of cultural deficit and difference to focus on the psychological effect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ self-esteem on their motivation to study and achieve in education. This position has foundations in the theoretical underpinnings of the 1982 NSW *Aboriginal Education Policy* (AEP), which included "propositions about self-esteem and self-concept ... [lack] of control ... achievement motivation ... and cultural identity” (Cook, 1995, p. 24). One premise of the AEP was that previous assumptions of Aboriginal culture deficit and a deductive teaching approach generalising stereotypical, traditional Aboriginal lifestyles, had created a lack of self-concept and poor identity, which linked to Aboriginal students’ low levels of motivation and achievement (Cook, 1995, p. 27). Teaching Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal perspectives across curricula as proposed in the 1982 NSW AEP aimed to build positive self-esteem for Aboriginal students, as well as to educate non-Aboriginal students about Aboriginal histories and customs. Although concepts of self-esteem and self-identity are complicated by many other factors such as gender, racism, location and class (Reid, 1999), this research approach has continued.

Further research investigated a causal relationship between individual self-esteem and academic achievement in Indigenous education. A wide ranging study across Australian schools explored the assumption that positive self-identity in Indigenous students can result in improved educational outcomes (Purdie, Tripcony, Boulton-Lewis, Fanshawe, & Gunstone, 2000). The study included quantitative data and qualitative consultations with
Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and its outcomes supported the value of “generally positive experiences” (p. 40) for Indigenous students’ relationship to schooling. However, the research also confirmed the complexity, multidimensionality and dynamic nature of self-identity, noting that it is only one compelling factor in Indigenous school education. Further, the researchers identified the need for the development and application of a culturally relevant research instrument. The report supported the significance, and recommended (again) the teaching of Indigenous studies and cross-curriculum Indigenous perspectives in schools, although these elements were already present in policy.

In the context of addressing policy gaps in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Australia, research explores possible connections between self-esteem, self-identity and the educational aspirations of Indigenous children and young people. To establish a context for such research, Rhonda Craven and Adrian Parente (2003) consulted with the key representative body, the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) on the importance of self-concept and appropriate research strategies. The subsequent, largely quantitative body of research built on the motivational assumptions discussed above, adopting psychological variables to measure and evaluate causality among self-esteem, self-concept and self-identity, aspirations and motivations, and the educational outcomes or engagement of Indigenous students, often benchmarking with non-Indigenous students, for example, Parente, Craven and Munns (2003), Craven and Marsh (2004), Craven, Martin, Munns and Ha (2007b), Munns, Martin and Craven (2008), Bodkin-Andrews, O’Rourke, Grant, Denson & Craven (2010c), Craven and Bodkin-Andrews (2011). To accommodate cultural variations in such comparative research, some studies explored the use of cross-cultural survey instruments, emphasising the importance of neutral or unbiased survey tools (Bodkin-Andrews, Ha, Craven, & Yeung, 2010a; Bodkin-Andrews...
et al., 2010b; Purdie & McCrindle, 2004; Yeung, Craven, & Ali, 2013). The self-esteem research has contributed to understanding the educational aspirations and intentions of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. However, there are limitations in applying global notions of self-esteem to a non-homogenous Indigenous population (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2010a). Further, limited applications of self-concept research into practical settings in education can continue disadvantage for school students if they are not enabled to “reach an optimal level of self-concept” (Yeung et al., 2013, p. 407).

Related qualitative research explores the relationship of racial identity to individual self-esteem and self-concept. Research with Year 11 and 12 Aboriginal students of the NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC) Aboriginal Studies found a positive co-relation between the HSC unit of study and the students’ self-esteem in relation to their schooling, and the positive value for them of cultural knowledge and learning, although this latter finding was not identified as an aim of the Aboriginal Studies course (Wray, Craven, & Munns, 2006). A study with Aboriginal children and young people in urban Western Australia noted a distinction in racial identity between younger children who emphasised culture, and young people whose focus was on self, suggesting the dynamic contribution of culture in the development of Aboriginal students’ positive self-identity and its relationship with self-esteem, mental health and wellbeing (Kickett-Tucker, 2009). Participation in school sport further contributes to positive self-identity for many Aboriginal school students (Kickett-Tucker, 2008). Such research suggests a circular relationship between Aboriginal students’ self-esteem, racial identity, mental wellbeing and academic outcomes, and highlights the significant role of schools in promoting cultural respect (Kickett-Tucker & Coffin, 2011). Interviews and discussions with Aboriginal students in urban schools about racial identity
identified the need for education to recognise the students’ cultural strengths and the complexity of their environments (Nelson & Hay, 2010).

For many Indigenous researchers, however, self-determination through control is a key educational outcome (Bishop et al., 2014; Blanch, 2009), although it is not always on the research agenda (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Individual and community self-determination are intertwined for Aboriginal people, and “[i]f Aboriginal education is 'self-determined', self-esteem programs are unnecessary” (Dudgeon, Lazaroo, & Pickett, 1990, p. 94).

3.1.5 Neoliberalism: Closing the gap

Current neoliberal government attitudes and policies focus on socioeconomic disadvantage and a measurable gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational outcomes. Neoliberalism involves transferring a state’s responsibility for its citizens’ wellbeing and the economy to global businesses which take on powers and methods to reconfigure people as “productive economic entrepreneurs of their own lives”, including within educational institutions (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 248). The deficit approach discussed earlier continues in Australian government discourse through neoliberal policies and programs such as Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage with a statistical focus on socioeconomic normalisation and educational outcomes, at the expense of diversity (Altman, 2009; Barbour, 2011). Closing the Gap is a joint state, territory and Australian governments approach to policy adopted by the Australian Government under Labor Prime Minister Rudd in 2008. The National Indigenous Reform Agreement: Closing the Gap measures Indigenous reform through pre-determined building blocks of targets in early childhood, schooling, health, economic participation, healthy home, safe communities, and governance and leadership (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2008). The presiding
conservative Australian Government has intensified the economic focus of *Closing the Gap* and established its priorities by enforcing school compliance and attendance through funding the employment of truancy officers in the Remote School Attendance Strategy focusing on students in remote Indigenous schools (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014). Attendance, however, does not take account of systemic school shortcomings such as resourcing and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culturally relevant curriculum that can support and encourage school attendance (AcilAllen Consultants, 2014; Riddle, 2014). Current political discourse defines Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schooling success through student attendance, academic performance, retention, completion and qualification, based on assumptions of a shared understanding of educational success. This presents normalising requirements that mirror the “neoliberal values that inform the education system and society” (Osborne & Guenther, 2013, p. 90). Further, a simplistic discourse of school-training/study-employment does not take account of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, values and beliefs that may differ from the expectations and assumptions of national policies (Osborne & Guenther, 2013).

Some responses to the *Closing the Gap* policy approaches draw attention to and document the inequality of access, participation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools (Dreise & Thomson, 2014; New South Wales Auditor-General, 2012; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP), 2011, 2013). In measuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student achievements incrementally against pre-established national targets, Closing the Gap approaches take little account of diversities of community needs, regional and systemic differences in the provision of and access to, opportunity and delivery of education (Altman, 2009; Altman & Fogarty, 2010). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are presented as a
homogenous population. Further, the achievement gap in education, which governments aim to close through identifying targets for Indigenous peoples to reach, is removed clinically from the realities of their lives (Dodson, 2011; Kerwin & Van Issum, 2013). Instead of the achievement gap in United States educational discourse in relation to non-dominant populations as being short-term and not adequately addressing educational disparities Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) identified an “education debt” (p. 3). This is a debt owed to non-dominant populations by the nation, from long-term policies with multiple dimensions of historical, economic, socio-political and moral inequalities: inadequate education, limited funding and exclusion from decision making. Based on attitudes, practices and policies discussed in the previous chapter, a similar debt would apply in Australia.

Positivistic approaches to education and research depict reality as linear and causal without considering the impacts of societal and historical forces (Martin & Kamberelis, 2013) such as those discussed in the previous chapter. Documents relating to Closing the Gap policies and some public responses report slow progress in the educational achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, who are presented negatively when compared with non-Indigenous students. As such, this continues “an objectifying deficit view” focusing on Indigenous students as an educational problem (Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008, p. 148). This categorising approach simplifies, universalises and essentialises Indigenous education, denying structural inequalities, Indigenous cultural rights, and takes a narrow view of successful education (Lingard et al., 2012). The discourse of Indigenous education in Australia needs to change from failure to success (Herbert, 2011b), and to define success and deliver education in terms relevant to the contexts, lives and realities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Of major relevance to educational settings is the notion of education that is culturally relevant, responsive and sustaining.
3.2 Culturally Responsive Education

In recent decades, research by indigenous and culturally diverse populations has challenged the positioning of cultural learning and knowledges within dominant or mainstream education. This section reviews research relating to culturally relevant pedagogies and the assessment of cultural learning.

3.2.1 Culturally relevant, responsive, sustainable pedagogies

The concepts of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies emerged primarily from the North American experience. The meaning and usage of the terms has altered over the years, but the concepts acknowledge an awareness of the impact of cultural predominance in educational systems, and recognise the value of languages and cultural practices which non-dominant students bring to schooling. Culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies identify the lack of an explicit theoretical model to address educational achievement but at the same time preserve the students’ “cultural and psychosocial wellbeing” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 475). The theory of culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on student achievement where students can “accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469).

A wide ranging review of literature from the United States (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008) found variations in terminology in the literature such as “culturally responsive, culturally relevant, culture-based, and multicultural education” (p. 946), and identified different contexts in which the concept is discussed: curriculum, pedagogy and schooling more broadly. Culturally responsive teaching is defined as:

- using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively … based on the assumption
that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly. (Gay, 2002, p. 106)

This definition implies a causal link between culturally responsive teaching and student engagement. Yet, in their critique of the literature in the field of culturally responsive schooling, Castagno and Brayboy (2008) found much research to be “reduced to essentializations, meaningless generalizations, or trivial anecdotes” (p. 942) with limited impact on teaching practices, and thus ineffective in bringing about systemic change. Further, the literature contained limited evidence of the assumed causality between culturally responsive learning and academic or scholarly outcomes for indigenous students. The complexities of “relationships between culture, curriculum, pedagogy, learning, and academic achievement” make the analysis of such linkages difficult (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 982). By contrast, some Canadian research demonstrates that respecting and supporting students’ culture and language in schools results in “significantly better outcomes for students scholars” (Munroe, Lunney-Borden, Murray-Orr, Toney, & Meader, 2013, p. 319). The measurement and evaluation of culturally responsive pedagogy in terms of academic or scholastic engagement and outcomes assumes “[a] stylised deficit model” (Beighton, 2012, p. 1299). Applying a causal, measurement approach to learning ignores the many social and economic forces and circumstances impacting on indigenous students’ learning.

The connections between cultural learning and enhanced educational achievements are difficult to measure. As discussed in the Curriculum section in this chapter, suitable indicators for the measurement of “Indigenous cultural studies” in Australia are lacking
Yet, case studies of four NSW schools identified “culturally inclusive” curriculum that focused on Aboriginal Studies and embedded cultural perspectives as one of eight factors contributing to successful academic achievement for Aboriginal students (Munns, O'Rourke, & Bodkin-Andrews, 2013).

In Aotearoa, research found that affirming and respecting Māori knowledges in teaching enabled Māori students to engage with Euro-Western science learning and to negotiate “boundaries between their home culture and the culture of science” (Glynn, Cowie, Otrel-Cass, & Macfarlane, 2010, p. 126). An evaluation of the Te Kotahitanga Effective Teacher Profile (ETP) for teachers of Māori students (Bishop et al., 2003) discussed earlier, observed the practical implementation of the culturally responsive ETP in schools with Māori students (Savage et al., 2011). The study found improvements in teaching practices and student-teacher relationships, but noted that structural and systemic factors such as assessment, school organisation and management continued to impact on schools developing “culturally responsive learning environments” (Savage et al., 2011, p. 196).

Strengthening culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies involves an emphasis on sustaining connectedness for young people with their cultures through contemporary activities. A “culturally sustaining pedagogy” accentuates the need for pedagogy and schooling to support students in their learning beyond being relevant and responsive; to sustain the languages and cultures of their communities, as well as accessing “dominant cultural competence” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). Innovative research and practices in the teaching of cultures and languages incorporate both traditional and contemporary views of culture students cultivate, such as hip hop and evolving language variations (Alim & Reyes, 2011;
A culturally sustaining pedagogy acknowledges the dynamic nature of culture and language, and young people’s need to adapt themselves within their cultural interface.

The risk of wide adoption of a single pedagogy or teaching approach is that it can be popularised, misinterpreted and reinterpreted. The simplification of culturally responsive pedagogy over the last two decades has marginalised its practice through the influence of neoliberal ideologies advocating individual choice, and reversing its potential to empower (Sleeter, 2012). Criticisms of the practice of culturally responsive pedagogy include: regarding as “cultural celebration” (Sleeter, 2012, p. 568 italics in original) separates it from academic learning, with teachers unsure of academic expectations; “trivialization” (p. 569) enacts culturally responsive pedagogy as tokenism, reducing it to a checklist of steps, instead of reconceptualising teaching and learning or curriculum; "essentializing" culture regards it as "fixed and homogenous" (p. 570); and “[s]ubstituting cultural for political analysis” (p. 571) ignores the impacts of underlying racism, oppression, politics and ideologies on learning. Such criticisms are reflected in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ responses to cultural and knowledge learning in this thesis (see Chapters 5 and 6), providing insights into their understanding and knowledge of the influencing forces in the complex worlds wherein they are positioned.

The culturally responsive pedagogy literature and research focuses largely on causality as measured against dominant learning outcomes, with less emphasis on how such pedagogy contributes to indigenous students’ understanding of their positioning and potential in both indigenous and non-indigenous worlds. Another side of the causality equation is
understanding more about the affect and meaning of cultural learning for indigenous students in schools.

3.2.2 Culturally responsive education in Australia

Cultural responsiveness “values the unique identity or [sic] each child”, recognising the knowledge and skills that culturally diverse students bring to schooling (Perso, 2012, p. 17). Cultural competence within organisations and institutions includes behavioural attributes, attitudes and policies leading to understand and value differing cultural positions and knowledges, for example, Indigenous perspectives, and leads to cultural responsiveness (Perso, 2012). Cultural responsiveness in education functions at a micro level, in the school classroom with teachers and principals, and at a macro level of society, and where policy is made within national and state systems and implemented locally. In Australia, progress in culturally responsive Indigenous education is limited, despite the proliferation of policies and measures, many of which are short term and under-evaluated. More research is needed to understand better how educators in Australia’s Western-dominated education system can make “the shift from ethno-centric to bi-cultural education provision”, and changes in attitudes will contribute towards more culturally responsive schooling (Perso, 2012, p. 83).

Evaluative research of the outcomes of culturally responsive education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within the Australian education system is complex and limited. Culturally inadequate methods of assessment and the multiplicity of factors comprising culturally responsive education for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, render evaluation of such programs difficult and inconsistent (Griffiths, 2011). Few empirical studies have evaluated the outcomes of "culturally-responsive Indigenous
education programs” introduced in Australia since the 1970s (Griffiths, 2011, p. 74). I
discuss this further in the next section.

Debates within Australia also focus on the value of the inclusion of Indigenous culture
within teaching. Critical of the “sensitivity to student self-esteem” (p. 83) and culturally
relevant education agendas, Noel Pearson (2009) believes they diminish the responsibility
and accountability of schools to parents, resisting the testing and ability placement or
streaming in education. Advocating rigorous skill learning methods for Aboriginal school
students Pearson (2009) implemented the Direct Instruction program in schools in Cape
York, Queensland. Direct Instruction is a US-based “scientific theory of instruction” (p. 45),
a teaching method that includes evidence-based data, sequenced lessons for students in skill-
level groups, and management of student behaviour with positive reinforcement (Pearson,
2009). Criticisms of Direct Instruction highlight a rigid approach that does not accommodate
program implemented by Pearson identified small increases in student attendance and
engagement (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2013). However, the review also
noted difficulty in establishing causal connections with improved learning outcomes in
terms of literacy and numeracy measurements, partly because of the short time of the
program’s operation and limited quantitative data. Pearson (2009) has argued for a “bi-
cultural policy” (p. 60) in education but his position on the role of culture and identity is
contradictory. He ascribes a high level of literacy for the maintenance of Aboriginal culture
and languages, to replace the oral transmission of cultural knowledges, but is critical of over-
emphasising culture and identity in schooling.
In contrast to Pearson, another approach emphasises strengthening Aboriginal students’ self-esteem and learning through a pedagogy that positively reinforces their cultural identity and has high expectations of students (Sarra, 2011). Chris Sarra established the Stronger Smarter Institute (n.d.) to deliver school leadership programs aiming to change school cultures and promote high expectations and positive identities for Indigenous students. An empirical evaluation of the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities Project across 201 schools in Queensland and New South Wales (Luke et al., 2013) found some success in changing the climate and attitudes in schools, but limited statistically significant improvement in student outcomes, and thus difficulty in establishing causal links between the model and conventional testing, assessment, attendance and student achievement. The evaluation also found assumptions of Indigenous cultural deficit continue to pervade educational attitudes and practice in schools. Pearson (2009) has criticised Sarra’s (2005) approach for promoting racial pride and identity politics because it can be illusory for Indigenous students, leading them to believe that this is all they need to succeed. While Pearson and Sarra adopt different pedagogies and methods, their aims coincide with current government policy objectives: to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ schooling engagement and thus measurable outcomes. Both their programs embed cultural knowledge and identity, albeit with differing levels of emphasis.

Evaluative research such as the aforementioned reviews of Pearson’s and Sarra’s projects responds to government requirements for quantitative learning outcomes, but provides less analysis and understanding of the nature and extent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ cultural learning. Further, the failure of the evaluations to identify causal links between the programs implemented by Pearson and Sarra and learning outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reveals not only the incompatibility of
measurement, but also the limitations of a positivistic causal approach, despite this being the preferred method governments use to justify or reduce expenditure on such programs. An example is the Australian Government’s recent announcement that it would fund a wider implementation of Direct Instruction in remote schools in northern Australia, despite the inconclusive evaluation (Luke, 2014).

A further approach to cultural responsiveness highlights the significant value of adopting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogies in all teaching. Identifying a lack of research and structured pedagogical advice for teachers regarding the application of “Indigenous higher order thinking within structures and pedagogies”, Yunkaporta (2009b, p. 63) created the “8-ways framework of Aboriginal pedagogies” (8 Aboriginal ways of learning, 2011). This framework embeds Aboriginal pedagogies into teaching and curriculum, incorporating relational responsiveness with local communities. The focus is on “learning through culture, not just about culture” (Yunkaporta & Kirby, 2011, p. 206), where Aboriginal perspectives are located in Aboriginal processes, not in Aboriginal content. Through a “relationally relevant pedagogy”, the teacher connects Aboriginal methodological, epistemological processes with relational ontological processes and values through moving from “Law to relations to knowledge to practice” (Department of Education and Communities, 2012, pp. 62-63). Some NSW schools are incorporating the 8 ways approach to teach Indigenous and non-Indigenous students through culture (Department of Education and Communities, 2012). The educational approaches of Yunkaporta, Pearson and Sarra respond to different community needs, and are implemented within and subject to existing education requirements.
Some qualitative research with students further explores culturally relevant pedagogy. One study in rural, inland New South Wales explored the perspectives of Aboriginal boys attending an intervention centre demonstrated the inadequacy of so-called culturally relevant education for some Aboriginal students (Edwards-Groves & Murray, 2008). The responses of the boys, described as “at risk of entering the criminal justice system” (p. 166), indicated that their cultural knowledges as a resource and their previous experiences were sidelined by the classroom environment through the teachers’ knowledge and practices. Aboriginal students in a state school and an independent Indigenous school shared their experiences of school and learning through drawings (Ma Rhea & Atkinson, 2008). Although there were only eight students, they expressed clearly the value for them of cultural learning and identity. The research concluded that the goals of the national Indigenous education policy relating to engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, histories and cultures, and increasing Indigenous staff, were not being met within dominant schooling practices.

Research with South Australian Indigenous senior secondary school students sought to understand factors that enhanced students’ engagement with learning and levels of school attendance, retention and completion of secondary school (Rahman, 2010). The 36 students interviewed expressed positive attitudes to learning within a culturally responsive environment. Learning cultural knowledge through Aboriginal Studies, language and perspectives, strong cultural identity; students’ understanding of the school “learning codes” (p. 72) contributed to the students’ positive experiences, as well as having Indigenous teachers, supportive teacher relationships and family, homework centres, tutoring, and developing career goals. The researcher suggested that “culture and culture based learning
potentially lead to improved levels of student engagement in learning and achievement in education” (p. 74) and that these factors contributed to the students’ motivation to succeed.

The different approaches and experiences of cultural responsiveness and learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students discussed above portray the diversities and challenges of implementing cultural learning across Australia. The requirements for evaluation in an evidence-based economic climate, and the unevenness of measurement complicate the position of cultural learning in Australian education systems.

3.3 Measuring Cultural Learning

The rights and opportunities for all Indigenous peoples to learn and speak their own language, to learn culture through histories and knowledges is enshrined in the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2008), endorsed by Australia in 2009. However, as discussed below, the evaluation of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural learning, tangible (culture and history) and intangible (protocols and values) in curriculum (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013), contribute to and enhance Indigenous students’ learning is a challenge for educational systems and institutions responding to government requirements for measurable outcomes. A direct causal link between cultural learning and educational outcomes literacy and numeracy scores is tenuous and sometimes elusive, and the value of such learning is deemed difficult to quantify.

Standard assessment practices in Australia focus on literacy and numeracy and rarely consider the value of Indigenous cultural learning, knowledge or perspectives (Klenowski, 2013). For example, one evaluative study of assessment tasks used in a NSW Quality Teaching model in schools suggested an inherent bias in measuring the value of Aboriginal
perspectives in the performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Amosa, Ladwig, Griffiths, & Gore, 2008). The researchers found the assessment tasks analysed required students to address only the knowledge and perspectives of dominant social groups in Australia, which usually took the form of white middle-class knowledge” (p. 9). This indicates a shortcoming in assessment and measurement of cultural learning for Indigenous students.

Indigenous measures of educational success vary, but both mainstream and culturally relevant assessment are needed in order to evaluate educational outcomes for Indigenous students (Griffiths, 2011). This can be achieved by examining cultural bias and incorporating suitable cultural tasks within standard measurement. Programs focusing on evidence-based assessment of English literacy and numeracy instruction and learning for Indigenous school students may incorporate the role of language and cultural background as well as cultural competence, but do not specifically focus on assessing the value of cultural learning (Jorgensen, Sullivan, & Grootenboer, 2013). The uncertainty with respect to understanding the relationship between, and contribution of, Indigenous cultural learning to student wellbeing and measurable educational outcomes suggests a difficulty in accepting cultural learning as an indicator.

Analysis of Indigenous education policy research in Australia from 1990 to 2007 found that in many schools in the studies, a focus on Indigenous cultural learning and developing high expectations of Indigenous students competed with external demands for literacy and numeracy testing (Fordham & Schwab, 2007). A preliminary analysis of qualitative data from the 2009 Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) reported that Aboriginal parents believed in and supported both a school education and cultural knowledge for their
children (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012). The analysis also identified a lack of empirical evidence of “causal mechanisms” (p. 2) to demonstrate that culture enhances wellbeing, or even the existence of such a causal relationship. The recent *Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage* (SCRGSP) (2014) noted the lack of a primary measure for the indicator Indigenous cultural studies, one of eight indicators in the strategic area of governance and leadership, and culture. Although noting the difficulty of establishing and defining appropriate cultural indicators for a quantitative report, the SCGRSP recommended the development of such a measure, as well as the need for a reliable source of data (p. 62). The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) reports statistics of teaching Indigenous culture in schools, but the survey is conducted only every six years; most recently in 2008 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Limited attention to, and evidence of, culturally relevant measurement and assessment tools in Australia contributes to a lack of understanding and acceptance of cultural learning for Indigenous students.

### 3.3.1 Wellbeing

The term wellbeing features as an outcome in many policy documents in Australia in the context of education and health, although its meaning varies according to contexts and peoples. An Indigenous perspective of wellbeing is that it is “firmly culturally based … through a continuation of cultural knowledges and practices” (Grieves, 2006, p. 21) (p. 21). However, dominant indicators of wellbeing do not necessarily reflect the values of Indigenous peoples and may be inadequate in assessing the outcomes of policy (Prout, 2012; Tomyn, Norrish, & Cummins, 2013). For example, in qualitative research, young Aboriginal adults reported that “a better level of education” was one factor contributing to their wellbeing through understanding their positioning in society (Grieves, 2006, p. 58). Further, that better level of education “includes those aspects of knowledge that are important in
Aboriginal culture including values and morals and that this occurs outside of formal education contexts” (p. 60). However, Indigenous wellbeing is not well understood or expressed in policy. Definitions of Indigenous wellbeing in education policy vary and are not clearly delineated. For example, the *NSW Aboriginal Education Policy* (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2009a) includes “improving the educational outcomes and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students” in Commitment 1.1.1, but wellbeing is not defined in policy documents, nor is it mentioned again.

The national *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014* (Ministerial Council for Education, 2011) refers to “the active recognition and validation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages by schools [as] critical to students’ wellbeing and success at school. There are strong links between wellbeing and learning outcomes” (p. 12). This is an important acknowledgement of the value of cultural learning. However, the plan fails to discuss the meaning of wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. The action plan continues: “A curriculum and pedagogy that embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural perspectives will support attendance and retention” (p. 16), without elaboration. Later, the plan introduces a national Australian Curriculum that includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. However, the current position of cross-curriculum perspectives in the *Australian Curriculum* is under attack (see previous chapter), and the future of the national Action Plan is unclear (Russell, 2014).

Knowledge and evidence of the meaning of cultural learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can strengthen understanding of the connections between knowledges, histories and cultures, student wellbeing and educational outcomes. However, the absence
of clear measurement indicators and relevant assessment methods limit understanding of the value of Indigenous cultural learning in education. This creates uncertainties about, and threatens, the continued place and role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, histories and cultures in Australian school curricula. Further, the political nature of curriculum continues to challenge the position of cultural learning.

3.4 Curriculum

Thirty three years ago, the introduction of the NSW *Aboriginal Education Policy* occurred during a period of School-Based Curriculum Development (SBCD) where schools and teachers were able to select and create teaching resources. SBCD was identified as a process whereby schools could identify and “tap” local community needs in establishing Aboriginal Studies curriculum (Cook, 1978, p. 52). However, the lack of a theoretical basis for Aboriginal education and policy, as well as an entrenched position of cultural deficit limited such curriculum development (Cook, 1995). Attempting to move the Aboriginal education debate analysis beyond a separate racial, cultural variable of Aboriginality, Cook (1995) isolated the variables of “cultural difference and socio-economic disadvantage … cultural learning patterns” (p. 208, 210). Yet, as discussed above, the cultural difference and learning styles approaches were misunderstood and misused, often leading to limited expectations, remedial programs and inadequate curricula. The strength of Cook’s research is on the value of a “more comprehensive curriculum model” (p. 210) as he tried to move thinking towards responsive and relevant education curricula for Aboriginal students. However, a substantive, equal position for indigenous material in curricula requires applicable models and theories.

In Australia, Aotearoa and Canada, where indigenous peoples are non-dominant populations, curricula are not neutral but are "grounded in the worldviews, beliefs and norms
of those who conceptualize and teach” (Ball, 2004, p. 456). Teachers do not always acknowledge that they hold such assumptions or make them explicit (Bishop et al., 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In Canada, an open architecture “Generative Curriculum Model” (Ball, 2004, p. 454) for childcare curriculum development through a partnership of First Nations peoples and non-Indigenous educators recognised the value of incorporating indigenous knowledges alongside Euro-Western theories and practices, leaving space for students and community perspectives and emphasising critical thinking. Research examining the integration of Aboriginal perspectives into school curricula in Manitoba, Canada, from the perspectives of teachers and Aboriginal students in six urban high schools found curricula lacking in Aboriginal representation, histories and knowledges (Kanu, 2011). Like Cook (above), Kanu identified a gap between theory and practice, and proposed reconceptualising a new progressive, dialogic and transformative curriculum theory that took into account “for Aboriginal students what constitutes meaningful and empowering learning for them in the formal education system” (p. 203). Relevant theory and practical models are key elements in the enactment of responsive curricula in schools and implementation by teachers.

In Australia, curriculum designers and writers provide space for local content; this is important and is stressed in policy and curriculum documents relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives. The prevailing Australian “instrumental curriculum” model focuses on transmitting a set of lifetime skills, encompassing an “intended curriculum” expressed in curriculum frameworks, and an “enacted curriculum”, interpreted and carried out by teachers (Vickers, 2013, p. 240). The enacted curriculum exposes a potential gap for the exclusion of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives. This is seen in the recent debate discussed in the previous chapter about the Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander cross-curriculum priority in the Australian Curriculum as an elaboration, not core content, and to be included at the discretion of teachers (McGaw, 2014; Wiltshire & Donnelly, 2014).

Examination of the content descriptions and elaborations in initial Australian Curriculum documents found a lack of critical and higher order thinking in the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curriculum perspectives. Analysis by Lowe and Yunkaporta (2013) explored the claim by the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA) that the curriculum would deliver opportunities for all students to gain “deeper understanding of the cultures and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” (p. 2-3). They established a cultural matrix tool to measure the “breadth and integrity of Aboriginal Content … depth of Aboriginal perspectives” (p. 3) in the 2011 Foundation to Year 10 documents for English, History, Mathematics and Science. Analysis of words referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content, the tangible (“cultural and historical facts”) and the less present, intangible (“protocols, values, processes and systems”) elements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives (p. 4) found a lower level of cognitive understanding overall, with more content located in primary years’ curriculum.

A broader discussion suggests Australian school curricula legitimate a “colonial narrative” or perspective, and a constructed view of Indigeneity often focusing on cultures and customs from a traditional past or from remote Indigenous communities (Lowe et al., 2014, p. 64). For example, curricula offered limited opportunities for all students to explore critically aspects of Australia’s colonial history such as land dispossession and denying Indigenous sovereignty. Further, the analysis found inadequate documentation in the Australian
Curriculum to enable teachers to develop student “sequenced learning” (p. 79), as well as uninformed pedagogies and inappropriate content, all of which limit understanding of the Australian Indigenous experience.

3.5 Cultural Learning at the Cultural Interface

The controversial revision of Australian curricula to reinstate the materiality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence, experiences and knowledges, and perspectives of invasion and survival versus settlement and colonisation (see previous chapter) illustrates the political nature of education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Maynard, 2007; Nakata & Muspratt, 1994; Reynolds, 2000). Within the "cultural interface", educational experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and Indigenous knowledges are filtered by Western discourses and structures (Nakata, 2007b). The ideological foundations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational policies generate contradictory responses from school teachers and principals (Nakata, 2011). This can be polarising for Indigenous students who live in two worlds, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and they need to understand the "political nature of their position...that requires both the language and the knowledge of how that positioning is effected in the everyday world" (Nakata, 2007b, p. 225). As this research shows in Chapters 5 and 6, cultural learning holds the potential for students to understand this positioning.

A criticism of Nakata’s cultural interface model is that it implies the existence of a homogenous space of equal opportunity for Indigenous education and knowledge research from a postcolonial stance, whereas many Aboriginal and indigenous scholars regard colonialism as “ongoing, not in the past” (Grieves, 2009b, p. 201). However, the adoption of Nakata’s cultural interface as a research framework by Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander researchers (particularly in education and health) as a representation of the contentions within this space, demonstrates the strength of this model (for example, Brown, 2010; Hart et al., 2012; Jackson-Barrett, 2011; Minniecon, Franks, & Heffernan, 2007; Tur, Blanch, & Wilson, 2010; Williamson & Dalal, 2007). A further interpretation of the cultural interface is as a space for dialogue between the two knowledges (Indigenous and Euro-Western), rather than tension and conflict (Yunkaporta, 2009b).

An exploration of cultural learning in formal education policy in the state of Tasmania critically analysed the depiction of Aboriginality in policy and curriculum (2012). In this research, Moore argued that many progressive policy interventions in Aboriginal education were counter-productive to improving the socio-economic position of Aboriginal people. Discussions with Aboriginal students and Aboriginal political leaders, identified an “imagined Aboriginality” (p. 147) taught in Tasmanian schools, focusing on an idealised difference or sameness, and that conflict with the reality of the lives of Aboriginal people for whom Aboriginality varies contextually. While the position of the Aboriginal population in Tasmania may be more contested and challenged than in other Australian states and territories (Ma Rhea, Anderson, & Atkinson, 2012), Moore’s criticisms of education practice, policy performance and research have wider application. For example, not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples lack self-esteem (as depicted in some research, see above), and the dynamics of policy “lock individuals into their subaltern position even as they are actually capable of negotiating the everyday difficulties of post-ethnic Aboriginality” (p. 153). Moore identified a persistent emphasis on a slightly romanticised, culturally different Aboriginal population with educational measures to address this position, including pedagogy. He advocated “a post-ethnic… intercultural … post-identity”
approach through critical Aboriginal Studies to negotiate the reality of life and relationships in Australia today and to “transcend the culture versus education bind” (p. 155).

Moore’s position resonates with that of Lowe and Yunkaporta (2013), who identified a lack of critical and higher order thinking in the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the Australian Curriculum, and of Nakata (2012), who advocates the importance of learning in two worlds. In exploring the extent and nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in school learning from the positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, this thesis is located within the framework of Nakata’s cultural interface.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter reveals a multiplicity of changing theories and practices which have sought to address the academic performance and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in dominant education systems. Approaches include cultural deficit, cultural difference and cultural disadvantage; learning styles; the cultural interface; self-esteem; and neoliberalist policies of closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage. The theories, beliefs, practices and curricula zigzag across and within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learning environment. Further, the chapter identifies gaps in knowledge and understanding of how cultural learning can contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ education and wellbeing, connecting with engagement, attendance and educational outcomes.

In Australia, much research in relation to the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is quantitative and wide-ranging, geographically. It often employs “linear
and cyclical research design” (Hodgson & Standish, 2009, p. 324) aiming to produce
diagnoses of the so-called Indigenous education problem, and respond to neoliberal
justifications for expenditure. On the other hand, qualitative research by nature tends to
focus on smaller, bounded geographic areas. A predominant focus within both qualitative
and quantitative research is the relationship between cultural learning and Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander student engagement with education in terms of measurable educational
outcomes. While this is important, less research considers responses of Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander students’ to the nature and extent of their cultural learning.

This thesis probes that gap, building on the qualitative literature reviewed in this chapter that
sought the views of Indigenous children and young people relating to cultural dimensions
of their education (Bishop, Vicary, Andrew, & Pearson, 2006; Craven et al., 2007a;
Edwards-Groves & Murray, 2008; Kickett-Tucker, 2009; Kickett-Tucker & Coffin, 2011;
Ma Rhea & Atkinson, 2008; Moore, 2009; Nelson & Hay, 2010). This research focuses on
aspects of cultural learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students which are
explored less in the literature, including: students’ understanding of the depth and meaning
of cultural learning, historical and contemporary knowledges; and differentiating such
knowledges from non-Indigenous knowledge. The following chapter outlines the
methodological, theoretical framework of this research, and the development of appropriate
research processes.
Chapter 4. Methodology: Researching Responsively and Respectfully

I begin this chapter with a discussion of the theories and philosophies of indigenous research, and research with children and young people that frame this research. These approaches have similarities and share principles and protocols of culturally responsive research, although with some ontological differences. Culturally and relationally responsive research requires ongoing, negotiated flexibility in response to developing relationships with the participants and changing research environments. This involves careful selection and use of methods in relation to the participants, moving beyond “formulaic” qualitative methods (Berryman, SooHoo, & Nevin, 2013b, p. 19) or a “pre-determined methodology” (St. Pierre, 2014, p. 24) with a prescriptive set of methods. I discuss ethical processes including collaborative co-construction of the research with members of the local Aboriginal educational community, and research practices with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student participants, Aboriginal educational staff, principals and teachers.

4.1 Culturally Responsive Research

This research was guided by parallel theories, principles and practices. Within indigenous research, relational principles include: co-constructing research with local community to embed concerns and values; reciprocity in outcomes and benefits; relational accountability to community; and building equal relationships (Chilisa, 2012; Martin, 2008b; Smith, 1999, 2012; Wilson, 2008). These intertwine with the principles of childhood sociological research that respect and promote the rights of children and young people to express their views and participate in research (Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Prout & James, 1990/1997; Punch, 2002). Both approaches encompass concepts of culturally responsive research: to resist
colonisation of peoples; to respect cultural practices and the rights of participants in research; and to promote equal relationships that are foundational to the research processes and outcomes (Berryman et al., 2013b). At the forefront of the research design I had questions, many self-reflective in nature. For example, would Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students feel comfortable talking to an adult from outside the Aboriginal community, without, as Wray identified, "links to my 'mob'", enabling the easy establishment of “community rapport" with Aboriginal students (Wray et al., 2006, p. 4). Would the students be willing to articulate their views of learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in schools? In response to these concerns, I was guided by the emphasis of Indigenous research on collaboration and relationships through working with the community, on giving back to participants, and on consideration of the process as well as outcomes.

Resonating with culturally responsive and indigenous research, and informing this research, are theories of postmodern emergent methodology (Somerville, 2007) and post-qualitative research inquiry (MacLure, 2013b; St. Pierre, 2011), which are open to new ways of generating and understanding knowledge. These approaches offer a means of understanding and conducting research through emphasis on: the relatedness of human and nonhuman; non-hierarchical and non-representative understanding of meaning; that research recognises and connects contradictory and entangled knowledge (Cole, 2012). As such, they contrast with conventional and positivist, scientific and some qualitative research that interprets, categorises, codes, measures and quantifies data, and generalises outcomes. This research includes the context and materiality of surroundings and place in the student discussions, student visual contributions, and stories from participants and stakeholders in informal situations beyond standard qualitative interviews and discussion groups; elements of
“transgressive data” (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 175). I discuss these aspects further in the section Making sense of the research contributions.

4.1.1 Interrogating the construction of knowledge

I position this thesis within current indigenous postcolonial, decolonising, anti-colonial research frameworks which critique Western, colonial research approaches emphasising whiteness (Martin, 2008b; Moreton-Robinson, 2005; Rigney, 2006; Smith, 1999, 2012). Some Australian Indigenous researchers challenge post-colonialism as a form of imperialism, where colonialism is embedded in practices and policies (Grieves, 2009b; Leane, 2010); thus the process of decolonising methodologies is ongoing.

A key step in contemporary indigenous research is to identify “knowledge gaps…going back and forth to retrieve marginalised and suppressed literatures to review, analyse, and challenge colonising and deficit theorising and interpretation” (Chilisa, 2012, p. 60). To bridge the knowledge gap since my anthropological studies in the 1970s, I began by reviewing and interrogating the foundations and impacts of the twentieth century practices of ethnography and ethnology. These disciplines were built on nineteenth century concepts of natural history, which classified social and cultural development on a scale of temporal evolution (Fabian, 1983). Fieldwork research and published monographs interpreted and represented the customs of non-Western peoples and societies relative to Western societies, with long-lasting, often negative, effects on the peoples studied (Nakata, 2007b; Smith, 1999, 2012). Interpretive methodologies and the centrality of the text “gave the researcher-as-author the power to represent the subject’s story” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 35). Anthropologists applied Western values and made moral judgements without taking account of specific and relevant aspects of indigenous cultures.
The required, classic anthropological texts of my studies represented non-Western societies as objects of academic study, but with little relevance to the lives of the people studied. For example, Margaret Mead’s (1961) study of so-called primitive youth in Samoa created a contested, difficult and persistent legacy for young Samoan women, branding them as “sexually carefree” and denying their voices (Tupuola, 2006, p. 296). The interpretation and labelling of the Yanomamö indigenous people of South America as violent in Yanomamö: the fierce people (Chagnon, 1968) which dominated academic and popular representations became controversial because they presented a limited understanding of the Yanomamö (Patton, 2002; Ramos, 1987). The analysis and interpretation of universality in Melanesian “myth-dreams” and cargo movements in Mambu, by Kenelm Burridge (1960) came to be seen as romantic, simplistic and totalising, imposing Western moralities on the lives of the Kanaka people from Papua New Guinea (Lattas, 2007; Lindstrom, 1999).

From the 1970s into the 1980s, a crisis of representation challenged ethnographic research and textual representation in social science research, leading to a rethinking of the politics of cultural invention (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Criticising the use of allegory in ethnographic texts to explain cultural differences by aligning them with Western traditions, Clifford (1986) challenged readers and writers to "confront and take responsibility for our systematic construction of others and of ourselves through others" (p. 121). However, the so-called crisis was “more a moment of reflection...than a true crisis of the discipline” (Vargas-Cetina, 2013, p. 4); it was not seen as a critique into the influence of the constructs of power (Nash, 2013). In the twenty-first century, representational approaches persist within anthropology, and much qualitative research continues to operate within a Western framework that emphasises judgement through representational thinking,
categorisation and labelling (MacLure, 2013b; St. Pierre, 2013b). Understanding these shifts in thinking has informed this research.

### 4.2 Researching with Indigenous Peoples

In the 1990s, indigenous scholars from colonised populations began to challenge Western colonial, academic ethnographic research that misrepresented the views and practices of indigenous peoples and denied their participation in research about their societies. A comprehensive critique of the impacts of Western research methodologies, *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples* (Smith, 1999, 2012), identified research practices that distorted and generalised the lives of Māori people of Aotearoa/New Zealand, and other indigenous peoples. Community-based, grass-roots initiated research agendas and practices counter Western colonial research methodologies. In Australia, protocols and strategies regulate and reframe research with Aboriginal peoples and communities to observe "Aboriginal terms of reference" (Martin, 2008b, p. 142). Kaupapa Māori protocols locate research within Māori practices and beliefs in Aotearoa (Bishop, 2005; Smith, 1999, 2012). Responding to inaccurate and damaging practices, indigenous research methodologies and practices support indigenous knowledges (Chilisa, 2012). Culturally responsive research incorporates principles of respect, reciprocity and relationships to navigate humility in research with all peoples of all ages (Berryman et al., 2013c). Non-indigenous researchers are encouraged “into a dialogue about research... and [a] more constructive and collaborative research relationship with Indigenous communities” (Smith, 2005, p. 90). However, despite commonalities such as anti-colonialism, equal power, principles of transparency and relationships, and attitudes of humility and respect, indigenous research processes are not “globally applicable " (Walter & Andersen, 2013, p. 62), because of the many diversities in historical and contemporary lives and experiences.
Thus, each proposal, design, conduct and outcome needs to be negotiated and constructed with indigenous communities.

4.2.1 Indigenous research principles and practices

The foundations of indigenous research embed and reflect indigenous knowledges, epistemologies, ontologies, axiologies, challenging Western methodologies that emphasise validity, objectivity and the discovery, measurement and categorisation of knowledges (Bishop, 2005; Martin, 2008b; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; Smith, 1999, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Indigenous agendas and frameworks emphasise community-initiated or community-based research, with community participation in all stages of research from design to outcomes, fluidity and flexibility throughout (Berryman et al., 2013c; Hokowhitu, 2009; Loppie, 2007; Smith, 2005; Yunkaporta, 2009b). Thus, research knowledge is owned by the community and is gifted to researchers. Indigenous research is “wholistic” (Grieves, 2009a, p. 1), where the process is as important as the results, and benefits the community and peoples who are the focus of the research (Dudgeon, Kelly, & Walker, 2010; Smith, 1999). Embodying relationality and relationships “Indigenous research is a life-changing ceremony” (Wilson, 2008, p. 61).

4.2.2 Critical theory, critical race theory and indigenous research

Critical theory provides tools to identify, critique and examine systemic problems and the shortcomings of racially-biased societies. Some proactive approaches build on critical theory, including: the unique position of being Aboriginal (Martin, 2003a); a principle of reconciliation within the educational cultural interface (Yunkaporta, 2009b); the indigenous principle of local, place-based orientation (Smith, 2012); and “Tribal Critical Race theory”, a framework to address the unique position of native American Indians in the United States,
who exist in a “liminal space” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429) in between statuses that are defined legally, political and racially.

This thesis embodies critical theory in terms of illuminating systemic and structural biases within the education system, for example, the complexity of underlying and embedded factors of Australian government actions and Indigenous education policies (Gray & Beresford, 2008). Further, this research acknowledges a critical indigenous theory, whereby indigenous categories of knowledges existing before settlement and colonisation, and as acknowledged in Australian colonial declarations of terra nullius, continue to exist, sustain and persist (Povinelli, 2011b). This thesis also draws on the critical philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 1994), who expose assumptions and forces within societies. Within the complex entanglement of human assumptions, beliefs, educational and social material forces of the past and present with the understandings articulated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff in six NSW schools, this thesis seeks to understand the production and multidimensionality of cultural learning for the students. In this way, it seeks to contribute to praxis, the confluence of theory and practice in the students’ engagement with cultural learning and its positive potential for the students in becoming-other than their present selves (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Semetsky & Lovat, 2011; Somerville, 2007), through understanding their positioning within the worlds they inhabit within Australian society, and the relationships they form with knowledges.

4.2.3 Indigenous research in Australia

In Australia, separate guidelines for ethical research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples emerged only in the late 1980s, reflecting a gradual shift in research attitudes and practices. From the late nineteenth century, scientific, medical and
psychological research on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples recorded their cultures as a dying heritage, ignoring their worldviews (Martin, 2008b; Nakata, 2007b). From 1940, linguistic social and cultural anthropological studies contributed to policies, but continued to silence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. From 1970, researchers explored selected parts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures through Western perspectives and frameworks, emphasising social and cultural difference, deprivation and disadvantage (Martin, 2008b; Nakata, 2007b). Since the 1990s, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers have articulated their own research perspectives and agendas. Research theories and practices draw on influences of critical theory, standpoint theory, decolonisation, resistance, emancipation and feminism (such as Ford, 2010; Fredericks & Adams, 2011; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; Nakata, 2010; Walter & Andersen, 2013; Yunkaporta, 2009b). For example, in conjunction with the community, Martin (2008b) interpreted and developed an Aboriginal post-colonial research framework for culturally respectful research encompassing relatedness, respect, self-respect, and accountability.

Two official bodies provide guidance for research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies guidelines (AIATSIS) (2012) outline principles of ethical research, including: (1) recognition of population diversity and uniqueness; (2) rights to and respect for self-determination, heritage, knowledge and cultural expression; (3) ongoing consultation, negotiation and mutual understanding; and, (4) equal participation and benefits. The National Health and Medical Research Council’s (NHMRC) (2003) guidelines for ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research outline values regarding developing ethical relationships and undertaking ethical research: spirit and integrity, reciprocity, equality, survival and
protection, and responsibility. Critiques of Australian institutional guidelines regard them as embedded in Western practices and still subjecting Indigenous peoples to “colonial domination” (Saunders, West, & Usher, 2010, p. 2). In this thesis, the research acknowledges Aboriginal ways of being, doing and thinking, forming relationships, and the relational accountability of all involved in the research process. This began with co-constructing the research with members of the Aboriginal educational community, and learning from each other.

4.2.4 Co-constructing the research

Indigenous research involves an ethical undertaking to work with the community, to define the research topic, to mutually agree on conduct, analysis of research, and the dissemination of outcomes. Non-indigenous researchers need to approach communities for agreement to proceed (Martin, 2008b), as do indigenous researchers from outside a community, to co-operate in research design and to develop relationships. This includes consideration of factors such as "initiation, benefits, representation, legitimation, accountability" (Bishop, 2005, p. 131), “relational accountability, respectful representation, reciprocity, rights and responsibilities” (Chilisa, 2012, p. 174). Incorporating these principles, I partnered with the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) to develop and co-construct the research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Aboriginal educational staff. The first step was to meet with the local AECG to discuss and negotiate the research, obtain their support and co-construct the research design. The agreed, shared research needs, practices and reciprocity in terms of outcomes relevant to the community embodied transparency and accountability in the research (Bishop, 2005; Chilisa, 2012; Marker, 2009). However, in practice, reconciling the ethical requirements of the Aboriginal community regarding rights and responsibilities with university research ethics processes was a challenge.
4.2.4.1 Ethical considerations, rights and responsibilities

As discussed, ethical requirements of indigenous and culturally responsive research are reflected in institutional research guidelines. However, the label collaborative research can subvert and disguise indigenous practices and values (Smith, 1999). I encountered such a challenge in obtaining ethical research approval from my university. The Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics process requires the submission of all research instruments including informed consent forms and discussion/interview questions before embarking on the research. Yet, before I could submit the ethics application, I needed to develop and reach agreement on the research topic, protocols and questions with the local AECG. I had difficulty resolving this dilemma until a colleague shared with me a two-phase approach developed for research with an Aboriginal community. Following this model, I divided the research into two phases, and obtained a separate university ethics approval for each phase. I framed phase one as a feasibility study (Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee approval number ECN-11-261), to develop the proposal for research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and practices with the local AECG. I approached the NSW AECG central office which referred me to the local AECG committee to discuss the research. Negotiations and discussions with the AECG led to an agreement to proceed, and I submitted a second ethics application to the university Human Research Ethics Committee for the research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff in schools (Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee approval number ECN-12-172).

In NSW, a network of local and regional AECGs represents Aboriginal community interests and concerns regarding educational and cultural practices in public and private schools and education policy, through the state body to government. In this research, the local AECG
committee includes Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders: community members, parents, teaching and support staff, principals and NSW Department of Education and Communities personnel. Many AECG Aboriginal executive members have multiple work and other commitments representing the local Aboriginal community. Following conversations over several months to ascertain the preferred research protocols, I made contact with an executive member, and was invited to attend an AECG meeting to discuss the research. Consistent with indigenous protocols for ownership of research design and outcomes, the initial proposal that I took to the meeting was conceptually broad, allowing space to define the research further with the group. Collectively, the group expressed interest and suggested locations and a focus for the research. The AECG President requested a separate meeting with the AECG executive to discuss the research further. We exchanged initial emails in which I provided some background and the AECG President established parameters and requirements for the study:

KW:... my interest …came out of another project I worked on … Aboriginal kids talked about the need for more Aboriginal culture and I've found that while there are lots of statistics, there's very little about asking kids what they think about being taught about Aboriginal culture in schools, what they are learning, and what they'd like to learn…

AECG President: I do have a few questions:

1. How will the kids be selected and who will select?
2. Will the parents or a representative be able to be present during the interview?
3. Can we see the Ethics proposal for this project?
4. Do you know if you will need work with children clearance to do this if on a school site?
Do you have a specific age group in mind?

(AECG President, personal communication, 24-25 April, 2012)

The AECG President discussed these questions when we met, and raised further concerns about the research. With the President’s consent I recorded our discussion:

Sometimes our kids are brushed aside if they don’t fit the mould or… if they fit too well, like if they have English difficulties, or they don’t want to wear shoes ... So that’s one of the things that we wanted to be sure [to] not discriminate against them in any way and make them feel different. (AECG President)

The AECG President emphasised the importance of non-discriminatory selection of student participants to ensure that all students of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent were invited to participate, not just those who may appear to fit a perceived, stereotyped idea of Indigenous students. Further, the President suggested the research should include a balance of student learning experiences and shared local knowledge of the schools to guide the school selection process:

To get proper research you should probably do both, across the board and see which kids are getting…and which aren’t. … Some strong Aboriginal schools in this area. (AECG President)

The President explained the AECG role in representing the community in the research and the historical legacies of the education system and difficulties with school structures for many parents:
We’re putting you through the mill so that if parents come to us and ask us we want to advise them… Lots of parents don’t want to deal with education because of their own bad experiences, can’t cope with going into school…if they know that this isn’t another department thing they’ll be more receptive. We want them to be more engaged, good for whole family, good for us. (AECG President)

Through these discussions, the AECG President assessed me as researcher. The executive and I then reached agreement on a research design that was formalised at a subsequent meeting (see Appendix A). This “collective consent” (Hudson, 2009) included discussion and agreement on framing the research: the research topic, selection of schools and participants, culturally appropriate methods, discussion group questions; transparency in reporting back, and dissemination of outcomes. We established an ongoing consultative structure whereby the AECG acted as a “critical reference group” (Genat, 2009, p. 102) to monitor the research, with AECG full members (those who identify as Aboriginal) participating in the student discussion groups and reporting back to AECG meetings. The following excerpt from AECG meeting minutes records feedback from the first discussion group:

Katie Wilson- Wishes to thank [Vice-President] and [President] for their support of her project and assistance in getting things up and running. Katie has spoken to a number of students already. [Vice-President] added that she sat in on interviews with [school name] students and was happy with the way things were done. (Minutes from AECG meeting, September 7, 2012)

The AECG executive had a more active role in representing the community’s values, knowledge and concerns; for example, in reviewing the student discussion questions.
Following the initial stage of the research and reaching agreement with the AECG, I obtained university ethics application to proceed with the second phase of the research. For this phase, I also obtained approval from the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) to proceed with the research in schools (NSW Department of Education and Communities SERAP approval number 2012143). Both approvals required informed consent from parents and/or caregivers, participating students, principals and other staff. According to the school requirements, principals, Aboriginal education teachers/co-ordinators or Aboriginal educational staff obtained such consent (see information and consent forms in Appendix B).

As discussed, the AECG required a representative to attend the student discussion groups. The DEC also requested a teacher’s presence at discussion groups to meet duty of care requirements to protect the students, in addition to both the AECG and the department specification that I had official clearance to work with children. I was concerned that the presence of teachers may affect the openness of the student discussion groups. In a school environment, the students may be inhibited in talking about their learning in front of teachers. However, I was able to adapt the departmental stipulation from teacher to school staff member, and the AECG representative or Aboriginal staff member often fulfilled the departmental requirement.

The presence of the AECG adults and Aboriginal staff members at the student discussion groups ensured cultural sensitivity in the research and vouched for my acceptance by the AECG and community (Bishop et al., 2006). The Aboriginal adults were co-researchers, and as participants they contributed to the student discussions and their knowledge complemented that of the students, reflecting the relational nature of indigenous research
through shared community knowledge (Martin, 2005; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009). Primary school teachers with scarce resource time did not attend the discussions, but non-Aboriginal classroom teachers attended two secondary school discussion groups. One participated in a limited way with little impact on the discussions. The second was more engaged in discussions, both contributing to and perhaps impacting on some student responses that were somewhat restrained in comparison with other school groups (see Chapter 6). In Chapters 5 and 6, I discuss the adult contributions within the student discussions in terms of the gatekeeper role of adults in research with children and young people.

4.3 Researching with Children and Young People

In addition to the AIATSIS (2012) and NHMRC (2007) ethical guidelines for research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the research required compliance with the NHMRC Guidelines to protect children and young people (2007), in terms of appropriate research design and methods, and including the school community. Expanding this position, I discuss theoretical and ethical considerations of research with children and young people.

4.3.1 The sociology of childhood

A new sociology of childhood emerged in the Western world during a period of postmodern social change between 1980 and 2000, challenging research practices and social constructions of childhood that regarded children and young people, theoretically and practically, as unable to represent their own views (Hendrick, 2005; Prout, 2011). Article 12 of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2005) recognises and proclaims the rights of children to participate and express their views, and is a fundamental component of current social research with children and young people. The positioning and theorising of the sociology of childhood provided a major shift in thinking and practising.
research with children and young people to focus on their perspectives and rights (Christensen & James, 2008; Freeman & Mathison, 2009; James & James, 2008; Jones, 2001; O’Kane, 2008; Punch, 2002, 2009; Qvortrup, Corsaro, & Honig, 2009).

However, recent thinking on childhood research questions aspects such as equality in research relationships, and opportunities to involve student participants in reviewing the research. For example, children and young people may be unable or choose not to participate fully in research (Fitzgerald, Graham, Smith, & Taylor, 2009); others may choose to be silent or are unable to speak out (Lewis, 2010). In other words, adult researchers need to consider the positioning, balance and equality in research with children and young people that is designed by adults. In a similar way, research with indigenous peoples that is initiated by non-indigenous peoples must ensure the equal co-construction of research design and conduct, shared knowledge and outcomes. In this research, I found that these positions informed and strengthened each other to some extent, and acted as warning beacons to check on the rights and proprieties of students within education and social structures.

4.3.2 Student as “knowers”

A further theoretical position informing this research is that of respecting students as “knowers and creators of their own worlds”, and incorporating student views in educational research, particularly in reform that aims to change the culture of education (Cook-Sather, 2007, p. 395). This position highlights the value of consulting with students about their learning needs and experiences, and integrating their perspectives into teaching practices (Bishop et al., 2003; Cook-Sather, 2009; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Lodge, 2005; Thomson & Gunter, 2007). Such views aim to equalise relations through considering the perspectives of children and young people in education systems, where policies and practices are
developed by adults in isolation from the students. In this research, I positioned the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as “subjects and actors” with “unique perspectives” which contribute to their education (Cook-Sather, 2010, pp. 558-559), not as objects of educational policies and practices.

4.4 Commonalties, Parallels and Overlaps

Despite differences in age and population groups, the practices, principles and underpinnings of research with indigenous peoples, research with children and young people and authorising student perspectives in education, resonate with practices of culturally responsive research today. Oppressive research relationships are not always based on colonial history; children and young people too can be subject to colonisation (Berryman, SooHoo, & Nevin, 2013a).
However, while similarities and overlaps exist between indigenous and childhood research, there are ontological differences in terms of the positioning and relationships between children and young people, and adults. Within Indigenous communities, relatedness among families and generations, respect for Elders and reciprocal respect for children and young people are embedded in protocols and relationships. Knowledge is shared relationally within communities; research benefits and is of value to the whole community, and thus all members contribute. The positioning of indigenous children and young people is relational and more equitable than in Western societies. For example, within school-based research, discussion groups are often organised by class or age, but in this research, the discussion groups included a range of ages and combination of genders because of the small number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in each school. Relationally, the older students made sure the younger students had opportunities to contribute to discussions and the students did not compete on a gender basis.

4.4.1 Participants’ voice in research

A focus on participants’ voice or expression has become a dominant element in qualitative research as a means to overcome previous practices of misrepresentation. However, a reliance on voice is contested, because of potential ambiguity when voice is presented out of context, in simplistic analysis and through “(over)simplified knowledge claims” (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012, p. 745). Multiple factors such as relationships and context need to be accounted for in understanding the contributions of participants’ voice in research (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; l’Anson, 2013; Komulainen, 2007; Spyrou, 2011). Epistemological problems include tendencies to universalise, mythologise and generalise the voices of children and young people, drawing parallels with the representation crisis in anthropology discussed previously (James, 2007). Student voice in schools is also a complex
concept, and recognising the diversity and differences of student voices is important (Arnot & Reay, 2007; Cook-Sather, 2007; Ryan, 2010; Spyrou, 2011).

In this research, I invited students to supplement their spoken words with writing and drawing to enable multiple dimensions of expression (see below under Student discussion groups). Within the confines of school-based research, I created a space for dialogue with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student about learning their histories, cultures and knowledges within the NSW education system (Berryman et al., 2013b). Through listening to local Aboriginal education community members, reviewing group discussions with participating students, interviewing principals and speaking to teachers, the research recognised the co-existence of multiple material realities of the students, the school systems and members of the local Aboriginal education community (Tuck, 2009).

4.5 Selecting Participants

Quantitative and qualitative research regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their education is often commissioned or funded by government wide-ranging geographical coverage, and based on representative sample populations. However, we know less about the perspectives of Indigenous school students in regional and less remote areas of Australia, where most of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population lives. In contrast with remote areas such as the Northern Territory, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in NSW schools are often in a minority (Munns et al., 2013; NSW Department of Education and Training & NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc., 2004). Schools in regional areas tend to have more stable staffing patterns than those in remote schools (Luke et al., 2013).
This research focuses on a small number of schools in one region, as opposed to a larger scale study across multiple communities where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are in a majority or in which depth of relationships, a crucial element of indigenous research, would be more difficult to achieve. Living in the area enabled me to form a relationship and partnership with the local AECG, and this informed and supported my decision to undertake a localised study, enabling extended connections with the Aboriginal education community, students and the schools. Further, although some critics of indigenous educational research in Australia argue that much is small scale and lacks longitudinal focus (Craven & Bodkin-Andrews, 2011; Mellor & Corrigan, 2004b), large scale research into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education can generate misconceptions and misrepresentation through generalisation across communities and populations, implying homogeneity of peoples, and taking less account of regional and geographic variations (Reid, 2004). Research needs to acknowledge the diversity and multiplicity of Indigenous experiences, viewpoints and knowledges (Anderson, 2003).

4.5.1 The land of the Gumbaynggirr nation

The research took place within six schools in the traditional country of the Gumbaynggirr nation, an Aboriginal language grouping in the mid-north coastal area of NSW, from Grafton to south of Nambucca Heads, inland to Guyra, between the Clarence and Nambucca Rivers. Since colonisation, government practices, legislation and squatter pastoralists dispossessed Aboriginal peoples of their lands, removing them to missions or reserves and legally controlling and restricting their lives. However, within the Gumbaynggirr nation, some families continued living on the land (Arrawarra Sharing Culture, n.d.; Smith & Beck, 2003), enabling two successful land claims under native title legislation (Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative, 2008). In the most recent 2011 Australian Census, the
self-reported Indigenous population in the land of the Gumbaynggirr nation numbered 4,558 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, approximately 4.5 per cent of the region’s population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Within that number, 95.6 per cent identified as Aboriginal, 2.5 per cent identified as Torres Strait Islander peoples, and 1.9 per cent as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. The census count does not differentiate by language or clan grouping and this number includes peoples from other Aboriginal nations.

Through the memories of Elders, the Yarrawarra Aboriginal Cultural Centre and the Muurrbay Language and Culture Co-operative (Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative, 2008), have revived the Gumbaynggirr language and customs (Aboriginal women's heritage: Nambucca 2003). Muurrbay trains community members and others to teach Gumbaynggirr language in schools and communities for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners, and provides teaching material and published language dictionaries (Morelli, 2008).
4.5.2 The schools

In consultation with the local AECG, I selected schools of varying size, numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, school/community connections and commitment to teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and perspectives. I began with four schools: two primary and two secondary schools. However, as participant numbers at some schools were small, I realised that additional schools would provide more variation in discussion outcomes. I approached another primary school with strong community connections, recommended by the AECG, and a third secondary school expressed interest in participating. Such flexibility is consistent with indigenous and culturally responsive research (Berryman et al., 2013c; Yunkaporta, 2009b). Thus the schools ranged from one with strong community connections, to one with a very small number (six) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and a limited commitment to teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, as assessed by the AECG. Variation within and across schools, students and staff provided a spectrum of experiences, contexts, and relationships.

I invited schools to participate in the research based on the AECG recommendations as well as interest expressed informally by principals and staff at local AECG meetings. The NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) research application required the names of participating schools and yet I could not formally approach schools or start the research without the DEC approval: another ethical dilemma. Following the DEC approval, I mailed letters of invitation and information about the project to principals (see Appendix B), although some did not appear to have received the letters. I followed up with telephone calls, emails and personal meetings. Most principals expressed interest and agreed to participate. The principal of one school had reservations about the
qualitative nature of the research because it was open-ended, not hypothesis-based (perhaps unscientific), was concerned about the possible impact on the school’s Aboriginal students, and did not participate. The gatekeeping role of school personnel and educational authorities in schools research is important in protecting children and young people, but it also can limit their opportunities to participate and to share knowledge and learning from the research process (Leonard, 2007; Powell & Smith, 2009; Spyrou, 2011). In its gatekeeping role, the NSW DEC emphasised avoiding disruptions to student and school timetabling and I negotiated these factors within each school.

A further consideration in the design was the schooling environment in which research took place. A constructed space can be symbolically embedded with “emotional and cultural value” and assumptions about people and processes (Atkinson & Delamont, 2008, p. 293). Aware of potential limitations or restrictions in researching with the students about school, within the confines of school environments, I wondered if researching outside of schools would facilitate more student participation and contribution and be less complicated in obtaining institutional ethics approvals. However, because the focus of the research was school-based learning, I felt that it was important to contextualise the student responses within the school settings, and to experience and understand the role of the school environment through the research. For confidentiality reasons, the schools are not named.

4.5.3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

The schools had responsibility for selecting students, distributing information about the research and obtaining informed consent from parents or carers, and the students. I provided information sheets and consent forms for parents/carers and students, varying
them for the different student ages. An Aboriginal staff member, the principal, or a teacher/co-ordinator of Aboriginal education invited students to participate. Obtaining consent was a lengthy process at times, because of different people involved, and in some schools I provided copies of paperwork multiple times (see Chapter 7). Thirty-eight Aboriginal students and one Torres Strait Islander student agreed to participate in the research, ranging across ages from Years 3 to 11/12, consisting of 26 girls (10 in three primary schools; 16 in three secondary schools) and 13 boys (six in three primary schools; seven in three secondary schools). Although twice as many girls than boys participated, this gender difference did not emerge as a significant factor in the student discussions. Table 1 shows numbers of participating students.
Table 1: Participating students and adults in schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Adults at students’ discussions, yarning</th>
<th>Principals and teachers interviewed</th>
<th>Number of adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary School 1, PS1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>AECG representative</td>
<td>Teaching Principal</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School 2, PS2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Aboriginal staff member</td>
<td>Principal, Associate Principal/teacher</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School 3, PS3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Aboriginal staff member, Principal briefly</td>
<td>Aboriginal staff member</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School 1, SS1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Aboriginal staff member</td>
<td>Principal, teacher, Aboriginal education coordinator</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School 2, SS2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>AECG representative, Aboriginal staff member, Aboriginal Studies teacher (non-Aboriginal)</td>
<td>Principal, Aboriginal Studies teacher, Aboriginal education coordinator</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School 3, SS3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Aboriginal staff member, English teacher (non-Aboriginal)</td>
<td>Principal, teacher</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>26</strong></td>
<td><strong>13</strong></td>
<td><strong>39</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>21</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.6 Student Discussion Groups

I chose to use discussion groups as the means of gathering stories with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. I have adopted the term ‘discussion group’ as it promotes a more conversational format than ‘focus group’, which has a market research or sociological positivist connotation (Flick, 2009; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2008). The discussion group also relates to Indigenous practices of talking or yarning circles, community consulting or collaborating, through enabling group data generation, sharing, respecting and building on other participants’ ideas (Chilisa, 2012; Stewart, 2007; Wilson, 1999). The dialogic nature of the groups offered students opportunities to reflect critically on their learning experiences (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2008). However, many factors affect and contribute to the outcome of a discussion group. Aspects I negotiated in this research include: the location and timing; the adults who attended; the dynamic materialities of placement of furniture, participants, researcher, and recording device; external sounds; weather; events prior and following; and the expectations and anticipations of the participants.

At the outset of the student discussion groups, I invited students to select a location in the school where they would like the discussion to take place. This offered the students an opportunity to set some parameters of the interaction, and to create a comfortable environment that was apart from school control, reducing the influence of schools. Students chose spaces as varied as outside, under trees, in gardens, in an Aboriginal staff member’s room; some opted to stay in the classroom or library. In one school, students could not agree on another location, and we remained in the classroom, but moved desks to create a close formation, enabling a successful discussion (see Chapter 6, secondary school two). Sometimes, it was difficult to offer the choice in the first discussion group,
for example, if we were waiting for participants to arrive, there just wasn’t time, or there was some disruption in the group, such as students coming and going. In these instances, I asked the students to choose the location for the second, follow-up discussion.

Student discussions took 30 to 45 minutes. The number of students in each group ranged from two in the smallest primary school (PS1) to eleven in a large secondary school (SS3). The groups combined Aboriginal students and in one school, a Torres Strait Islander student, together from several years, consistent with indigenous customs where community members work collaboratively across age groups (Martin, 2005), in contrast to school practices of separating students into similar ages. This enabled a range of student experiences, and because the students knew each other, or were related, most were comfortable with such arrangements. In one school, students were hesitant to respond, perhaps because of the location of the discussion and the presence of the teacher; one student expressed reluctance to speak on the record. I arranged for a follow-up discussion with these students to take place in the Aboriginal staff member’s room where students were more comfortable. Despite some difficulties working through and within the schools, the connections and relationships I developed with the school personnel—collaborating with AECG representatives and Aboriginal staff in the student discussions—contributed positively to the research and to active outcomes such as bringing specific issues to the attention of the principals.

I held a follow-up discussion group at each school, for three reasons. First, to provide students further opportunity for interaction with the discussion topic (Spyrou, 2011). Second, to enable the students to review my syntheses of our first discussions, to clarify their comments and check for misinterpretation (Punch, 2009). The students were able to
revisit the first discussions and build on their responses to the research topic (Bishop et al., 2003). Some students had expressed desires for more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learning and activities in their schools, and in the second discussion I invited them to suggest ways of extending such learning and activities. I also returned the students’ drawings and writings at the follow up discussion, generating additional or explanatory comments from the students about their works (see Chapters 5 and 6). Third, the follow up group provided opportunities to change the dynamics and location of the first groups, which sometimes freed up the discussions.

While discussion groups are often used in research with children and young people, they have some limitations. These include: participants copying or echoing each other; domination of discussion by some participants; and the relationship between an adult researcher and younger participants (Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, & Britten, 2002; Patton, 2002). In this research, the second, follow-up groups diffused copy-cat responses from students of similar ages (mostly in primary schools) by changing the dynamics of the group relationships. Moreover, the students’ behaviour in the discussion groups reflected indigenous relatedness: they shared and built on each other’s knowledge. The few students who contributed less to spoken discussions engaged with enthusiasm in the drawing or writing session (see Drawing and writing). Finally, to address balance in the relationship between the students and myself as a non-Aboriginal adult researcher, I always used my first name and positioned myself physically on an equal level with the students wherever the discussions took place—in a circle, around a table, in rearranged classroom desks, seated inside or outside—not standing or sitting on a higher chair as a teacher might.
4.6.1 Cultural safety and rapport

Creating a level of cultural safety for students in discussions was a key consideration. The concept “cultural safety” emerged with respect for Māori clients in nursing and midwifery practices in Aotearoa New Zealand, where research found that unsafe practices may endanger the wellbeing, or disempower the clients (Papps & Ramsden, 1996, p. 493). In such a context, the concern was that Māori clients who felt unsafe would not take advantage of the services offered. The concept of cultural safety extended to higher education in Australia refers to a model of academic programs incorporating Indigenous knowledges, cultures and histories, within an “emotionally and physically safe environment … [with] shared respect and no denial of identity” (Bin-Sallik, 2003, p. 23).

Nakata (2013) has challenged the trivialisation of ‘cultural safety’, because he believes it "promote[s] victimhood rather than Indigenous agency and resilience" (p. 8). Some secondary students in this research expressed the importance of cultural safety in relation to the school’s Aboriginal staff member and her room as a separate space at their school (see Chapter 6, SS 3).

Research with children and young people and Indigenous peoples emphasise the value of establishing connections and respectful relationships (Martin, 2008b; Nicholls, 2009), rapport (Spyrou, 2011), and a level of trust in order for them to feel comfortable about participating and speaking freely. In this research, I achieved respect, cultural safety and rapport with the students in three ways. First, I visited each school several times before and during the discussion groups to build rapport with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, to create connections and familiarity. Second, my ongoing relationship with the AECG and the presence of Aboriginal staff members and AECG representatives at student discussions demonstrated community connections. Third, some secondary
students knew me as a mentor with AIME, the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (2011) program operating through my university.

Further, ethical considerations within research are an ongoing process that extend beyond formal processes and initial consent. It was important to enable the students’ non-discriminatory expression (Cannella & Lincoln, 2011; Keskitalo, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2012). I was sensitive to Aboriginal concerns such as ‘shame’ or embarrassment and not promoting oneself over others in a group situation (Leitner & Malcolm, 2007; Munns, 2000), and that in conversation, silence has a particular meaning (Eades, 2008). Further, in indigenous “high-context…holistic” cultures, information is interrelated and extracted from the wider context (Ezeife, 2002). Thus, in the discussion groups, the questions began with a broad focus of cultural learning, narrowing to more specific questions.

4.6.2 Student discussion questions

I designed the student discussion questions, with the AECG’s support, to enable students to express their opinions and reflect on their learning experiences. In terms of language, I replaced the policy terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges, with stories, histories, customs, ways of life, and people. I adjusted terminology in the questions throughout the discussions in response to the students and schools (Morgan et al., 2002). For example, I did not initially use culture, because it can have different and broad connotations, but students often used the term, and so I echoed their usage. Further, reflecting the student or school practices, I used Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Aboriginal, Indigenous or Koori (used in preference by some Aboriginal or Indigenous people living in New South Wales to describe themselves). I phrased questions a little differently when speaking with primary or secondary school
students, and when referring to learning areas I named subjects according to the school usage. The questions used in student discussion groups are in Appendix C.

Sometimes I needed to clarify or define the questions, for example, suggesting subject areas in which students might learn Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges and cultural activities at school. I incorporated comments from principals and teaching staff about curriculum and cultural activities, or topics raised by students in other school discussions, for example, Aboriginal dance. These contributions of students, AECG and Aboriginal staff members extended the discussions, co-constructing knowledge that shared and confirmed participants’ experiences (Bishop et al., 2014; Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick, 1998). I was aware of potential sensitivity in discussion questions for students. For example, in response to questions about how they felt about their learning, some students indicated they felt sadness, and discomfort with some non-Indigenous teachers’ attitudes to historical events. Discussions about events such as the ‘Stolen Generations’, the widespread practice of removing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, may trigger family memories or contemporary experiences (Williams-Mozely, 2012). I was careful to not push students to answer sensitive questions.

Further, communication in “high-context”, non-hierarchical Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies involves extracting information holistically, top down, from the context and environment, as opposed to building from the bottom up in low context societies (Ewing, Cooper, Baturo, Matthews, & Sun, 2010, p. 13; Ezeife, 2002, p. 185). Thus, it was important to provide a full context for the research for the students, and also recognise
that they may not have immediate answers to some specific questions. A research discussion group is multidimensional. More than simply a means of data collection, each discussion is a performative event with characteristics dynamically created by human and nonhuman forces, such as relationships between participants and researchers, and connections with the physical environment. The discussions in this research produced unique understandings of the students’ cultural learning.

**4.6.3 Drawing and writing**

In the first discussion groups, after talking with students, I provided colour felt pens and large drawing paper and invited them to write about and/or draw their experiences of cultural learning. In this way, I sought to both complement and supplement the verbal discussion and to provide other opportunities for students to engage (Bishop et al., 2003; Cook-Sather, 2007; Thomson, 2008a). Arts-based expression extends research to contextualise the experiences of children and young people, and the process can be as instructive as the products (Backett-Milburn & McKie, 1999; Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin, & Robinson, 2010; Finley, 2008; Thomson, 2008b). In this research, the students’ writings and their interpretations or explanations of their drawings contributed to their expression of their cultural learning. However, not all children and young people feel confident about their drawing ability, and one or two students commented that they were not good at drawing. I reassured the students that they could draw whatever and however they liked; that the quality or technique of their drawings skills was not going to be judged (Leitch, 2008). The students spoke openly as they drew or wrote, and the recording includes their discussions, interactions and explanations. Some students asked me what they could draw or write, or commented among themselves that they did not know what to draw or write. Some collectively produced similar works as they talked; others launched confidently into drawing or writing that was uniquely individual. Most
secondary school students wrote, sometimes illustrating the text with drawing. See Chapters 5 and 6 for examples and discussion.

I photographed the students’ drawings and writings and returned the originals to them at our next discussion. Later, I returned to schools to obtain written permission from the students to use the copies of their drawings and writing in my thesis, reports and publications relating to the research, observing indigenous research protocols and the ethics of reproducing visual materials (see Appendix F). At this school visit, I presented each student with a gift in return for sharing their knowledge: a certificate of appreciation illustrated by a community artist, under license (see Appendix E), and hand-beaded jewellery in the colours of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags.

4.7 Making Sense of the Research Contributions

From the outset, I sought to understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ relati onality and connectivity to learning their histories and knowledges in terms of developing “awareness and sense of self, of belonging” (Martin, 2003a, p. 206): positions not often considered in research at schooling level. To explain the processes by which I approached the student discussions, drawings and writings, I draw on the notion of “making sense” (MacLure, 2013a, p. 181) that incorporates and acknowledges my role in the process of understanding and presenting the student contributions.

4.7.1 Student discussions

I transcribed the recordings of student group discussions, and reconnecting with the conversations, I listened and re-listened many times to each recording in order to hear and transcribe the students’ nuances, side comments, whispering, pauses, silences, laughter and humour, elements that are as relevant and meaningful as spoken comments in
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communication. For example, often people are thinking through silences (Eades, 2008) and humour is philosophical and centrally significant (Nakata, 2007a; Pearn, 2010). In this way, I included responses of students who contributed less to spoken discussions; and through their absence, acknowledged those who did not participate at all, or who withdrew from discussions. Meanings of some comments or bodily expressions were ambiguous or not always apparent. However, these “snags” (MacLure, 2013a, p. 174) provided opportunities for slowing down and thinking in depth about what the students might be saying, or not saying. I reviewed, re-reviewed, and discussed cultural and other possible meanings with my supervisors and colleagues (St. Pierre, 2011).

As I began to try to make sense of the student contributions, I had some difficulty with standard qualitative research practices of classifying and categorising the students’ comments. Pushing the students’ comments, following data coding practices, into specific categories that I interpreted and to which I allocated terminology from concepts in the literature seemed artificial and manipulative. For example, should I ascribe the label ‘authenticity’ to students’ comments about including “real” Aboriginal people to teach? If the students did not use certain words, I could not assume that was their meaning. I wondered which elements to include or exclude and how to account for variations between student discussion groups.

Instead, I used the idea of contextual presentation within indigenous research (Kovach, 2010). I wrote a narrative of the student discussions that included the context of each primary and secondary school, the syntheses of the conversations agreed with the students and my reflections. In the context, I included local statistical and historical background
data, together with descriptive information about the school settings, as case studies for each school (Yin, 2009). I used this process of writing (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008) to understand further the interrelationships and differences among the ideas in each group, between schools and students, and to shape the ideas into differences and connections (Honan, 2007; Mazzei & Jackson, 2012). In order to guide my thinking through visualisation, I gathered key words from each group of primary and secondary students onto two large pieces of paper (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013; Stringer, 2007) (see Figures 3 and 4). Finally, I assembled the students’ conversations and drawings/writings into three broad ideas that related to the discussion questions: the extent and nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives which the students identified; the students’ connections to their cultural learning; and the impact and consciousness on the students of the nature and the extent of their cultural learning. These headings are presented in Chapters 5 and 6, subtitled by the students’ words from the discussions (Stringer, 2007).
Figure 3: Collation of primary school students’ comments.
Figure 4: Collation of secondary students' comments.
A continuum of cultural learning began to emerge from the students’ comments, with points along the way between superficial, stereotypical, tokenistic learning and a potential for students’ higher order and community-connected learning.

4.7.2 Student drawings and writings

I invited students to draw and/or write in the discussion groups in order to enhance the understanding of their learning experiences, to include some dynamic, artistic dimensions in the research context (Berryman et al., 2013b; Thomson, 2008b). As discussed earlier, relying on *voice* as a single means of knowledge has limitations, and the students’ nonverbal contributions extended their participation in this research. My focus was on the processes of drawing and writing and the ideas conveyed, and not the skill level or ability of the students’ expressions.

In making sense of the students’ drawings, I considered how their expressions reflected or illuminated their discourse of cultural learning. For example, the depiction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lifestyles as traditional rather than contemporary symbolised the knowledge from their learning; the use of symbolic or figurative drawing styles was an indication of cultural art learning. Drawing and writing is a dynamic, interactive and contextualised process (Eldén, 2013; Leitch, 2008). I was also conscious that the students produced images and writings within a specific context, influenced by my research discourse, and the school environment, and that such material can be read in different ways (Spyrou, 2011; Thomson, 2008b). I recorded the students’ questions and discussions among themselves as they undertook the drawings and writings, and asked them to explain their drawings. In this way, the students and I co-constructed an understanding of the visual material (MacDonald, 2009), which complemented the group discussion. One student indicated she was at ease with our research relationship by
sharing her knowledge and teaching me the meaning of Aboriginal art symbols. Students added writing to inform the drawing: summaries of the discussions, suggestions, enhancements, ‘wish lists’ to extend the students’ learning, a personal manifesto and statements of an activist nature (see examples in Chapters 5 and 6).

4.8 Adult Perspectives

Complementing the student conversations are the viewpoints of Aboriginal educational community members and Aboriginal school staff, non-Aboriginal school principals and teachers (see Chapter 7). The intention of including adults’ views was three-fold: one, to follow the indigenous principle of relational knowledge, relatedness and community accountability in research (Martin, 2008b); two, to acknowledge the co-existence of multiple perspectives in culturally responsive research (Berryman et al., 2013b); and three, to understand the production of cultural learning through different human and nonhuman processes and forces (Cumming, 2014). Including the perspectives of adults does not diminish the students’ perspectives, but recognises the importance in indigenous research of relationality, where knowledge is shared by the whole community (Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009). Further, the adults’ views provide context for underlying assumptions and social, structural forces.

4.8.1 Aboriginal educational staff and AECG members

As discussed, culturally responsive research with indigenous peoples requires ethical acceptance by a community, co-constructing research design and conduct, and developing relationships. As I proceeded through these steps, I met regularly and developed relationships with the Aboriginal education staff and community members who participated as co-researchers and contributors in student discussion groups. They spoke, and I listened, to their experiences in schools, and these stories were integral to
understanding further dimensions affecting the production of cultural learning for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. We developed relationships of trust through discussions before, during and after the research in schools, when they shared details of their roles in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and cultural learning within each school. This process is known as ‘yarning’.

4.8.1.2 Yarning with Aboriginal adults

Yarning is a two-way, informal, dialogic, conversational, cultural means of sharing information among Aboriginal peoples which begins with establishing trust and understanding through continuing relationships (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010; Yunkaporta & Kirby, 2011). As a means of research and communication, yarning is about listening and creating relationships over time, although research between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal peoples can be yarning up and yarning down (Burchill, 2004, pp. 6-7). Yarning down often assumes an agenda and a position of control, whereas yarning up involves listening to community perspectives, concerns and stories and not approaching the yarns with a predetermined position or solution. My approach in this research was yarning up. Further, there are four forms of yarning within the process of research in Indigenous communities (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010, pp. 40-41). Social yarning is informal conversation which takes place before or separate from the research topic and is a means of developing trust and respect. Research yarning is interactive but more focused on the topic. In collaborative yarning, participants share ideas about research or related ideas. Therapeutic yarning includes conversation that is emotional or personal for the participant and in which the researcher affirms the person’s experience through listening and supporting.
Throughout the research, I yawned with the five Aboriginal educational staff and two AECG representatives, who were co-researchers and participants. Three staff members were in fulltime, but not permanent positions, in secondary schools; the two staff in primary schools were on temporary or short term contracts; and the other AECG members worked in other schools or government positions. Our yarning conversations began with social yarning. Together, over time we exchanged experiences and established a position of mutual respect where the Aboriginal adults trusted me, sometimes inviting me to visit and to attend school cultural events. In further research yarning conversations, I asked some questions but often the adults led with their stories and experiences, including their own histories of education together with contemporary experiences in schools. They expressed their responsibility and accountability to the students, families and communities through being able to pass on knowledge and language, and for the wellbeing of the students. Some yarning became therapeutic, where Aboriginal staff expressed frustrations with their employment in the schools such as ongoing uncertainties, lack of time for community liaison and experiences of racism, prejudices and assumptions of non-Indigenous people. Collaborative yarning happened when I returned to schools to review the group discussions with the students and Aboriginal staff, and in discussing the research with AECG members at meetings. Some yarning sessions I recorded and transcribed, such as discussions with the AECG president, Aboriginal staff or AECG members in student discussion groups. From the informal and spontaneous yarning I made written notes.

As a method, yarning observes Aboriginal cultural practices, and was integral to this research in two related ways. First, through yarning, the Aboriginal adults and I developed respectful relationships whereby they trusted me to share their own knowledges and
perspectives and create a context of the social and educational forces in their schools, their issues and concerns. Second, the yarning contributed, piece by piece, to knowledge of the production of cultural learning.

4.8.2 Principals and teachers

I held face-to-face interviews with six principals in each participating school, to understand the principals’ philosophies in relation to cultural learning/teaching in their schools, and how the practices relate to a NSW departmental policy that has been in place for over 30 years. I provided the principals with information about the research in advance and obtained their consent to participate in recorded interviews. The format was a standard interview, about 30 to 45 minutes long, combining semi-structured questions with flexibility for principals to expand on their answers (see Appendix D).

Some principals chose to be interviewed alone; others invited an assistant principal, deputy principal or an Aboriginal staff member to contribute to the discussion. One secondary school principal invited me to an executive meeting to discuss the project with head teachers, and to ask them about teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in their classes and among their staff (addressing one of the interview questions). Another secondary principal consulted with staff or executive on the questions before we met for the interview. The principals shared their views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and perspectives in the curriculum; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural events, the engagement of local Aboriginal community members in events and knowledge sharing; and the impact of cultural learning on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in their schools.
Principals engaged thoughtfully and at times passionately with the questions, and were forthcoming about their views and experiences in response to most questions. Some principals provided answers to a questionnaire about school data such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolment numbers, staffing, and teaching resources; others provided the completed questionnaire later (see Appendix G). The juxtaposition of the principals’ comments with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ conversations and drawings/writings created a contrasting view of the position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and perspectives in the schools (see Chapters 5 and 6).

4.8.3 Discussions with teachers

With the consent of teachers, I observed some classes that included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, Aboriginal Studies or the Gumbaynggirr language. I was interested in the content, resources and materials used, teachers’ approaches; responses and participation of all students, and the dynamics of interactions among the students and the teachers (Young, 2010). Before, during and after the classes, I spoke with five non-Indigenous teachers of Aboriginal perspectives, knowledges and language, and two Aboriginal education co-ordinators (non-Indigenous) through unstructured or conversational interviews (Bishop et al., 2003). They shared their teaching practices, philosophies, experiences and attitudes toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges. Some voiced strong opinions, reflecting underlying strong tensions and conflicts surrounding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education (see Chapter 7). These often spontaneous conversations provided further dimensions to the students’ views expressed in discussion groups. See Table 4 for numbers of adult participants.
Following the research discussions and interviews in schools, as part of the research praxis, I presented preliminary observations, including students’ comments, to teachers in one of the participating secondary schools, in a non-participating local secondary school (on request), and to a class of graduate preservice teachers at my university. The responses, and lack of responses, to these presentations are included in this research as “transgressive” data (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 184), unexpected but meaningful contributions in terms of understanding teacher attitudes, as discussed in Chapters 7 and 8.

4.9 Making Sense of Adult Perspectives

In understanding the contributions from the principals, Aboriginal staff, AECG members, and teachers, I used a different process to that of the students’ contributions, for two reasons. First, the adult conversations and interviews (see Chapter 7) relate to the social, education and historical forces that underpin Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural learning: the employment of Aboriginal staff; cultural learning in curricula; teacher attitudes; leadership in schools; and cultural competency. Many such factors emerge from the historical and research literature in Chapters 2 and 3, and I aggregated the adult contributions in terms of these multidimensional forces. The second reason for presenting the adult contributions in this way, and not as case studies of individual schools, is for reasons of confidentiality (Kovach, 2010).

The knowledge that Aboriginal adults shared throughout the research illuminates understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural learning, including present and past systemic, educational, attitudinal, social and political forces within the dominant school system. Thus, it made sense to consider the experiences of the Aboriginal school staff and AECG members together with the contributions of the non-Indigenous principals and teachers, as discussed in Chapter 7.
4.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the development of a methodological framework incorporating the principles of indigenous research and research with children and young people, for this study with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and adults regarding cultural learning. As I encountered blocks, restrictions and challenges—both practical and theoretical—throughout the research, I turned to the principles of culturally responsive research (Berryman et al., 2013c; Martin, 2008b), complemented by post-qualitative theories and practices, reflecting on qualitative research practices (MacLure, 2013b; Mazzei & Jackson, 2012; St. Pierre, 2013a). Within this framework, in the three following chapters I present and review the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ discussions of cultural and historical learning in their schools, with Aboriginal educational community members, Aboriginal school staff, non-Aboriginal school principals and teachers providing context to the students’ cultural learning.
Chapter 5. Student Discussions from Three Primary Schools

This research has sought to fill a gap in understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ experiences and responses to learning cultural knowledges, histories and perspectives in regional NSW schools. As discussed in Chapter 1, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives have contextual meanings that differ according to their positioning, for example, in curriculum, Indigenous or non-Indigenous usage, or their expression in policy objectives. I use the phrase ‘cultural learning’ to denote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in curriculum from the point of view of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

In this chapter, I present and discuss the conversations of 15 Aboriginal students and one Torres Strait Island student regarding cultural learning in three primary schools within the land of the Gumbaynggirr nation. This addresses the following two research questions:

1. What is the nature of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are learning in mainstream schooling education in New South Wales?

2. In what ways do the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reflect on the extent and nature of cultural learning?
The student discussions took place in schools between September 2012 and February 2013 and were arranged in conjunction with the school principals and the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG). Aboriginal staff and local AECG representatives participated in the student discussion groups as co-researchers and contributors, as agreed with the AECG in the research design. I discuss their views in Chapter 7, together with comments from principals and teaching staff. In Chapter 4, I discussed in more detail the development and structure of the student discussion groups.

5.1 Background

This research took place in three primary schools within the land of the Gumbaynggirr nation on the mid-north coast of NSW (see Chapter 4). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population comprised approximately 4 per cent in the 2011 Census, and within that figure, 95.6 per cent identified as Aboriginal, 2.5 per cent as Torres Strait Islander peoples, and 1.9 per cent as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. This contrasts with the NSW Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of 2.5 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). In the three primary schools, the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Islander students ranged between 5 to 11 per cent of the total school population. Nationally, Indigenous primary students made up 5 per cent of the primary student population in 2011 (O'Keefe et al., 2012).

The regional location of the schools and the small percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students contrast with a large proportion of Indigenous education research in Australia that tends to focus on schools with “significant numbers of Indigenous students” in remote locations or in socially disadvantaged metropolitan areas (Fordham & Schwab, 2007, p. 47). In metropolitan Sydney, for example, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the overall school-age
population was less than 5 per cent in 2011, but more than 50 per cent in some remote areas of northern Australia. While percentages of Indigenous students in some remote areas of Australia can be large, the largest absolute Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population numbers are in urban and regional areas of south-eastern Australia, such as Brisbane, New South Wales central and north coast areas, and Sydney–Wollongong (Biddle, 2013), and research is needed in such areas.

In consultation with, and on the advice of the AECG executive, I selected schools to reflect variations in student enrolments and different levels of school engagement and connection with local Aboriginal communities and families (see Chapter 4). The AECG executive emphasised non-discriminatory selection of students of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin to participate in the research, and required an AECG representative to attend the discussion groups (see Chapter 4 for further details of collaboration with the AECG). The logistics of the school-based research required collaboration with schools in selecting students. Depending on the school size and structure, a principal, associate or deputy principal or Aboriginal staff member invited students to participate. Thirteen students who joined the discussions identified as Aboriginal, with one Torres Strait Islander: ten girls and four boys from Year 3 to Year 6, a total of 14 students. The discussion group numbers ranged between two and six students, with several age years together in each group. AECG representatives and Aboriginal school staff participated in the student discussions as co-researchers and contributors (see Chapter 7). Their participation “vouched” (Bishop et al., 2006, p. 25) for the research and myself as researcher, conveying acceptance of the research, and myself as researcher, with the students. Table 2 summarises the participants in the primary school discussion groups.
Table 2: Primary school discussion group participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Students’ pseudonyms</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Adults who attended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary School 1</td>
<td>PS1</td>
<td>Girls: Karen, Hannah</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>AECG representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School 2</td>
<td>PS2</td>
<td>Girls: Alison, Kiara, Kelly, Sharni, Sharon Boys: Rob, Tyler</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Aboriginal staff member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School 3</td>
<td>PS3</td>
<td>Girls: Platypus, Bibi, Secret Cat Boys: Mouse, Ken, Jared, Roy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Aboriginal staff member, and Principal (briefly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In each school discussion group, conversations took place around a set of ten questions regarding the students’ cultural learning: stories, histories, customs, ways of life, language and people (see Chapter 4 and Appendix C for the discussion questions). Some students discussed specific subject learning areas, language and local histories, but at other times I needed to ask prompting questions. Further, I asked the students how they felt about the cultural learning at school. I approached the students’ reflections with two questions: the good things and the things that are not so good about learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, stories and histories at school.

A third area of discussion was the extent and nature of cultural programs and activities at each school, and the involvement of local community Elders in such events and cultural learning. Sometimes, I asked students about specific programs, building on information from principals, staff (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers), AECG members, or discussions with students in other schools. Terminology in the student discussion groups varied slightly among schools; for example, the term Aboriginal is used in NSW Department of Education and Communities documents, but I replaced or supplemented Aboriginal with Koori, Torres Strait Islander, or Indigenous, depending on the preferences of the students and the schools.

After the discussion, I invited students to draw and/or write about their cultural learning at school. This enabled them to expand on their conversations, and addressed concerns about students who may participate less in spoken discussions (Bishop et al., 2003; Cook-Sather, 2007). As an integral part of research, drawing and writing provide further
opportunities for the expression of knowledge (Eldén, 2013). During the drawing and writing activities the students talked among themselves, often reflecting further on the topic. (See Chapter 4 for more detail on this process). Students gave permission to photograph their drawings and writings, and written permission to reproduce and include their drawings/writings in this thesis and related publications. I have not reproduced the drawings of two students who had moved and whose permission I did not obtain.

I listened to and transcribed the discussion group recordings and then returned to the schools for a follow up discussion, at least a week after the first. The students reviewed and agreed with my synthesis of the initial discussions, adding further thoughts on ways to increase and enhance cultural learning in their schools - desires they had expressed in the first discussions. In group research it is not always possible to delve further into responses, and understanding can be open to the subjectivity of the researcher (Morgan et al., 2002; Spyrou, 2011). Thus the second discussion provided space for students to comment further, to add depth or to clarify their earlier comments. Changes in attendance are a reality of school-based research, and occasionally, one student could not attend one discussion but came to another. This flexibility provided opportunities for all students who wanted to participate.

Using an indigenous research contextual presentation approach (Kovach, 2010), I have grouped the student discussions within the context of each primary school. The collection of student conversations is not verbatim, but combines comments from students in the two discussion groups held at each school, within three broad areas. The areas in which I discuss the student comments relate to the research questions, as follows:
the extent and nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives that the students identified in school learning;

- the connection of students to the knowledges and perspectives they have learned; and

- the students’ awareness of the content and the process of their cultural learning.

For confidentiality reasons, the schools are not named, as agreed in the consensual process.

### 5.2 Primary School 1: Small and Semi-rural

The school is small and located in a semi-rural area not far from a large regional centre. The five students identified as Aboriginal at the school represent 4.9 per cent of the school population. This is a slightly higher percentage than the 3.9 per cent of people who identified as Aboriginal in the 2011 population census for the whole area (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011), although 4.2 per cent of the census respondents did not answer the Indigenous (Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander) status question. Australian and Aboriginal flags flew in the school grounds on the days I visited, a symbolically important presence, as the Aboriginal flag, controversially, has not always been flown at the school in the past (personal communication, AECG representative, May, 2012). The full transcript of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s 2008 *Apology to Australia’s Indigenous peoples* was fixed to the school office window. In the Principal’s office, a painted didgeridoo and an Aboriginal painting were prominent.

Two Aboriginal girls in Year 5 agreed to participate in the discussion. Another student invited by the Principal had declined to participate. I had visited the school twice before, and I knew the AECG representative who attended the discussion, but I had not met the
students. The girls chose to use their own names, not secret or code names as offered in
the consent form (see Appendix B); however, I have used names for ethical
confidentiality purposes. When asked to choose a location for the discussion the students
opted to sit outside on the steps looking on to the sports field, with a roof over top. It was
hot and windy but quiet and sheltered, looking out across fields and trees. The students’
reasons for choosing this space were: “...it’s peaceful...shady, don’t get sunburnt”. The
second, brief discussion with one student took place a few weeks later, also outside, on a
very windy day.

As this was the first school I visited, I felt some uncertainty about how the students would
respond to me as an adult, non-Aboriginal researcher, and how they would respond to the
questions. However, the small number of students and the outdoor location created a
relaxed, almost intimate setting. The presence of the AECG representative, as mother and
aunt to the girls, and her connection with me through the AECG contributed towards a
culturally safe environment for the students to participate (see Chapter 4). The students
were responsive to the questions and quick to engage in discussion.

5.2.1 “Well we don’t really learn much...”: The extent and nature of cultural
learning

The discussion began with a question about “Aboriginal stories and histories and ways of
life” that the students learn at school. Their initial response focused on NAIDOC
celebrations at school. NAIDOC is an annual week-long celebration of Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander cultures to increase awareness in the wider community of the status
and treatment of Indigenous Australians (NAIDOC (National Aborigines and Islanders
Day Observance Committee), 2013). NAIDOC is celebrated in July but as it often falls
within school holidays, it is observed on one day when schools resume.
Katie (Researcher): Could you talk about what Aboriginal stories and histories and ways of life ...what sorts of things you are learning at school?

Karen (Student): Um, well we don’t really learn very much... days like NAIDOC day we do drawings and watch movies and stuff...

Hannah (Student): We mainly just do drawings of Aborigines and pictures, that’s mainly all.

Karen and Hannah: [on NAIDOC day] We do activities... we go into different classes and the teachers make like activities ...like we get to make like kangaroos and paintings... we get like these little outlines and we get paint and we do dots over the wall and there’s other activities like we make clay figures ... clay figures like kangaroos and ostriches...We [watch movies about...] mainly how Aboriginal people live...

Hannah: [movies about] how they used to live and stuff and how they used to like survive, yeah, stuff like that.

As a nationwide event, NAIDOC offers opportunities to acknowledge and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait cultures and histories, and every year has a different theme; for example, in 2012, the theme was remembering and celebrating the unifying spirit of the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy at Parliament House in Canberra, the national capital, 40 years prior. The students discussed NAIDOC day activities at school, but they did not make reference to that year’s NAIDOC theme, suggesting that it was not included in the school celebrations. The nature of the students’ comments and their use of the present simple verb tense (“we mainly just do …we go…we get…we paint…we make…we do dots over the wall…watch movies”) indicate the repetitive nature of activities, and suggest the embedding of Aboriginal knowledges and perspectives with
limited depth of learning on that important day. The Principal expressed awareness of this limitation (see Chapter 7).

However, the students did note that NAIDOC celebrations provided an opportunity for an Aboriginal parent to participate in the event and speak at school transmitting traditional knowledge, language and history at a deeper level than the school classroom activities:

Karen: Like when she [aunt, mother] comes to speak at NAIDOC days. Like last term we had a NAIDOC day thing and she came and said how they used to, you know, in the national park, they used to find leaves and stuff.

Karen and Hannah: We like learned how they crushed up leaves to make medicines, how they found food in the bushes and how they killed kangaroos and stuff to survive.

Repetition of themes and projects and a focus on traditional, more than contemporary, society have been a criticism of Aboriginal education curricula and teaching since the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy was introduced in 1982 (Wammarra Aboriginal Education Centre & School of Teacher Education Charles Sturt University, 1992), with continued calls for better sequencing and depth of Indigenous knowledge in curricula (Nakata, 2011). Knowledge and understanding of traditional customs is acknowledged as important in school curricula and policies, but needs to be taught alongside contemporary Indigenous knowledge (Nakata, 2011; Paton, 2012).

Beyond NAIDOC, the students’ recall of cultural learning included primarily historical accounts of European arrival, Aboriginal traditional lifestyles and art:
**Katie:** What subject areas or classes at school, do you learn things in class or any of your classes?

**Karen:** Not really, not usually

**Hannah:** We just do maths and stuff

**Katie:** Little bits of history and stories...?

**Karen and Hannah:** Oh yes, we do history...

**Karen:** Yeah and stuff like how Captain Cook came to Botany Bay and stuff... Aboriginals first on the land...It’s kind of like Aboriginal history and stuff but it’s like ... how they used to make paint and stuff.

**Hannah:** …and how they used to put dots on their paintings.

**Karen:** How they got dots on their paintings and stuff...how they did it so creatively.

The history of European arrival (Captain Cook) reflects a Euro-Western perspective in learning; although the student’s reference to Aboriginal peoples “first on the land” marks a change from previous historical accounts and the embedded legal doctrine of *terra nullius* that denied the value of Aboriginal presence and formed the basis of colonisation and dispossession.

I remember learning in the history classes at school [in the 1950s] that Captain Cook discovered this land. As a child I argued with the teachers about this version of history, knowing a different story from my father, my mother, and my grandparents… the image presented to us at school was the blackfella standing on one leg holding a spear. (Paton, 2009, p. 11)
However, because *terra nullius* was taught and accepted as fact for so long, despite its overturning in the 1992 High Court Mabo land rights case which recognised native title for the first time in Australia (*Mabo v Queensland (No. 2), 1992*), a “*terra nullius* mindset” persists in education (Butler, 2000, p. 93). Such ingrained beliefs take generations to change. For these students, the image of the “blackfella” and a spear still persists, as depicted in their drawing (see Figure 5). A key opportunity for curriculum is to embed cultural knowledge within a context of cultural connectedness that teaches students Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and pride in being “first on the land”.

The students had not learned local Gumbaynggirr language or histories at school, and seemed embarrassed at the lack of such learning:

*Katie: Are you learning local language words, or other language?*

*Karen and Hannah:* No, not really at school …

**Hannah:** but my Mum …kinda… does sometimes …

*Katie:* Are there things you have learned from around here…people, places, land?

*Karen and Hannah:* Uum, [pause, laughter] uum…well…

The students’ references to the role of their mother/aunt in transmitting knowledge, and the knowledge she shared at the discussion (see Chapter 7) are examples of the valuable opportunities for Aboriginal peoples in developing resource materials, contributing and transmitting knowledges in education. This is a stated aim of NSW state and national Indigenous education policies (Whatman & Duncan, 2005); however, in reality, community participation as interpreted and implemented in schools is often not realised
(Kerwin & Van Issum, 2013). Within school-community education partnerships Aboriginal community members and parents are not equal partners with schools and school staff, and this can inhibit community members’ engagement, feeling they cannot question “policies, curriculum and pedagogical practices” (Lowe, 2011, p. 13). The current NSW Aboriginal Education and Training Policy (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2009a) identifies consultation with local communities and the NSW AECG Inc. as the responsibility of regional and state offices and school principals, and suggests achieving such engagement and collaboration through the establishment of a local planning group. Only one primary school actively participated in AECG meetings at the time of this research.

The student discussions reflect limited learning of contemporary Aboriginal cultures, societies and customs in school. The students expressed positive interest in learning more Aboriginal “cultures” with a focus on “history” and traditional customs and lifestyles to fill gaps in their knowledge of Aboriginal accounts of living. However, they were uncertain about the prospects of increased learning of Aboriginal knowledge and cultures at the school:

Katie: Are there other things you’d like to learn?

Hannah: I’d like to learn about the cultures of Aboriginals and history.

Karen and Hannah: …how they used to like make all different types of things, how they used to live and make spears and stuff and the houses and things they used to live in.

Katie: So do you think that might happen more?

Karen and Hannah: yeah, maybe...
In the follow up discussion one student suggested that learning in school might be extended through group projects:

**Katie:** You said [in the first discussion] you’d like to learn more about Aboriginal culture, history, dance and painting… what is one way do you think that you could learn more at school?

**Karen:** … maybe ask my teachers if like we can learn a bit more about it and stuff… And I don’t know we could probably do something like a group thing, we could go around and … teach us something about it.

**Katie:** Go in groups, go on visits to places?

**Karen:** Yeah.

Karen suggests going out and talking to community members, expressing awareness of the potential and value of community resources and knowledge existing out of school. Projects involving research with local community members are a key feature of the Year 11/12 Aboriginal Studies syllabus.

**5.2.2.1 Drawing and writing**

During the second part of the first discussion group, Hannah and Karen discussed what they were drawing, which colours to use; they laughed and seemed to enjoy the drawing, but were uncertain at first of what to draw:

**Hannah:** Are we allowed to draw animals… kangaroo?

**Karen:** What colour should a kangaroo be… orange? That is my wonderful bush… Look at my kangaroo, it turned out to be decent.

**Hannah:** My kangaroo didn’t turn out too decent.
Figure 5: Karen, Year 5, drawing, Primary school no. 1
Karen: There... I've drawn a man, that’s throwing his spear at a kangaroo for food... remember when we went to Sydney and we saw how they lived in that tour thing in the Rocks?

Hannah: That’s a person and a kangaroo, that’s where they live, where I think they live, in caves, that’s... a tree they used to get medicine from...that’s a painting kind of thing... they’re kangaroo footprints ...they’re fish...that’s the river...lines to make it look good...that’s a goanna, that’s the things they used to draw, like circles...

I did not obtain permission to reproduce Hannah’s drawing, but the content and drawing is similar to Karen’s in Figure 5. Hannah’s explanation of her drawing was animated and detailed. Her mother, who was present at the discussion, commented later that her daughter who “does not usually enjoy” things, had enjoyed the session, suggesting a positive connection with the discussion content and process.

The students’ drawings, writings and their conversations referred mostly to the past: “how they lived in that tour thing in the Rocks” [in Sydney], how “they used to draw”, reinforcing cultural stereotypes focused on historical, traditional Aboriginal ways of life: living in caves, hunting with spears, and making dot paintings, although dot painting is not practised by all Aboriginal artists (see Chapter 7, Community engagement and local knowledge). The students’ discussions suggest limited evidence of curriculum-based learning in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures is contemporary, dynamic and ongoing. Yet, teaching and learning material from the NSW Board of Studies (2009) provides examples of incorporating Aboriginal local and cultural knowledge and perspectives into educational curricula in all mandatory K-10 syllabuses. In addition,
textbook material by Aboriginal educationalists (Kerwin & Van Issum, 2011) presents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and strategies. The school Principal demonstrated teaching awareness of such positions, but was reluctant for me to observe or talk to other teachers (see Chapter 7).

5.2.2 “how they used to live and see how much better our life is now…”:

Connections to cultural learning

I asked the students how they felt about cultural learning at school. Karen reflected on changes in the lives of Aboriginal people from the past to the present, suggesting a negative connotation of the past, and not the positive values and strengths of the oldest culture in the world:

Katie: What are some of the good things about learning about Aboriginal stories and histories that you can think of...

Karen: You can see how they used to live and see how much better our life is now. Uum, uumm [pause] I think that’s all... uum [pause].

The students’ comments did not express strong personal connections with learning Aboriginal knowledge, culture or history, perhaps because of the superficial and limited extent of their learning in school. Their written comments, in addition to extending their historical knowledge of how Aboriginal peoples lived and survived (see Figure 5), expressed interest in learning more about:

“Aboriginal history... Where they slept ... How they made spears” (Karen)

Karen wanted to learn more contemporary and active knowledge such as dance and art:

“Aboriginal dance moves... Aboriginal markings” (Karen).

Aboriginal dance emerged as an area of interest in many student discussions. The Board of Studies New South Wales curriculum document states, “Dance is integral to the
expression of Aboriginal identity” (2009, p. 5), but evidence of Aboriginal dance activities appeared only in primary school three and two secondary schools (see Chapter 6).

5.2.3 “I like learning all stuff about it, it’s really cool…”: Impact and consciousness

The students indicated they enjoy the learning, but were conscious of the gaps in their knowledge:

Katie: Is there anything you don’t like, something that’s not so good, that you don’t like about learning Aboriginal culture and stories?

Karen: Not really, I like learning all stuff about it, it’s really cool [laughter from both]

Hannah: Well I’d like to like learn about it because I want to know more about the cultures and stuff.

Compared to students in some other schools, these students’ comments suggest the superficial nature of their cultural learning has provided less opportunity to connect with their cultural knowledges and histories, and to develop understanding of their positioning within Australian society.

5.2.4 In summary

The students’ discussions of the extent of their cultural learning and the nature of their drawings indicate learning that is limited to annual NAIDOC celebrations and associated regular activities, history from a Western colonial viewpoint (“Captain Cook came to Botany Bay”); stereotypical knowledge (dot paintings, hunting with spears, living in caves), with less depth in learning and contemporary knowledge within curriculum.
However, the school may be in transition: the Principal’s Year 3/4 class that I observed included local, contemporary and historical Aboriginal perspectives and knowledges (see Chapter 7, Cultural learning in curricula).

5.3 Primary School no. 2: Suburban and Coastal

The school is located in a suburban coastal area that is close to the regional centre. At the school, 7.8 per cent of students identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, higher than the 3.5 per cent of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people in the area, as recorded in 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). One Aboriginal education staff member employed on contract under a NSW government Wambinya Early Years Program provided support for learning in numeracy and literacy for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from kindergarten to Year 6, and in the Principal’s words, a “great role model for the older [Aboriginal] students”. Two Aboriginal paintings were on display in the school office; in the foyer awards glass case two emu eggs decorated with Aboriginal markings were displayed; and two painted didgeridoos leant on the wall outside the Principal’s office.

The school executive demonstrated a strong sense of equity, independently helping me to develop connections with the students. At a pre-discussion visit, the Assistant Principal (also the Aboriginal education co-ordinator) walked me around the school to meet and talk briefly about the research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Years 4-6 invited by the school to participate. On the morning of the first discussion, the Assistant Principal introduced me to the whole school assembly and asked me to briefly outline my research to all students.

Six students participated in the first discussion: one Year 4 girl, Kelly; three Year 5 girls: Alison, Sharni, Kiara; one Year 6 girl, Sharon; and one Year 6 boy, Rob (for some of the
time) who identified as Aboriginal. Tyler, a Year 5 Torres Strait Island boy, who had agreed to participate was absent for the first group, but joined the second discussion group. For confidentiality reasons, the student names are pseudonyms. Also present was the Aboriginal education staff member representing the AECG and the school.

The first discussion took place in the library and the second, a week later, was outside in a garden, a location selected by the students. In the library, we sat at a table where the students drew. Students searching for examples of how to draw kangaroos led to discussions about finding resources in the library. The first discussion was disrupted a little because Rob, the Year 6 boy, did not want to participate. In trying to maintain the cohesion of the group, I was distracted from asking the students if they had a preferred location for the discussion. I tried to include Rob in the discussion, as did the Aboriginal staff member, but after limited contribution he withdrew physically to sit elsewhere. When I spoke with Rob he was respectful and responsive, however, he did not want to participate further and soon after he left the room, as was his right.

5.3.1 “We learn other things but we don’t really learn Aboriginal things”: The extent and nature of cultural learning

The discussion began with questions about the nature of the students’ cultural learning at school. One student responded immediately that the primary area of Aboriginal learning was NAIDOC day activities on a regular event:

Katie: What are some of the things you are learning at school about Aboriginal culture, history, people, and stories?

Alison: We learn other things but we don’t really learn Aboriginal things...

NAIDOC day’s like the only thing...
Katie: ... what do you do on NAIDOC day?

Alison: We like paint... we get like 3, is it, I think it’s three activities...bracelets, damper and painting...

Kiara: NAIDOC day was the same, I like did two dot paintings... one with [teacher] and another with [teacher] ...

Katie: what others sorts of things happen at school, Aboriginal activities, events like NAIDOC day...?

Alison: there isn’t really anything else ... we don’t do much after that...

The students’ comments and present tense usage suggest the repetitive nature of NAIDOC activities: “we paint... we get...” doing the “same” in different classes, and a limited extent of learning on NAIDOC day. I asked the students about learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in other subject areas, and they recalled accounts of historical life and customs, but less evidence of contemporary knowledge or culture in other key learning areas:

Katie: What about in art or music?

Sharni: In [teacher’s art] class, it’s mostly just fruit bowls... you can’t do anything else

Katie: What about history, what have you learned in history... about Aboriginal people on the land?

[Silence]

Kelly: We watched a video before... we watched it in the library with [teacher] ...

Katie: What was the video about?

Kelly: Like, uum, things from ages ago, people from ages ago... Years and years ago...

Katie: What sorts of things do you remember from that?
Kiara: They caught fish with spears and that....

Sharni: This Aboriginal thing we saw ...and they all lived altogether...it was called My Place.

Sharni may be referring to the educational resource and television series *My Place* and one theme, *Indigenous perspectives* (Australian Children's Television Foundation & Education Services Australia Ltd, 2011), focusing on historical events and Indigenous people. My Place is also a unit of work in the NSW Stage 1 syllabus (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2009).

The students’ use of the past tense in their language above—“*they caught fish...they all lived together*” —suggests an emphasis in their learning with teachers of historical content, but less about contemporary life, knowledge and customs. The Aboriginal staff member mentioned that local Aboriginal Elders had visited the school, and picked up the clapsticks in the library that the Elders had brought. I asked the students about them, and their responses referred only to historical usage:

Kiara: Yeah, they’re clapsticks.

Katie: Do you use them in music or in class?

Sharni: Didn’t they use them around campfires and that?

The school had engaged a local Elder from the National Parks and Wildlife Service to teach local Aboriginal history, and to identify artefacts in preparation for a walkabout program which the Principal had introduced for all Year 5 and 6 students (see Chapter 7). I asked the students about the walkabout:
**Year 5 girls:** Oh yeah, we went through the rainforest here...Yeah...for like a day...With Mr... [Teacher]. And we did this activity we had we had to see what was...in the rainforest.

**Kiara:** We went into the bush to see what didn’t belong in there and we got 5 cents if we won.

However, only two students commented, when prompted, about the Aboriginal significance of the area, which was part of the program:

**Kelly:** We looked at the land

**Tyler:** and we looked at the things that they used for chopping up stuff, like sharp rocks and all that.

The students’ language and past tense ("clapsticks...didn’t they use them ...things that they used") suggest that for them programs such as meeting Elders and discovering history on the land still focus on the past.

**Drawing and writing**

Following the discussion, I distributed felt pens and paper and asked students to draw: “what you’ve learned at school, it can be what you’ve learned in class, or NAIDOC day”.

Some students talked as they drew and wrote. Some were uncertain about what to draw. They were familiar with words for objects they wanted to draw, but unsure of details such as colour and shape:

**Rob:** I don’t know what to draw...

**Kiara, Kelly:** Can we write about NAIDOC day? Can we draw a boomerang or something? ...Does it have to be about Aboriginal things?

**Sharni:** What colour should the spear be? I’ll make it pink...
**Kiara:** Now I’m going to draw a didgeridoo… What should I draw on the didgeridoo?

**Kelly:** This is going to be hard [drawing a kangaroo]… Can I look in a book?

[jumps up]

**Kiara:** You should look in the computer that’ll tell you where it is.

**Kelly:** I know a book… it’ll be in the history… [copying drawings of kangaroos].

*Are kangaroos Aboriginal things?*
Naidoc day
on naidoc day
we do aboriginal
Paintings, bracelet
making, we made
Johnny cakes, we,
made didgeridoos
Boomerang

Kangaroo

Spear
didgeridoo.

Figure 6: Kiara, Year 5, drawing, Primary school no. 2
As the students drew, they discussed the content of their drawings, commenting on and making a connection with “country”, recognising the importance of land:

**Kiara, Kelly, and Sharni:** I forget what my country is ...I'm just going to draw some land...Where does my country go from?

**Kelly:** I'm just going to draw some land...Gumbaynggirr

**Sharni:** Can I also draw some land?

**Kelly:** Where does Gumbaynggirr go from?

**Kiara:** Does it go from Grafton down?
Figure 7: Sharni Year 5, drawing, Primary school no. 2
**Kiara:** Can I draw my house? It’s my Aboriginal doctor...

**Alison:** there are no Aboriginal doctors...

[Whispering]

This exchange about an Aboriginal doctor indicates an opportunity for contemporary role models as part of young students’ education, to balance the historical and artefactual material to which these students referred. Indigenous role models are a key element of the AIME (2011) mentoring program with Indigenous secondary students.
Figure 8: Kelly, Year 5, drawing, Primary school no. 2
The students’ drawings and writings depict similar ideas: NAIDOC day activities; land/islands, water, trees, and customs with stick figure people holding spears or sitting around campfires; artefacts such as boomerangs and didgeridoos, and animals, some traced from library books. Some drawings suggest a perspective of looking in on Aboriginal people living on the land historically, and perhaps a distance between the students and their cultural learning. While similar, each drawing has unique and meaningful marks (Knight, 2013). Kelly's drawing (Figure 8) includes knowledge of living and surviving: fish, a person in the water fishing, fruit on the trees. The tiny Aboriginal art U-shape symbols (I recognise these from a student’s sharing in primary school 3) depicting three people sitting around a campfire suggest that Kelly may have learnt from another source or pictorial image (Cox, 1998), although not currently in school art classes, where one student commented they only did “fruit bowls”. The Aboriginal flag embellishes the theme of the pictures.

In the first discussion, Sharon, a Year 6 girl, sat at the far end of the table and contributed little to the conversations. As the only Year 6 student present after Rob, the Year 6 boy had left, she may have felt less connected with the Year 4 and 5 students who seemed to have a close relationship with each other. However, Sharon engaged independently and with deep determination in her drawing and writing, which provided an opportunity for her to express her thoughts. (I have not included Sharon’s drawing as I did not obtain her permission). She led the way in drawing an Aboriginal flag; the other students followed and there was a flurry for the red, black and yellow pens. The students discussed the meaning of the Aboriginal flag:

**Kiara:** ...and now I’m doing an Aboriginal flag...does the red go down the bottom or the top?
**Alison, Sharni:** The red’s at the bottom...Sun is the sun...red is blood, and black...is...people.

**Aboriginal staff member:** what does the red also stand for?

**Girls:** [in chorus] land.

While the students drew, they talked and shared knowledge as they co-constructed their drawings, inserting individual elements. In this way, the drawings stimulated and added to the students’ discussions (Leitch, 2008).

**Language**

The students indicated that the local Gumbaynggirr language was not taught at the school, and in the second discussion group my question triggered further associations and some comments about language, words they may have heard:

**Sharon:** I’d like to learn Gumbaynggirr language... but it’s too difficult.

**Sharni:** And my aunty ...works at the... the land......what’s it called...the place... where you learn how to ...Aboriginal... the language centre.

**Tyler:** yeah, Torres Strait language, Gumbaynggirr language, I mean Aboriginal language and uum, Australian English.

**Kiara:** you’re speaking Australian English right now...

These were the first comments referring to current and contemporary activities, and the involvement of a family member in the local language centre. Tyler, the Year 5 Torres Strait Island student, discussed learning the culture and customs of the Torres Strait Islands. When I asked if he would like to draw (as he had not been at the first discussion), he referred to himself as something to draw, perhaps because he was less familiar with cultural aspects, as the Aboriginal staff member had mentioned earlier. He used wordplay and humour to comment on his cross-cultural experiences (Nakata, 2007a, p. 13):
Tyler: ...dugong, turtle

*Katie*: any other things you’d like to learn more about ...Torres Strait Island history...?

*Tyler*: that’s what I want to learn about...

*Katie*: would you like to draw something?

*Tyler*: yes, I’ll draw a Lamborghini.

*Sharni*: that’s not Aboriginal.

*Tyler*: Yeah, Aboriginal, Gumbaynggirr, drives a Lamborghini....I’ll draw me because I’m Torres Strait Island ... me playing football.

*Tyler*: ... the Torres Strait flag is white, turquoise and dark blue.

After this discussion, Tyler drew a map showing the geographical location of the Torres Strait Islands, in relation to the Australian continent (See Figure 9).
Figure 9: Tyler, Year 5, drawing, Primary school no. 2
Tyler: that’s where Torres Strait Islands is, that there, right on top of Queensland

Kiara: that’s a really good, dodgy drawing...

Tyler: yeah I know, it’s just a quick professional one.

5.3.2 “Knowing about your past”: Connections to cultural learning

At the school, I observed a Year 6 class in which students were studying the ‘Stolen Generations’, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were removed from their families and communities and placed in institutions or foster homes, a deliberate policy of assimilation to separate them from their culture. This official practice became the subject of a national inquiry (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997; Read, 1983).

Previously, the class had watched the first half of Rabbit-Proof Fence, a film about three Aboriginal girls in Western Australia removed from their families in the 1930s, depicting their long journey on foot (2,400 km) from the Moore River Native Settlement to re-join their families in Aboriginal communities. The film is based on the book Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence by Doris Pilkington (1996/2002) (Garimara), daughter of one of the girls featured in the book/film. During the class discussions, the two Aboriginal students, participants in the research did not speak. However, Sharon, the Year 6 girl, desperately did not want to miss the second part of the film by participating in the research follow up discussion group. “Don’t start without me”, she said to the teacher. Knowing about the Stolen Generations is important history for all Australians (see Chapter 6), and is part of

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1 The film, directed by Phillip Noyce (2002), was released in 2002. The book is one of a trilogy by the author about her experiences and her family’s experiences as members of Stolen Generations and the continued impact and legacy of such practices on many generations of Indigenous people in Australia (“The stolen generations: Rites of passage: Doris Pilkington interviewed by Anne Brewster,” 2007).
Teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students such content requires sensitivity because of the possibility of family experiences (Williams-Mozely, 2012). During the discussion with Year 4 and 5 students, I mentioned the Stolen Generations class, and a response from one student suggested personal experience:

**Katie:** In Year 6 ... they’re learning about history, stories of Stolen Generations, Aboriginal children who were taken from families.

**Tyler:** DoCs

DoCs is the Department of Community Services, responsible for child protection in New South Wales, and is now known as Family and Community Services FACs.

I asked the students how they felt about their cultural learning. One student expressed a connection between learning Aboriginal knowledge and the past, but other students seemed unsure about what to say about their connections with Aboriginal culture and knowledge. I wondered if they had other sources of learning and knowledge, connections to culture and country at home or in the community:

**Katie:** What is one good thing about learning some of those things?

**Sharni:** Knowing about your past [quietly; muffled]

**Katie:** Do you learn stuff at home? Culture...in your families?

**Alison, Kiara:** Yeah...yes... sorta

**Aboriginal staff member:** You would ... your Mum is very into that...culture and background.

**Katie:** Does your Mum come to the school to talk, or any of your parents?

[Silence…laughter…whispering, inaudible]
Katie: Are there other things would you like to learn...more you’d like to learn about?

Girls: Yeeeah [sounding unsure]

Katie: Like what?

Kelly: I don’t know [Laughter…]

The students’ uncertainty here may reflect their limited cultural learning, or a reluctance to be critical in front of me and the Aboriginal support staff member. However, I did not want to shame the students, an Aboriginal fear of embarrassment (Munns, 2000), by pressing them further. In the first discussion, the students recalled cultural learning in the past, but in the second discussion, where we were seated outside in the school grounds and the dynamics had changed, students opened up to talk more about out of school activities and family connections to culture:

Girl: Well... it’s not at school, it’s something out of school ... it’s Speaking Hour Lingo [a Gumbaynggirr language program on local radio].

Girl: My mum works for an [Aboriginal] festival on Australia Day and it like changes places every year.

I asked the students about Aboriginal Elders coming to the school to share knowledge, through the federally funded PaCE (Parental and Community Engagement) program for parents and carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students designed to connect community members with schools, principals and teaching staff. The students responded differently to the Elders’ visit. Rob did not engage with the Elders; this may have been his preference not to participate in groups, or he may be from a different language group and not connected to the local Elders:
**Aboriginal staff member:** What sorts of things did you learn when the Elders came into the school?

**Rob:** I didn’t pay attention.

**Aboriginal staff member:** you didn’t pay attention? Why did you not pay attention?

**Rob:** I got bored.

**Kiara, Sharni:** It’s not boring...we learnt about heaps of boomerangs... how they used them, which ones they used them for...uum ...and ... they showed us a spear...

**Kelly:** Are we talking about those old people...?

**Aboriginal staff member:** They’re Elders...show some respect

**Kelly:** Those older people ... Elders.

Kelly’s reference to “those old people” may be acceptable usage heard from family members, although the Aboriginal staff member suggested the terminology was not respectful of the traditional role of Aboriginal Elders in the community. Learning from contemporary Elders, the students still referred to the past. However, opportunities exist for the school to engage with local and contemporary knowledge. One student suggested the Aboriginal staff member as a source of knowledge, and others referred to the current activities of family members.

5.3.3 **“I thought, I don’t know what to say”: Impact and consciousness of cultural learning**

The students did not comment when prompted to share aspects of their cultural learning that were not so good. Perhaps the question was too direct; their learning was insufficient; or they were reluctant to speak openly in front of the Aboriginal staff member who provided learning support.
Katie: Is there something that is not so good about it?

Sharni: No.

Kiara: No

However, in another context, the students talked about the Acknowledgement of Country, a practice for all people to show respect for Aboriginal culture and heritage and the ongoing relationship the Traditional Custodians have with the Land. It is used at the beginning of a meeting or function. Acknowledgement of Country can be performed by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. The principal had introduced the practice at the commencement of school assembly, using a statement approved by the AECG (2005), and which the students knew well:

Katie: Do you learn things about Gumbaynggirr language at school?

Girls: No...

Girls: We pay our respects to the Gumbaynggirr people, past and present... in assembly...on Fridays, only on Friday... Classes have assembly and they choose people to speak and the first like thing is like we pay our respects...

Girls [in chorus]: to the Elders past and present...

Tyler: ...who own this la-a-a-nd.

Katie: Who does that?

Kiara: Someone from the class ...But if you’re in the choir and you’re Aboriginal Mrs. [teacher] goes you say this...Mrs....usually chooses Aboriginal...But Mrs... says to me, can you say it and I thought, I don’t know what to say.

The students were uncomfortable being identified as Aboriginal students who were expected to know the procedure and wording. The practice of being singled out as Aboriginal and expected to possess and demonstrate authentic knowledge can be difficult
for students (Reid, 1999) and for Aboriginal preservice teachers in schools, an indication of the “tension, ambiguities and contradictions…[in this] pedagogical space” (Hart et al., 2012, p. 717).

5.3.4 In summary

The students’ comments regarding their cultural learning in this school focus primarily on NAIDOC celebrations and Acknowledgement of Country in assembly, symbolic events that aim to develop and maintain all students’ awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures. Knowledge emerging from student discussions and drawings suggests historical and stereotypical, with little evidence of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges within their subject areas. In class, the students recalled watching videos, but the general impression was of less in-depth cultural learning, or understanding of the connection of customs with contemporary life. For the participating students, this may be a legacy of previous school practices, as the school Principal is beginning to engage with community members (see Chapter 7). Students’ comments about family member connections suggest further opportunities for family and community involvement in the school’s cultural learning.

5.4 Primary School no. 3: Small and Connected

The school is located in a small village in the northern part of land of the Gumbaynggirr nation, and was established in the late nineteenth century. Aboriginal people living in the area have a strong, continuous historical and contemporary connection to the land. The community was able to maintain a presence throughout European settlement by obtaining leases to occupy what was regarded by the local council as “marginal” land in the early to mid-twentieth century (Smith & Beck, 2003, p. 67). Later, community members established a cultural centre to maintain and promote cultural knowledge and connections
for the community and beyond, providing valuable and practical resources for the school’s teaching and celebrating Aboriginal heritage. The centre is built on land claimed by the community under the *NSW Land Rights Act 1983* (Smith & Beck, 2003), land on which many continue to live. Two large Aboriginal murals dominate the school building walls and a dedication plaque identifies the school as a “Place of Learning” in the Gumbaynggirr language. Many local Aboriginal people have attended the school since its establishment, and the students’ conversations reflected strong connections among the community, knowledge of the area, the history and culture, and the primary school. Eighteen students at the school identified as Aboriginal (11.25 per cent), with three Aboriginal teaching support staff. The population of the area included 91 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples (6.1 per cent) in the 2011 census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Most Aboriginal students in the discussions were from the Gumbaynggirr nation, but some explained that they were off-country, in other words, from other Aboriginal nations within Australia.

The Principal invited Aboriginal students in Years 3-6 to participate in the research. Eight agreed but on the day, two Year 6 students were absent, so there were six students in the first discussion; one Year 6 student joined the second discussion. Aunty A., a local Gumbaynggirr Elder who taught language to the students, spoke with me first, and introduced the students. She often works in the staffroom with the students, and as it was a space in which the students were comfortable with her, we stayed in that location for the student discussion. No other staff were present, although the Principal came in briefly to check on the discussion. Some students chose to use code or secret names, and for confidentiality reasons, the names of those who did not are replaced with pseudonyms:
Mouse (Year 3 boy), Ken (Year 4 boy), Jared (Year 6 boy), Roy (Year 6 boy; 2nd discussion); Platypus (Year 3 girl), Bibi (Year 4 girl), Secret Cat (Year 4 girl).

5.4.1 “Captain Cook … how they treated the Aboriginals … Dreamtime… language” : the extent and nature of cultural learning

The discussion began with questions about Aboriginal culture and history, the local language and knowledge the students are learning in school. Bibi asked if this included her language Bundjalung from further north, and Platypus and Secret Cat volunteered that they were from different language groups, “Dharug … from Sydney… Yurunga … Queensland”. The students were clear, forthcoming and articulate about cultural learning and activities in school, in different classes and years, discussing topics such as language, impact of colonisation, Aboriginal land management and food gathering practices:

**Jared**: we do like uum like ... Gumbaynggirr words the weeks and months and stuff...we do the animals as well.

**Bibi**: In year three we did the history of Australia and Captain Cook and stuff like that and how they treated the Aboriginals...that was with Mr [teacher]...

**Jared**: When I was in year 5 we learnt uum my Aboriginal language and stuff...

**Secret Cat**: in year three we looked at Dust Echoes... It’s about Aboriginals...it’s a Dreamtime² story...it’s videos... ‘cause we were doing culture about being Australian and Aboriginal....And there was one Aboriginal person that came from...they took him to see the queen...and he died...

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² Dreamtime … Aboriginal people prefer Dreaming; it is a concept that was named by Carl Strehlow, in his "biblical" interpretation of the Aranda word "Altiiringa", from Hermannsburg Finke River Mission. It is not universal, nor is it represented in all Aboriginal languages (Kerwin, 2011, pp. 250-251).
**Aunty A:** Bennelong

**Secret Cat:** [teacher] …told us about…the Aboriginals …fire… they used to come back and there’d be new shoots and kangaroos would be there…and the spears they used to have was from grass trees.

**Jared:** oh yeah and at the school like that Deadly Vibe magazine comes with all Aboriginal stuff. It’s like a magazine, it’s called Deadly Vibe you open it up it’s got all Aboriginal stuff in it...

**K:** all Aboriginal football players.

The depth and knowledge that these students expressed is quite sophisticated. For example, the systematic practices of fire and burning to manage the land and wildlife as a food source are well-known to Aboriginal peoples (Kerwin, 2012), but ignored by dominant Australian education and recently re-discovered in mainstream literature (Gammage, 2011).

The students discussed other Aboriginal activities and sport that they participate in at school and through the local Aboriginal cultural centre, such as Deadly Days, a regional festival offering young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people opportunities in education, employment and training. This is the first mention of NAIDOC activities by the students, suggesting it has less prominence than at the previous primary schools; their cultural learning is more diverse:

**Ken:** we go to Deadly Days in year 6. We go to 3-on-3 basketball ...

**Bibi:** Aboriginal basketball … and NAIDOC week down at [the cultural centre]
**Jared:** in NAIDOC week with Mr. [Aboriginal staff member] we ... went around in circles, stomping our feet... were dancing, Aboriginal dancin’... and he said can you see inside like a snake.

**Bibi and Jared:** Dreamtime snake.

**Secret cat:** The rainbow serpent.

**All:** in NAIDOC week ... that was pretty fun...

**Secret Cat:** We also got face paintings at [cultural centre]

**Jared:** oh yeah, there’s this thing down at [the cultural centre]… we did like this painting thing...the paint goes on the snakes.

**Ken:** snakes…oh yeah, screen painting.

The students’ detailed comments about the NAIDOC activities suggest art and dance are powerful and meaningful activities in which they can embody cultural learning.

**5.4.2 “It’s … better learning about your culture”: Connections with cultural learning**

The students’ comments indicate strong connections with cultural learning. They reflected positively that learning Aboriginal cultures, customs and language is interesting and relevant. The school maintains strong connections and works closely with the community, Elders and the cultural centre to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge:

**Jared:** Uncle ... comes to this school and we go and do stuff that Aboriginals...me and [others in Year 6]… and they show us the bush tucker...and I think next time they will come they will teach us totems, yeah...storytelling as well...

**Katie:** Who do you do that with?
**Jared:** Aunty M. [a local Elder].

**Ken:** she tells the…Dreamtime stories.

**Bibi:** she talks about where she came from like the water people and she said that she’d call the dolphins or her tribe would call the dolphins and they’d round up the fish and they’d catch the fish, they’d cook them and the leftover fish they’d give to the dolphins.

**Katie:** as Koori or Aboriginal students, how do you feel, what do you think about learning Aboriginal culture and stories?

**Ken:** it’s good… it’s fun.

**Jared:** It’s like, better learning about your culture all that stuff.

**Ken:** yeah, and how most of the Aboriginal words have double letters…Like you spell [place name] backwards and it’s the same word.

**Bibi:** I find the Aboriginals interesting because they have all these spirits but there’s not one exact one for each tribe…there’s always different … except they do have warriors they depend on and they give them each a different spirit or something like that, and totems.

These engaged comments express the students’ strong connections with the local cultural centre and activities in which they participate, such as dance and food, art works, and that local historical artefacts are part of their history and culture. The centre has an important role of in their education:

**Jared:** down there [at the cultural centre] we like make food and stuff and dance, do the Aboriginal dancing.

**All:** yeah, animal dancing…kangaroo…emu
**Bibi:** there’s a bush dance where you make a branch with leaves on and you just leap across the branch

**Ken:** and you go on the bush tucker track

**Jared:** they have like didjeridus … ‘cause there’s an art gallery there and it has Aboriginal paintings and clothes…it’s real cool when you walk in there...

**Ken:** There’s a big canoe.

The students discussed with Aunty A. the story of how the canoe was found by local Elders, and dated before being placed in a glass case in the gallery, understanding the relevance of local history, as well as an appreciation of the contemporary nature of Aboriginal cultural practices (“Aboriginal paintings and clothes”). Some talked about their connections to community through family:

**Bibi:** I do feel quite close because most of the Elders I’m related to.

**Jared:** heaps of my elders live [here]…some live in [nearby centre] and I don’t know, all around.

At the follow up discussion, students identified some gaps in their Aboriginal knowledge and how they would like to learn further, such as the meaning of culture, more language learning, active learning and practicing customs:

**Roy:** Language, bush tucker, aah, culture...

**Katie:** when you say culture… what sorts of things?

**Roy:** oh it’s the language, how we foraged for food

**Roy:** how to say the words like now what I’m saying in Gumbaynggirr…I’d like to learn how to weave the nets … go fishing and all those ways and that

Roy expressed a connection to culture and people, using the pronoun “we”, and a sense of the ongoing practice of ways of life.
As well as history, the students discussed learning contemporary Aboriginal culture ("being Australian and Aboriginal"), events and sport. Year 6 boys spoke of visiting Elders at their home to learn cultural practices and ways of life, as part of the PaCE (Parental and Community Engagement) program:

**Katie:** ...what do you do with them?

**Roy:** ...just talk about stuff, our culture

**Jared:** talk about the weapons, they showed us spears they used to hunt, yeah

Although the boys’ talk here about the past, they relate and connect with “our culture”.

**Jared:** oh yeah, and the uuum Aboriginals used to go spear fishing as well, yeah. And make spears.

**Roy:** They still do in Queensland. They still hunt with the flat ... crabs and fish.

Roy notes that hunting and fishing is still a way of life in some parts of Australia.

Bibi expressed a critical understanding of how ways of living, customs and cultures have changed with the impact of “white people”; of what happened during the colonial process of assimilation and acculturation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. She wanted to learn more:

**Bibi:** Oh, I’d like to learn history, like more after the white people came and the Aboriginals started to settle in and stuff like that. Like I want to know if they built normal houses like the white people or if they just stayed with their culture? But it all turned out to go with the white people in the end but I’d like to learn more about it.

Some details of the transition of ways of life for Aboriginal people in this community has been documented in literature through oral history and archaeological excavation (Smith & Beck, 2003).
5.4.3.1 Drawing and writing

The students undertook their drawings confidently, without questioning what they should draw or what to include, and sometimes directly referencing their learning. Secret Cat demonstrated cultural learning knowledge and communication through art through the use of Aboriginal symbols, colours (see Figure 10). The drawing and words “tree on fire” reference Secret Cat’s earlier comments about land management: “fire” and “new shoots and kangaroos”. There is a wealth of knowledge to be learned from Aboriginal art symbols, such as reading the landscape with symbols, similar to reading geographic maps (Kerwin & Van Issum, 2011).
Figure 10: Secret Cat, Year 4, drawing, Primary school no. 3
Secret Cat explained her painting and shared knowledge of Aboriginal symbols, women and men sitting, the multicoloured sun, used in her artwork:

**Secret Cat:** That’s fish in the river, that’s a turtle, this is just Aboriginal art things...

**Katie:** So you’ve seen that before on paintings?

**Secret Cat:** No it’s just Aboriginal symbols. That’s a tree… there’s a lot of colours in the sun, you can’t really see them.

As Jared began drawing, he explained the Aboriginal elements of his large artwork (Figure 11):

**Jared:** just Aboriginal things? I might draw like a big art thing, Aboriginal … it’s Aboriginal symbol things…a lake down here and Aboriginal symbols up there.

**Katie:** What do the symbols mean?

**Jared:** I don’t know, just making up something that looks Aboriginal…I might finish this when you come back ‘cos this’ll take some time.

Jared worked creatively on his Aboriginal art-piece; he realised it will take time to finish, for example, the colouring.
Figure 11: Jared, Year 6, drawing, Primary school no. 3
The perspective of these students’ drawings (including others not reproduced here) is much closer than those of the previous two schools, suggesting art is integrated with and not separate from their cultural learning. In this sense, the students’ drawings reflect established connections with Aboriginal culture and knowledge, as well as the Aboriginal art classes that they discussed.

5.4.3 “hearing stories about those who sacrificed themselves”: Impact and consciousness of cultural learning

I asked the students to reflect on aspects of learning Aboriginal culture and history that were “not so good”. Aunty A. had commented to me that she did not talk to the students about the “bad things” that had happened in the area (see Chapter 7). However, the students shared their knowledge and awareness of the bad things that happened locally and of the treatment of Aboriginal people during the early days of European occupation, but from an Aboriginal perspective:

**Bibi:** well for me it’s about hearing all the stories about those who sacrificed themselves. Uum, also why they called the place down past school [name] is because it means blood rock. Because Aboriginals died there…a man was trying to get some white people away and they shot him and his family escaped through a rock tunnel leading on to the other side.

**Jared:** and one time the Aboriginals were at this place, right, and it’s like a beachy place, and one day they were like hanging around and white men from overseas came in their boats and they were like got guns …killed some…and pushed them off the cliff.
Secret Cat: Mr. [teacher] told us that white people came along to the black people’s place and they were making them... first they did dance...and then they were making diseases and stuff ... and they died from alcohol and stuff.

Jared: And while they were slaving they couldn’t eat no food and they were starving and dying and everything.

Bibi: And they also became lazy, they started hanging round people’s houses and begging for food and they’d give them tobacco and rum.

Aunty A: instead of going hunting and gathering like they used to do, that’s right.

Bibi: yeah, and so the Aboriginals would spear some of the sheep so the white men would just kill them.

For some students, these people were their relatives and ancestors:

Jared: Mainly all ...they could have been our family...I don’t even know all the guys that died.

Jared: you know how the old Aboriginals used to hunt for their food and all that...they don’t hunt any more they don’t do that stuff no more... they’re just like normal people...they don’t go round hunting...now they just go down to the shop...and buy [laughs].

These insightful comments indicate the students’ knowledge of events of the past, causal explanations of dispossession, changes to Aboriginal peoples in life and death. Learning of killings and maltreatment may be difficult for the students, but Aboriginal realities (Jones & Jenkins, 2008a) such as these were completely omitted from education for at least a century (see Chapter 2). Jared’s reference to “old Aboriginals…normal people” and ways of surviving indicates his understanding of how life has changed. He maintains a generational connection between the past customs and their life “now”, suggesting an awareness of the process of normalisation of Aboriginal peoples into mainstream society.
However, some words the students used, such as “lazy...begging”, reflect a stereotypical negative image of Aboriginal peoples in some of their learning; as in other parts of the colonised world, such language can feed “self-abnegation” (Tuck, 2009, p. 120).

5.4.4 In summary

The knowledge reflected through these students’ conversations can be characterised in two ways. First, there is a focus on Aboriginal knowledge of traditional customs and ways of life such as fishing with traps, foraging for food, hunting, totems and Dreaming stories, not just as relics of the past, but as part of their heritage and a body of cultural knowledge. The students have learnt in school through contemporary active learning and practice, knowledge of Aboriginal art and dance, cultural customs that are alive and dynamic, and through contact with local Elders from whom they learn about "local belonging and identity from everyday stories and conversations …" (Somerville & Perkins, 2010, p. 195). Their learning is through local connections to place, the cultural centre, the teaching of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal school staff, Gumbaynggirr language teaching; and the school’s relationships with parents and families within the Aboriginal community. The knowledge of customs, country and history of the area is shared and stored in the collective memory of the community, and supplemented by resources that document the local history and customs (Somerville & Perkins, 2010).

Second, the students expressed curriculum-based knowledge of the historical treatment and dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, such as: the “history of Australia…Captain Cook…”; the impact of European settlement in their area “people sacrificed themselves...diseases”; as well as awareness of the changes in behaviour and living that colonisation has brought to Aboriginal peoples. They identified gaps in their knowledge of Aboriginal accounts of history; for example, how Aboriginal people
adapted to the changes, and the transition from staying “with their culture” to building “normal houses”.

The students were passionate about what they already knew and eager to learn more. Further, the students’ comments indicate a negotiation of cultural knowledge within the two worlds of schooling and society—dominant Western knowledge and Aboriginal knowledge systems. They demonstrated awareness of the continuity of Aboriginal culture in their lives today through learning close to the knowledge source and being able to learn with Aboriginal people.

5.5 Conclusion

The comments and drawings from primary students in this chapter indicate a continuum of learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives across the three primary schools: from stereotypical, historical content to contemporary knowledge that is strengthened significantly by community connections. Celebrating NAIDOC in schools plays an important part in developing and maintaining pride of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in their culture, and for consciousness-raising among non-Indigenous students. However, reliance on NAIDOC day as a primary means of teaching knowledge and perspectives continues tokenistic and limited transmission of knowledge. Some students expressed awareness of the limitations of such learning, for example, repetitive activities such as dot painting, drawing, making bracelets, clay figures and damper that do "not teach students anything at all about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people" (Price, 2012a, p. 160). There is more to be learned about the making and use of such items; as one student said “how they did it so creatively” (Year 5).
Students discussed learning history from a non-Aboriginal perspective, for example, depicting Aboriginal people as “lazy...begging” (Year 4). They identified gaps in their learning from an Aboriginal perspective “I’d like to learn more about it” (Year 4). Education curricula Australia still embed a largely “colonial narrative” (Lowe et al., 2014, p. 84), but if learning is balanced with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, students have the opportunity understand and differentiate the existence of two knowledges. Students from primary school three demonstrated how opportunities for cultural learning of the meaning and significance of cultural knowledge, customs and history, together with active and performative learning, community collaboration and celebrating NAIDOC events with community, can encourage deeper understanding and critical thinking.

In all three schools, the students indicated less evidence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives taught in science, technology and mathematics, although such knowledge is recognised and documented in curriculum resources and textbooks (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2009). Despite powerful examples of the value for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students of such learning, the difficulty of teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems equally and contextually in mathematics for students in schools continues to be a challenge (Ewing et al., 2010; Howard & Perry, 2005; Jorgensen, Grootenboer, Niesche, & Lerman, 2010; Matthews, Watego, Cooper, & Baturo, 2005).

The students’ engagement with cultural learning in schools is also affected by the extent of community involvement and cultural knowledge in teaching, and opportunities for community and students to connect in learning. Developing strategic relationships, cultural resources, connections to land, spirituality, and respect for Elders in schools
provides affirmative learning opportunities. The next chapter considers secondary school students’ perspectives of cultural learning.
Chapter 6: Student Discussions from Three Secondary Schools

In this chapter, I present and discuss conversations with 23 Aboriginal students’ views on cultural learning, cultural activities and community involvement in three public secondary schools also within the land of the Gumbaynggirr nation. The schools are located in the same area as the primary schools discussed in Chapter 5.

As in the previous chapter, I have grouped the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ conversations within the context of each school in this chapter, combining students’ comments from the two discussion groups held at each school, as well as their views expressed in writing and drawing. This chapter addresses the following two research questions:

1. What is the nature of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are learning in mainstream schooling education in New South Wales?

2. In what ways do the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reflect on the extent and the nature of cultural learning?

6.1 Background

In consultation with the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), I selected schools reflecting variations in student enrolments and levels of school engagement and connection with local Aboriginal communities and families (see Chapter 4). With the agreement of school principals, the discussions took place in schools between September 2012 and February 2013. The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander students within the schools ranges from 7 to 13 per cent. The school statistics do not separate figures for Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students; however, only Aboriginal students participated in these discussions. Each school’s percentage is explained within context in this chapter. A summary of the discussion group participants is provided in Table 3.
Table 3: Secondary school discussion group participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Students’ pseudonyms</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Adults who attended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School 1, SS1</td>
<td>Large, regional, urban</td>
<td>Girls: Lara, Kiara, Jemma, Boys: Larry</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Aboriginal staff member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School 2, SS2</td>
<td>Large, semi-urban</td>
<td>Girls: Sophia, Kerin, Jakey BobCat, Alyssa, Boys: Marcus, Brayden, Neil, Derrin</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>AECG representative, Aboriginal staff member, Aboriginal Studies teacher (non-Aboriginal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School 3, SS3</td>
<td>Regional, semi-urban</td>
<td>Girls: Tara, Zara, Sharon, Bella, Eliza, Celia, Lily, Molly, Tahlia Boys: Tom, Jai</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Aboriginal staff member, English teacher (Non-Aboriginal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>16</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>23</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At each school, I yarned with the Aboriginal staff members. I observed a class which included Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander perspectives or knowledges or the local Gumbaynggirr language, and I talked with the class teachers about their classes, students and teaching resources. I interviewed each school principal about their philosophies and leadership in relation to cultural learning (see Chapter 7). Including the adults’ views provides context and contributes to understanding the forces which mediate the students’ cultural learning.

6.1.1 Culturally responsive discussion groups

As discussed in the previous chapter, my connections with the AECG vouched for the research (Bishop et al., 2006, p. 25) and strengthened my connections with the students to create a culturally respectful environment. My participation in the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience program (AIME) as a mentor extended these connections with some participating Year 9, 10, 11/12 students. To fulfil AECG ethical requirements, an AECG representative (often the Aboriginal staff member) participated as co-researchers in the student discussions. The AECG members contributed to the student discussions, and I refer to or include their comments and questions where appropriate to indicate possible influence on the students’ contributions. The staff members also fulfilled the duty of care ethical requirements of the NSW Department of Education and Communities. In addition, a classroom teacher was present at two school discussions and participated briefly (see Chapter 7).

The first discussions focused on ten questions regarding the students’ cultural learning: stories, histories, customs, ways of life, and people (see Chapter 4, and Appendix C for the discussion questions). Often I supplemented these questions to ask about specific
subject areas or activities mentioned by staff or other students, for example, Aboriginal dance. In this way, I built on previous discussions to contextualise and enhance questions (Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick, 1998). As with the primary students, I varied the terms Aboriginal, Koori, Torres Strait Islander, or Indigenous, depending on the preferences of the students and the schools. In the first discussion, I invited students to draw and/or write about cultural learning at school; most, but not all, secondary students wrote. Students gave their permission to reproduce and include their drawings/writings in this thesis and related publications, and examples of drawing and/or writing complement and supplement the discussions in this chapter. I also sought the students’ permission to share aspects of the discussions with their schools, the department and the AECG, and reiterated I would not identify the students by name.

I returned to the schools for a second discussion where the students reviewed and accepted my synthesis of their comments. They shared further experiences and suggestions for increasing cultural learning in the secondary schools, reinforcing their views and providing additional perspectives. I digitally recorded each group discussion and personally transcribed the recordings, enabling me to re-connect with and identify most of the students’ voices, and to include non-verbal elements such as pauses, silence, humour and laughter. I grouped the discussions by school, read and re-read the comments, and wrote a collective narrative of students’ views in each school, following an indigenous contextual process (Kovach, 2010) (see Chapter 4, Making sense).

Similar to the primary students in Chapter 5, I discuss the secondary student comments in three broad themes relating to the two research questions:

- the nature, extent and delivery of the students’ learning;
• the students’ personal connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and the teaching or learning process; and
• the awareness and impact on the students of cultural learning, cultural events and activities in their schools.

Students’ phrases expand the main headings in this chapter, following the “verbatim principle” (Stringer, 2007, p. 99), and focus on the participants’ expressions. Descriptions of the geographical location and physical setting of the discussion groups at each school provide further context to the conversations.

**6.2 Secondary School no. 1: Large and Urban**

This well-established secondary school is located in a regional urban centre, and has a population of over 800 students from years 7 to 12, drawn from primary schools in the centre, neighbouring suburbs and outer areas. Students who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander represented approximately 7 per cent of the school enrolment, higher than the 4.5 per cent of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples who identified in the 2011 Census as living in the area in which the school is located (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). One Aboriginal support staff member, a Gumbaynggirr local and AECG member, had worked at the school for many years and had strong relationships with the students.

The non-Aboriginal teacher responsible for co-ordinating Aboriginal education and the Aboriginal support staff member invited students from the school’s Indigenous leadership team to participate. The Indigenous leadership team, a program initiated by the Department of Education was established at the school in previous years, but had lapsed,
and had been re-established in 2012. Both the staff members managed the leadership team and had a respectful relationship. The discussions took place in the morning before classes commenced, after the leadership group had met. Not all students were available at that time, or wanted to participate, nor were they required to participate. One Year 9 boy was not able to participate because parental consent was not given. Thus, four Aboriginal students participated in both discussion groups: Larry, a Year 11/12 boy (in between years 11 and 12), Lara and Kiara, Year 7 girls, and Jemma, a Year 8 girl. Mark, the Aboriginal staff member was present, as co-researcher and to ensure cultural respect as well as fulfil the department’s duty of care requirement. Mark sometimes prompted or triggered students’ memories to avoid shaming or embarrassment (Leitner & Malcolm, 2007), particularly in this context with a non-Aboriginal researcher and contributed actively to the discussions (see Chapter 7).

The student discussions took place in the Aboriginal staff member’s office in the school, at the students’ suggestion. Selecting this space for the discussions enabled the students to create an environment in which they felt able to speak and participate in the research. The room included equipment and facilities such as computers, a fridge, sink, learning resources, and original Aboriginal artwork covered the walls. For the students the area was supportive and enjoyable: “…it’s good to work, it’s good to have a bit of fun” (Larry, Year 11/12). We sat around a table in the Aboriginal staff member’s room for the discussion. The students chose to use their own names, not secret or code names as offered to them in the consent form; however, for ethical confidentiality reasons, I use pseudonyms. I explained to the students that I would not use their names in anything I later wrote or that I may discuss with the school, unless they gave their permission; and that the Aboriginal staff member had signed a confidentiality agreement.
In the first discussion group, I asked the students to speak of learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in class; school cultural activities involving family, community members and Elders; and their personal responses to their school-based cultural learning. I returned to the school for a follow up discussion a couple of weeks later, in the same location. We reviewed my synthesis of the first discussion, which the students accepted, and discussed ways to increase their cultural learning at school. They gave permission to share their ideas with the school Principal. Comments from both discussion groups are combined here, and identified, if appropriate to a context.

6.2.1 “...Indigenous people in history... back when they were on the land”: The extent and nature of cultural learning

The students talked about the subject areas in which they learn Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and perspectives at the school: primarily in English, art, history and geography:

Lara: In English we write and read Dreamtime stories...we have to write about it.

Katie: You have to write Dreamtime stories?

Lara: Yeah, we have to come up with our own, but that’s it...like, you know how they have like picture books and stuff...yeah. And in history we do some Aboriginal history... We look at paintings, Aboriginal paintings, like on the walls, yeah.

Kiara: Like the meanings of the pictures, what it means.

English is a mandatory subject in Years 7-10 of secondary school and includes the study of “texts [to] give students experience of Australian literature and insights into Aboriginal
experiences and multicultural experiences in Australia” (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2012, p. 12).

The Year 11/12 student commented on gaps and less current learning, compared to earlier years:

**Larry**: I don’t do art now but we used to do like Aboriginal art work in art and like ...I did Ancient History but that doesn’t really involve Indigenous studies and all my other subjects I don’t really do anything except English is like ...really basic – I don’t really learn much unless I’m doing stuff with the Botanical Gardens.

**Kiara**: Bush Tucker

**Katie**: So did you used to in other years?

**Larry**: Oh yeah, when I did normal history we looked at it but yeah I can’t really remember.

Larry’s use of the phrase, “normal history” may refer to units in Australian history taught in earlier years, as described in the syllabus:

Mandatory History in the NSW Syllabus Stage 4 [years 7-8] includes the unit...*Indigenous Peoples, Colonisation and Contact History* in which students explore the nature and impact of colonisation and contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia and in one other location. In Stage 5 [Years 9-10] students study the shared history of Australia in the twentieth century, including a major focus on the changing nature of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations. (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2010b, p. 6)

In response to my question, Larry discussed examples of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander perspectives within specific subjects:
**Larry:** do you mean the examples of our culture in subjects?...the other day...we [student and teacher] were talking about like something like how science is sort of related to indigenous studies and stuff like that but I can’t really remember exactly what we were talking about [laughs]... but I realise it when it comes up, so like when we talk about it like how things happened how they got their nutrients and stuff.

Larry was aware of Aboriginal perspectives in curriculum, but felt that some coverage was brief. He discussed Aboriginal Studies, an elective subject taught within the New South Wales school system in years 11 and 12 since 1991, and which is examined in the year 12 Higher School Certificate:

**Larry:** we have the option to go to [another high school] to do that [Aboriginal Studies]. Now I can’t because it’s on Wednesday and I work ... so that’s unfortunate but yeah I would have definitely done it if I was free on Wednesdays.

Larry suggests that while the Years 7 to 10 curriculum and syllabus include Indigenous material, he did not recall such learning explicitly in Years 11 and 12 subjects, except, as he understands, in Aboriginal Studies. As an elective subject (for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students) if the minimum student quota is not always met, or staff resources are not sufficient, Aboriginal Studies is not always taught, although students can study it online (see Chapter 7). As Larry noted, some schools in the area had combined resources to teach Aboriginal Studies (see Secondary School 2). The Year 11/12 syllabus maps a continuum of learning Aboriginal culture from early years to Year 10 (K-10) which is built on further in Years 11/12 (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2010b). However, if Aboriginal Studies is not offered, or not taken up by students in Years 11 and 12, they miss an opportunity to learn critically, and in depth, the histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
The students discussed local perspectives in their learning. Relationship to country and place is acknowledged as a fundamental basis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011); however these students indicated limited learning of local language, customs or events:

**Katie:** … *what do you learn of the local area, Gumbaynggirr people, what’s been happening in this area, what happened, what happens now?*

[Silence]

**Student:** Uuum...

**Katie:** language?

**Larry:** Uuum [Laughs]. Don’t look at me girls [referring to the other students]!

Mark, the Aboriginal staff member reminded the students about a bush tucker Aboriginal plants program they participated in with primary school students at the local Botanical Gardens and working with a local Elder, as some students discussed in further detail:

**Larry:** oh yeah, we’ve done like the Bush Tucker walk, representing the school.

**Kiara:** Aboriginal words and what they mean…what they used to make, like baskets and stuff, what they used to eat, Such as lomandra, which is used in weaving to make baskets and carry bags. With this lomandra they also ate the end stalks for food. Some said it tastes like peas.

**Katie:** Does anyone come to teach language?

**Jemma:** Yeah, on Monday, there was this guy from [the language centre]… *He was teaching us about the different words that they use* [for plants, bush tucker].

Lara recalled learning Aboriginal dance with community members at her previous primary school:
**Lara:** Before I came here my old school used to like have Aboriginal people come in and teach us all the dances. I did that for about three years...but they don’t do it anymore. I wish they still did it but they didn’t do it last year.

Larry discussed NAIDOC (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee), a week-long annual celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures at the school in July, and the role of the older Aboriginal students in the NAIDOC assembly (see chapter seven for the Principal’s comments). He explained the student participation, and the annual NAIDOC themes:

**Larry:** It’s just assemblies now...Our NAIDOC assembly day ... yes we pretty much run it, we all do speeches. Well, Miss [teacher] writes up our speeches and we read them out for her and sometimes we get a performance from the local dance group. The speeches are about the theme so we have two hosts that run the assembly and then we have four kids that speak about the theme of like the NAIDOC week year. This year it was the tent embassy, last year it was change the next step or whatever, so that’s pretty much what we do with performances.

The students’ greater involvement and knowledge of NAIDOC day themes contrasts with some primary students’ discussions of NAIDOC day in Chapter 5. This may be due to the secondary students’ ages, but may also reflect more extensive celebrations at secondary level and in this school.

As members of the Aboriginal leadership team, the students spoke about representing other Aboriginal students, learning leadership skills and contributing to Aboriginal activities at the school:
Larry: This year we announced the [leadership] team which is pretty much us and the rest of them that didn’t turn up today [laughs].

Kiara: he’s the leader of his year, for the Aboriginal students, we’re the leaders for our Aboriginal Year7 and we have meetings every second Thursday. We talk about what’s coming up …that we need to prepare for and then when we finish it we write comments about how we enjoyed it.

In their writings reproduced in Figures 12, 13 and 14, the students referred further to the value for them of participating in the leadership team and representing their Aboriginal year cohorts. As young leaders, these students may be more articulate about their cultural learning, and they may not speak for all Aboriginal students.

6.2.2 “I wanted to do more of the Aboriginal history…it was interesting because it was about my culture …” : Connections to cultural learning

The students reflected on the process of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural learning at school. Their key points are connections to their culture, the positive and active aspects of the learning that they value and enjoy, and how it can help make learning more interesting and relevant for them:

Larry: It’s just good to learn about your culture and stuff like that, pretty much.
[Laughter]

Larry: Everyone just nods their heads [in agreement]

Kiara: it’s better than just like talking about, in English instead of like talking about one whole subject, you can … talk about that, and then talk about something else. Like instead of just studying it, we can do it, sometimes…interesting… you get more choice.
**Larry:** Hands on.

However, the students felt they would like to learn more cultural knowledge, in greater depth, and for longer. Larry felt a lack of commitment from some teachers:

**Larry:** like we don’t get enough knowledge about it. We learn about it a bit but it’s like a thing, you learn it but then it gets left, so in subjects we should probably have it for a bit longer so we can learn a bit more about it. Because to teach it just like a syllabus thing that they [teachers] have to cover they don’t actually care about the subject. That’s how I feel about it anyway.

**Kiara:** Like in history we did Aboriginal culture for about half a term and we didn’t really learn much about it and then we just went straight on to like Greek History, and I wanted to do more of the Aboriginal history because it was interesting because it was about my culture.

The school does not have Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander teachers. This is a contested issue, and there is criticism of non-Indigenous teachers delivering Indigenous content in Australian schools (Nakata, 2007b). However, the difficulties for non-Indigenous people teaching without a culturally appropriate pedagogy are acknowledged (Yunkaporta, 2009b). In response, Yunkaporta designed an 8 Aboriginal ways of learning pedagogy (Department of Education and Communities, 2012), for use by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers and material.

One of the three guiding principles of the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2009a) is engagement with Aboriginal people and communities, as stakeholders, and as holders of knowledge. However, these students felt that their engagement with local Aboriginal families, community and Elders through school or involvement in school activities was limited:
**Katie:** do you have Elders coming to the school to talk to you?

**Larry:** not normally

**Jemma:** not really

In the follow up discussion, Larry suggested how Elders could be involved in teaching, and sharing Aboriginal culture with non-Indigenous students:

**Larry:** and it’s sort of like end of year activities and there’s nothing more to teach because everybody starts zoning out and so you do activities. And I reckon we should have an activity where an Elder comes in and like teaches us who are interested in our culture... and that might even get other people involved like non-Indigenous people that actually do want to learn about our culture.

Reflections on the school’s community engagement from the Aboriginal staff member and the principal are discussed in Chapter 7.

### 6.2.2.1 Writing and drawing

In the writing and drawing session as part of the first group discussion, most students opted to write. The year 7 and 8 students asked for clarification of content and permission to use certain formats:

**Lara:** So what do we write?

**Katie:** well, anything you like about the sort of things that you are learning now, what’s good about it, if there’s more you’d like to learn.

**Kiara:** can we do dot points?

**Jemma:** can we write what we want, like having people coming to the school?

**Kiara:** we should have a painting on the wall.

**Larry:** yeah, we could have Aboriginal people’s hands.
The students created individual accounts that complemented, reflected and expanded on the collective discussion. For example, they wrote of their experiences in art (see Figures 12 and 13), expressed interest in more activities with Elders and Aboriginal people teaching, and more “Indigenous education” at the school (see Figures 13 and 14). Identifying words and names have been removed from the reproductions of students’ work:
• In English we learn about the dreamtime stories.
• In History we get to learn about how aboriginal people lived back then.
• In Art we get to paint things like lizards & fish etc we get to dot paint.
• We get to go on aboriginal trips and learn about our culture.
• We have meetings to talk about events that came up for us that involve aboriginal culture.

We should have a mural for aboriginal students that students paint and have all the aboriginal people's hands on.
* History: Learning about aboriginal culture is enjoyable, I would like to learn more about Indigenous Australians and spend more time being educated on it.

* Art: Aboriginal paintings and clay work is really fun unfortunately in year 9 if you don't choose art as an elective you don't get to participate. Meeting every second Thursday are a great way to gather aboriginal students to talk about upcoming events and how we thought past events were. Being a year 8 aboriginal leader is great. Makes us feel as we are helping our year group in activities.

* Learning about old dreamtime stories.

Figure 13: Jemma, Year 8, writing, Secondary school no. 1
Figure 14: Larry, Year 11/12, writing, Secondary school no. 1

Comments written in yellow pen but not visible here are: “…full time AEO!! [Aboriginal Education Officer], suggested by the Aboriginal staff member…More activity in NAIDOC assembly such as clay…etc. make it a two day event…”
6.2.3 “...talking about the issues and stuff” : Impact and consciousness of cultural learning

In an earlier visit to the school, I observed a Year 9 History class in which all students were studying the Stolen Generations: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were removed from their families and communities and placed in institutions or foster homes to separate them from their culture. Students examined the text of the official government apology to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for the “pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind” by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on February 13, 2008 (Rudd, 2008), and the response to the apology by Tom Calma, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, which ended with a plea to members of the Stolen Generations (Calma, 2008). The “varying experiences of the stolen generations” is a key topic in the NSW Year 9 (Stage 5) syllabus (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2009, p. 26).

I asked the students in the discussion group about the Stolen Generations. Larry indicated he had studied this at school, and related his family experiences:

**Larry:** Uum, Mum and Dad had sort of talked to me about the history around here, Nan mainly, she was here, she knew what was going on. Dad was like told by Nan, so, and Dad like told me and I looked further into it with Nan 'cause Nan knew more than Dad did obviously, mm...No, Nan doesn’t really talk about it. She said that every time like the car, it was a black van or something, I don’t think it was a black van it could’ve been a black car, I’m not sure she was just like as soon as that came around her parents told her to run and stuff. Which is what you’re learning, history anyway.
**Katie:** is it good to learn about those things in class?

**Larry:** Mmm, yeah. I think.

The Aboriginal staff member discussed the value of sharing and utilising the wealth of family knowledge as resources in schools, and sharing with other high schools, and Larry responded, suggesting ways of collaborating with others:

**Larry:** …talking about the issues and stuff ... even if it’s just leaders like us, all the leaders in all the schools, or a few selected people that you can actually trust to sit down and have a conversation.

### 6.2.4 In summary

The students who participated in the research at this school were articulate about learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and perspectives. Their comments suggest learning is primarily in the arts, humanities and social sciences. The bush tucker project identifying botanical plants, learning local Gumbaynggirr plant names and some Indigenous perspectives in science was the only references to cultural learning in the sciences and language.

The number of students in the group was small but as members of the Indigenous leadership team they were conscious of representing their peers (see Figures 12, 13, 14, and related discussion). The students provided different perspectives and experiences of the nature of their learning from a range of Years: 7, 8, and 11/12. Key issues emerging for these students were the importance and value of learning Aboriginal histories, knowledges and cultures, having its significance acknowledged and recognised in the school, and sharing their knowledges and cultures with non-Indigenous students.
At the same time, the students articulated desires for more cultural learning, greater commitment by some teachers, and ongoing involvement of Aboriginal Elders and community members in learning and cultural activities. They would like further opportunities for cultural expression (“dance…more painting…a painting on the wall”), and they appreciated and valued the Aboriginal staff member’s office as a designated space for them at school. I discuss the notion of cultural safety later in relation to secondary school three, and in Chapter 7.

6.3 Secondary School 2: Large and Semi-urban

Secondary school two is located within one of the regional centres in the land of the Gumbaynggirr nation. Within a multicultural population of over 600 students from Years 7 to 12 drawn from primary schools in the vicinity, 13 per cent of the students at the school identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in 2012, compared with the 4.5 per cent of people in the region who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in the 2011 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The school employed one full-time Aboriginal Education Officer.

Visits to the school and the discussions with Aboriginal students occurred over a period of several months, because the responsibility for organising the discussion groups became somewhat protracted (see Chapter 7). My initial contact was with the teacher and chair of the Aboriginal education committee who arranged for me to observe a Year 7 Aboriginal Studies class. Brett, the Aboriginal staff member, selected eight Aboriginal students to participate in the first discussion group. Gemma, the AECG representative, Brett (who was not at the time an AECG member), and Kylie, the Year 11/12 Aboriginal Studies teacher (non-Aboriginal), were present the discussion group. Gemma participated as co-
researcher and to support the students. The teacher and Aboriginal staff member participated only minimally.

We met in the Year 11/12 Aboriginal Studies classroom, and while Brett gathered more students from other years, Gemma, the AECG representative from another school, commented that the school architecture and the classroom were uninspiring. I asked the students present if there was somewhere else they would like to hold the discussion; one said “outside”, but others said “nowhere good outside”. They did not agree on an alternative and so we remained in the classroom. Some students were related (brothers and sisters). Most elected to use their own names which are replaced with pseudonyms for confidentiality reasons; one created a code name. Participating were four girls: Sophia, Kerin and Jakey BobCat (Year 7), and Alyssa (Year 11/12), attending from secondary school 1 for the Aboriginal Studies class; and four boys: Marcus (Year 7), Brayden (Year 8), Neil and Derrin (Year 11/12). Two students were ‘off-country’, from nation groupings in New South Wales, not the Gumbaynggirr nation.

Together, the students and I set the desks up in a U shape. Initially, I sat in the U together with the students, but it was difficult to locate the digital recorder in a suitably central position so I moved with the recorder to sit at a desk within, but at the top of, the U shape. The configuration was close and everyone could speak, be heard and recorded; and the voices of the Aboriginal staff member, the AECG member and the teacher were in the background. My familiarity with the three Year 11/12 students through AIME (2011), the Indigenous student mentoring program, together with my connections with the Aboriginal staff member and the AECG representative, their connections with the students, and the seating arrangement all created an environment conducive to an open discussion. The
students were responsive and respectful, engaged and serious, and focused on the discussion. Gemma and Kylie prompted the Year 7 students at some points during the discussion and later writing session. The Year 11/12 students checked with the Year 7 students to make sure they had opportunities to speak, an example of Aboriginal relational respect.

As the students filled out their consent forms at the start of the discussion, they provided useful feedback about some of the terminology and the format of the research consent form (I used different forms for primary students, see Appendix B):

“What is ‘participant’? …What is ‘audio-taped’? …Do I have to tick all the boxes?”

I explained the nature of research to the students, and the participation of other schools in the area, emphasising the privacy of the discussion, and that the staff members and AECG representative present had signed a confidentiality form (as requested by the Department of Education and Communities, see Appendix B). A second, follow up discussion was held several weeks after the first. We met in the school library, where the Year 11/12 Aboriginal Studies students were working with their teacher on their final essays for the year. There seemed to have been some miscommunication between Brett, the Aboriginal staff member, and Kylie, the teacher, about the date of the meeting. This was the final Aboriginal Studies class for the year, and the Year 11/12 students were engaged in writing with looming deadlines; too busy to participate fully in the discussion. Brett brought two Year 7 girls from the first group, and other students from the first group were absent that day. The Year 7 students reviewed my synthesis of the first discussion and then spoke further about their learning experiences, expanding on their thoughts. I returned to the students their writing/drawings from the first discussion group.
6.3.1 “In years 7, 8, 9, 10…we didn’t learn anything about Aboriginal history”: Extent and nature of cultural learning

The students were articulate about the extent, nature and significance of cultural learning. Derrin a Year 11/12 student, quickly responded to my first question, clarifying his understanding, and distinguishing Aboriginal cultural and historical knowledge:

**Katie:** So what I wanted to ask you about is what you’re learning of Aboriginal ways of life, people, culture, and history ... what subject areas do you learn in, history, or English? Do you learn stuff in science or maths, Aboriginal Studies?

**Derrin:** When you say learn about Aboriginal people do you mean like the way, like our culture, was brought up? Uum. We didn’t really learn anything, when I done history in Years 7, 8, 9, 10, we didn’t learn anything about Aboriginal. All we learnt was, uum, Aboriginal people being killed and being slaves and stuff. We didn’t learn anything about Aboriginal history.

Derrin’s comment expressed an insightful understanding of the lack of Aboriginal perspectives in a predominantly colonial view of history in Years 7 to 10. Another Year 11/12 student commented on cultural learning in art, but felt that it was superficial, lacking in depth and Aboriginal significance, relating only to dot painting:

**Alyssa:** Yeah in art we do Aboriginal painting but I don’t know, they didn’t really have a story to it, they just you know told us, oh yeah, do dots and blah blah blah, so you know...

Embedding Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum can mean the inclusion of Aboriginal viewpoints, or references to Aboriginal society, culture and history (Cook, 1995). However, one student’s comment suggested he found the approach perfunctory and not very meaningful:
**Brayden**: like they talk about it, but they don’t tell us, they don’t really have lessons on it, they just talk about it, like a 5 minute talk and then they just get over it.

**Katie**: Is that useful to have that as part of general learning, do you know what I mean, as an example?

**Brayden**: well, they’re not really teaching us nothing about Aboriginal like, he just talks about it and then just gets over it and goes back to the subject that we’re doing.

Two Year 7 students noted the importance of Aboriginal knowledge and being taught by Aboriginal people. They commented that some teachers made stereotyped assumptions, and they expressed a preference for being taught by Aboriginal holders of knowledge and experience:

**Jakey BobCat**: in PE we play like Aboriginal training games kind of...we learned about the seasons...[in] Aboriginal studies, and in art we were doing some Aboriginal art symbols and stuff

**Katie**: understanding what they mean?

**Jakey BobCat**: Kind of, and we did dot paintings... It’s kind of good...but most teachers are like what most people would have assumed...that they [Aboriginal people]...walked around with no clothes on...and [we would] like more of actual people who were there’s views rather than people who just assume everything.

**Katie**: So who do you think could come and talk to you?

**Kerin**: Like people that have experienced it and stuff.
**K:** *she’s [the teacher] Italian. [the Aboriginal staff member] *comes in every now and then.*

Teaching Aboriginal Studies was introduced to NSW schools with the 1982 Aboriginal Education Policy (NSW Department of Education. Aboriginal Education Unit, 1982). At times, the department has declared it mandatory, but this status varies considerably among schools. Strategies to assist teaching by non-Aboriginal or non-Torres Strait Islander teachers include critical guidance, interaction with and learning from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples (Lampert, 2005), and the understanding and adoption of Indigenous pedagogies (Yunkaporta, 2009b; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009).

This research was conducted in schools just before the introduction of the national *Australian Curriculum* which includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curriculum perspectives (however, see Chapters 2 and 3). At this school, Aboriginal Studies was taught to all students in Year 7 as a mandatory subject and as an elective subject in Year 11/12:

**Brayden:** *in Year 7 they’ve done a new *Australian Studies*

From the students’ comments, learning Aboriginal Studies in Year 7 and in Year 11/12 has provided opportunities to explore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in depth. They discussed some of their learning:

**Katie:** *What do you learn in Aboriginal Studies?*

**Alyssa:** *How they backburned and lived…*

**Jakey BobCat:** *we learned a bit about that the …trees… fire brings animals… we learned about the seasons.*

**Brayden:** *Excuse me, I did Aboriginal Studies in Year 7 and we watched this*
whole documentary about, I don’t know his name but just about Aboriginal
people and stuff and like, yeah we just kept watching documentaries and we then
had to do heaps and heaps of writing about it…

Katie: Was that good?

Brayden: Yeah the movies were good but the writing was pretty... it was about
these lads, you know how they put people in the olden days, like they’d put people
on other islands, yeah well they put people in Australia from England and they’d
come back and get them two years later’... like ‘cause they buried old Aboriginal
people because they’d died, they uum put their spear, like just in case they come
back, and like they believe like they come back... So this lad took the spear to hold
onto and yeah they thought he was that Aboriginal person coming back so they
took him in as like as an Aborigine but he was like an England man, but they
didn’t know that, so he learnt the Aboriginal language and all that and he got
tooked back home and they all come on the boat so Aboriginals all wiped them out.

Sophia and Kerin: Oh yeah I know what you’re talking about... I remember
that...yeah we watched that too...yeah we did it too ...in Miss [teacher] ’s class...

The Year 7 students also discussed documentary and feature movies that they watched in
Aboriginal Studies:

Kerin: We watch movies and stuff... about when white people first came to
Australia...some of them they act but most of them are documentaries.

Katie: Is that good? Do you like watching movies?

Kerin: Mmhhm, better than writing...
Kerin & Jakey BobCat: At the minute ...in Aboriginal Studies we’re looking at how they had nothing and had to go out and hunt their food and stuff like that. We watched a documentary about how there were these children ...on like an island and then these two other white people came and there were like letting them stay but they killed one of them because he something the law... He was like messing around with the young girl...yeah, so they killed him and then one of them stayed there and the other...and he was like their translator...

Kerin: In language we watched ‘Rabbit Proof Fence’...it’s sad.

Jakey BobCat: we copy out of a book and type it up on the Smart board, and like [the teacher] doesn’t like read it to us, she just types it ... apart from documentaries that we watch.

The movie, Rabbit Proof Fence, directed by Phillip Noyce (2002), about the Stolen Generations, was based on a book by Doris Pilkington (1996/2002) (Garimara), daughter of one of the girls in the book/film also featured in primary school two (see Chapter 5. The students’ detailed recollections of documentaries and movies with storylines that feature Aboriginal customs, language, historical perspectives of interactions with white settlers and authorities suggest this is a powerful, engaging tool for cultural learning, more so than copying out of a book or typing on a Smart board.

Beyond movie-watching supplemented by written activities, Jakey BobCat expressed interest in more “outside learning ... getting more interactive and stuff”. The Year 7 students said they had been on one excursion in Aboriginal Studies, to the cultural centre.

Jakey BobCat: yeah we went there, on the [bush tucker] walk.
The local Aboriginal cultural centre provides rich learning resources and activities and features prominently in primary school three (see Chapter 5) and is mentioned by students in secondary school three.

6.3.2 “I feel good about myself because I am learning this stuff”: Connections to cultural learning

In response to my questions about what was good about their cultural learning at school, the students were positive about their cultural learning, although some felt there could be more opportunities:

**Derrin:** I reckon it’s good.

**Neil:** It’s not enough

**Brayden:** Yeah, I reckon it’s heaps good…because we’re learning about our own culture and stuff and like learning how our lives were, and yeah… and feel good about myself because I am learning this stuff.

**Alyssa:** really I just say knowing who you are and where you come from...

Thus, for these students, cultural learning forms part of their understanding of themselves and their positioning, and it is enhanced by cultural activities such as dance.

Dance

Four boys in the discussion spoke enthusiastically of their participation in the school Aboriginal boys’ dance group. The Aboriginal staff member had initiated and now managed the dance group, playing *didjeridu* in performances, and a dancer external to the school taught the boys dance moves. The dance group was very successful, and the students were invited to perform at local events such as NAIDOC celebrations at universities, other schools, conferences and festivals. The boys talked with enthusiasm
and engagement about their performances in the dance group and its meaning for them and the community:

Neil: Uum, it’s been 20 years since anything like this has happened... in Gumbaynggirr country...we thought just to bring pride and honour back into our community, and um to let civilians know that we’re here to embrace our culture before it just becomes done...pretty much.

Derrin: Well actually the school asked [name], which is the person who taught us how to dance, to come to the school and he asked us; a couple of the boys got asked to go and do the dancing, that’s how it all started. And we just started getting noticed from other people you know every now and then we get a phone call or an email asking us to go and dance and perform for them ...which is pretty good.

Neil: we want to expand...

Brayden: Yeah it depends on what emails and calls we get.

Katie: so when you move on, leave school, will there be others trained too, to keep it going?

Brayden: I really hope that we keep going...

The boys’ passionate but modest comments about their involvement in the dance group performances indicate value in terms of their pride, and from contributing to a sense of leadership and contribution to the community: a source of “pride and honour”. Educators have recognised the important role of dance and performance in constructing and sustaining indigenous young people, learning about their culture and customs, leading to improved educational engagement and outcomes (Blanch, 2009; Thorpe, 2011; Whitinui, 2010a). I discuss the place and recognition of Aboriginal dance within NSW schools and curricula further in Chapter 7.
Students’ commented that cultural events and activities involving the local Aboriginal community at the school were limited. They referred to a weekly Acknowledgement to Country in assembly but indicated little community involvement or engagement in school activities beyond the occasional passive presence of Elders at assembly:

**Derrin**: sometimes if we’re having a big assembly … Do an acknowledgement every Monday, in a big assembly we do an acknowledgement and all the Aboriginals, uum Elders will come in sometimes.

**Katie**: do they talk?

**Derrin**: Oh, not really they just sit there and just listen.

**Katie**: do parents come into school as well?

**Neil**: Rarely.

Alyssa, the Year 11/12 student from the first secondary school, who joined students at this school for Aboriginal Studies once a week, discussed Aboriginal student involvement in the NAIDOC day celebrations at her school. She reflected on the difficult past for Aboriginal people:

**Alyssa**: We have assemblies, NAIDOC assemblies … that’s really all that we have at school…like we do welcome to country and we just tell some of the people at our school some of the things that happened back then when you know things went wrong…

Alyssa’s awareness and consciousness of historical events may reflect her learning in Year 11/12 Aboriginal Studies which includes, for example, the “impact of colonisation on Aboriginal cultures and families” (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2010b, p. 18).

The students referred to other Indigenous events observed at the school, such as Deadly Days, regional festivals promoting opportunities in education, employment and training
for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and remembering National Sorry Day:

*Neil*: *this is the first year we celebrated Sorry Day, I don’t think we celebrated last year.*

*Derrin*: *we celebrated it this year, Sorry Day, that’s the first year, ever.*

The year the students were talking about was 2012. National Sorry Day remembers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Stolen Generations annually on May 26, when in 1997 the report of the national inquiry, *Bringing them home (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997)*, was tabled in Federal Parliament, and as recommended in the report. Although National Sorry Day was initiated in 1998, it was only recognised in 2010 as a National Sorry Day (National Sorry Day Committee Inc., 2013).

6.3.3 “*Each person plays just a little bit it’ll make a big difference* ”: Impact and consciousness of cultural learning

The Year 11/12 students discussed aspects of history and contemporary life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, of systemic and legislative impacts, reflecting the current NSW Stage 6 Aboriginal Studies syllabus [Years 11-12] that builds on knowledge learned in stages 4 and 5 (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2010b, p. 5).

*Neil*: *History, what’s happening now, with, um, institutionalised racism and all that.*

*Alyssa*: *uum we learn human rights and social justice, land rights…*

*Derrin*: *title acts…*

*Neil*: *media manipulation*
From these brief comments, the students demonstrate understanding and critical thinking, learning objectives expressed in the rationale for Aboriginal Studies in the Stage 6 (Year 11/12) curriculum:

to foster intellectual, social and moral development by enabling students to think critically about the historical and contemporary experiences of Aboriginal peoples…to develop a heightened understanding and appreciation of the concepts of social justice and shared histories, and … critically examine their role as active and informed citizens. (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2010b, p. 5)

Language

The Aboriginal students commented that Aboriginal staff member taught some local Gumbaynggirr language to Year 7 students, but they would like to learn more, because of the value of language to their identity and culture:

Jakey BobCat: I've been learning it in language...this term [would like to learn] more about the language.

Kerin: it’s hard to learn language. We’re doing it in language now...

Alyssa: one thing that’s not so good is, like the language, it’s really, really hard to learn...

Neil: No…not really, a few words, that’s it, not actually learning anything.

Derrin: it should be really important to have your Aboriginal language, just like any other culture. Reckon having your language is a big part of who you are, where you come from.

The Year 11/12 students discussed further the importance of language, expressing strong awareness of their learning and commitment to the continuation of Aboriginal cultures and languages:
Neil: not enough...uum, cause if they want our culture to survive we want language to be passed on, to education for Koori [NSW Aboriginal] students.

Derrin: everyone’s got to commit to it...everyone’s got to play, each person plays just a little bit it’ll make a big difference.

Neil: Not many people will go out of their way, like stop doing something they’re doing and go and learn an Aboriginal language...

While understanding the effects of colonisation on language, and the relationship of languages to cultural identity and heritage are specified in the NSW Stage 6 syllabus (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2010b), teaching local languages is a local school decision dependent on resources, staffing and community support (see Chapter 7).

Writing and drawing

The writing and drawing by students during the first discussion group reflected some politically aware views. They commented on the importance of involving Aboriginal people (“real people”) in Aboriginal education, learning and expressed desires for more Aboriginal cultural events, dance and language at school. Encouraged by Gemma, the AECG representative, to write down what they would like to see, some students developed their ideas into “wish lists” of what they would like to see in the school:

Gemma: whatever you put down there might become real...

Brayden: I’m going to write a wish list [see Figure 15]

[Laughter from other students]

Brayden: no, a wish list that I want to happen in this school...can we do that?

Other students followed with wish lists. One Year 7 girl included “girl dancing” in her wish list, perhaps in response to the successful dance group for boys discussed earlier in
the session, a desire to learn “both sides of the story”, language, and for Elders to teach Aboriginal Studies (see Figure 16).
Figure 15: “Wish list”, Brayden, Year 8, Secondary school no. 2

Figure 16: “School wish list”, Jakey BobCat, Year 7, Secondary school no. 2
Two Year 11/12 students expressed political activism in their writing and drawing.

Neil composed a personal manifesto, including the symbolism of the Aboriginal flag (see Figure 17):

\[
N: \text{what does revolutionary mean?}
\]

**Katie:** Uum, like major change...

**Marcus:** revolution ... change the world...Completely turn it around...

Following is the text of Neil’s manifesto:

\[
I \text{ hope to become something more than I am today. I hope to become a revolutionary. Someone who will change everything, someone who will change the way our brothers and sisters live. People won’t only fear us but will think of us as great leaders to the Koori community. I will make this happen or I will die trying.}
\]

Neil’s powerful manifesto expresses many things: hope for change in the future; the affirmative potential of the transformative nature of cultural learning and awareness through education; of becoming-something-more-than-I-am; awareness of fear; and aspirations for community leadership.
I hope to become something more than who I am today. I hope to become a revolutionary. Someone who will change everything, who will change the way we live. People won’t only fear us but will think of us as great leaders to the Koori community. I will make this happen or I will die trying.

A symbol of hope and survival
Derrin transformed a sketch he had drawn during the discussion into an activist statement on a placard about cultural learning (see Figure 18): “We need more Aboriginal Education in public schools”.

Alyssa (Figure 19) wrote insightfully about embedding Aboriginal knowledge learning in curriculum, and giving this knowledge equal weight with knowledge of other societies, for example, as sacred sites; the importance of sharing cultural knowledge and history with all students; and learning language and culture early, through art and song:

*We learn about local sacred sites like [names of places] cultural centre and the fish traps. But I think that we should learn other cultures about these sites as in some cultures like Hindu and whatnot have sacred sites as we do too. I would love if we actually got more people into Aboriginal studies like learn it from Year 7 upwards and have an Aboriginal teacher who teaches it if old enough to do it would be a good experience for anybody to learn not even us should be learning but the school kids could learn like do art sing songs like head shoulders knees and toes in language.*
Figure 18: Derrin, Year 11/12, writing/drawing, Secondary school no. 2
We learn about local significant sites like mutton bird island, red rock, yarramarring cultural centre, and the fish traps. But I think that we should also learn about other cultures and what not have sacred sites as we do to. I would love if we actually got more people into aboriginal studies like learn it from year 7 upwards and have an aboriginal teacher who teaches it if I was old enough to do it would it be a good experience for anybody to learn not even should be learning but even preschool kids could learn like do art sing songs like hood shoulders knees and toes in language.
The students’ drawing and writing demonstrate the strength of a culturally aware education that encourages critical thinking and understanding of cultural knowledge, of who they are, and that with such learning, students can become-other, to imagine themselves within two worlds.

6.3.4 In summary

For these students, learning Aboriginal knowledge and culture as part of their education is meaningful and positive, “it’s heaps good”, but at the same time they were aware of gaps, and limitations in the learning and activities at their school: “we didn’t learn anything about Aboriginal”, “it’s not enough”. The Year 7 Aboriginal Studies students wanted more Aboriginal people involved in teaching, and more interactivity in learning. Year 11/12 Aboriginal Studies students reflected understanding of issues such as social justice, racism and the construction of knowledge. They expressed a political consciousness, perhaps developed through studying events such as the NAIDOC 40th celebration of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in the national capital. Their learning reflects the critical focus of the important Year 11/12 Aboriginal Studies syllabus (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2010b). However, the continuity of Year 11/12 Aboriginal Studies was in doubt, and the students would have to complete Year 12 online. This predicament is experienced in other secondary schools because of student quotas, and lack of funding (see Chapter 7, Aboriginal Studies), and denies many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students the opportunity to learn their history, perspectives and culture in depth, and to develop critical insights and awareness of their positioning in contemporary society.

Apart from the occasional presence of Aboriginal Elders at school assemblies, the students at this school indicated limited active engagement or connections with
community members in teaching and learning at the school or in related activities. The school Principal also discussed the school’s lack of success in engaging local community Elders in school events or in contributing to Aboriginal Studies content (see Chapter 7).

6.4 Secondary School no. 3: Semi-urban

The school is located in a regional centre in the land of the Gumbaynggirr nation, with an enrolment of over 800 students drawn from neighbouring local primary schools. Students who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander represented 9 per cent of the school population in 2012, double the 4.5 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the region identified in the 2011 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The school staff included an Aboriginal Education Assistant, a part-time Aboriginal Norta tutor (Norta is a NSW government funded tutoring program), and three teachers who identified as Indigenous. Artwork such Aboriginal murals adorned the walls in prominent places, suggesting strong cultural recognition.

A non-Aboriginal teacher and the Aboriginal Education Assistant selected students from Years 7 to 11 to participate in the research. The school had expressed interest in joining the research towards the end of the 2012 school year and the first discussion with students took place in December 2012, with a follow up discussion in February 2013. The first discussion took place in a room in the school library. Preparation for the discussion group seemed to have been rushed, and participating students arrived at different times throughout the discussion. As each student joined, I welcomed them and explained the research conversation. In order to keep the momentum flowing and not disrupt the discussion, I did not ask the students if they would like to move to another location. The discussion proceeded slowly and the students took some time to warm up and to speak.
within the group. The room was hot and stuffy but when students opened windows, noise from the playground outside filtering in became distracting and so they were closed.

Eleven students participated in the first discussion (for confidentiality, pseudonyms are used): Tara and Zara (Year 7 girls); Sharon and Bella (Year 8 girls), Tom and Jai (Year 8 boys); Eliza and Celia (Year 9 girls); Lily and Molly (Year 10 girls); and Tahlia (Year 11 girl). The Aboriginal staff member, representing the AECG, and the non-Aboriginal teacher of English (soon to teach Gumbaynggirr language) were present at the first discussion (see Chapter 7). The students and I sat around a large table and the Aboriginal staff member and the teacher sat at a table behind. The conversation was slow, and after talking for a while, I gave the students pens and paper and asked them to write or draw on the topic under discussion. We all moved around, the students relaxed a little, and the teacher and Aboriginal staff member prompted them by asking further related questions.

After the discussion, I visited the Aboriginal staff member’s office. The small room was centrally located in the school, with Aboriginal posters decorating the walls, and resources such as books, magazines, a computer, armchairs and a fridge filled the room. Aboriginal students dropped in between classes to talk with the Aboriginal staff member, to discuss school and subjects they were studying. The Aboriginal staff member’s relationship with the students was warm and supportive, giving advice, discussing tutoring and other opportunities. I asked if we could have a follow up discussion in the room, and the Aboriginal staff member agreed. Although the room was small, it is often used for meetings. Aboriginal parents often come straight to the room when they visit the school, indicating it was a familiar and comfortable space for discussion.
The second discussion with students took place early in the following school year, and the students had moved up a year. Seven students from the first group and the Aboriginal staff member participated: Tara and Zara (Year 8 girls); Bella and Sharon (Year 9 girls); Tom (Year 9 boy); Lily and Molly (Year 11 girls). The students reviewed and accepted my synthesis of the first discussion, and discussed the topic further. They were more relaxed than in the first group and the discussion was friendly and conversational. The room was small and full with people. The door remained open, and noise from outside, students and teachers talking, and public address announcements filtered into the discussion. From the recordings of both discussion groups it was difficult to identify some students’ voices because of outside noise; at times the students spoke over each other, or their voices were inaudible. The students’ comments from both discussion groups are grouped here into the three broad themes.

6.4.1 “Stolen Generation…land rights… just history”: Extent and nature of cultural learning

To begin the discussion, I asked the students what they were learning at school, in what areas:

[Silence, laughter from girls, perhaps they did not know where to start or felt awkward about the question].

**Katie**: Maybe we can talk about what subject areas you learn in, so for instance, in History? Do you learn Aboriginal history, or of Aboriginal people in history?

**Tara**: Stolen Generation

**Molly**: land rights

**Tom**: when we had History, Mr…went on computers…Dust Echoes.
Dust Echoes is a collection of Aboriginal dreamtime stories collected from the Wugularr (Beswick) Community in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory (Australian Broadcasting Corporation & Djilpin Arts Aboriginal Corporation, 2007).

Some students discussed the length of time they spend in class “talking about Aboriginal/Indigenous things”:

Lily: in Year 10 history three weeks with learning ...Aboriginal things about Eddie Mabo, land rights and that stuff. We watched a movie...

Tahlia: Last year in history we had[teacher] ...she spent heaps of weeks...on Aboriginal stuff... about like laws, yep...we watched a movie as well ...about how the British people came over...and treated

Sharon: [learned about] Aboriginal people...if someone they had to throw a spear at them, or hold them down and throw a spear at them, then they die...

Bella, Eliza: things about people like...Bennelong...in year 8...how he was killed.

The students’ comments suggest the important role of movies, as in the previous secondary school. Eddie Koiki Mabo was a Torres Strait Islander man whose questioning and campaigning regarding his customary land ownership led to an historic High Court challenge, overturning the Australian legal doctrine of terra nullius (land belonging to no-one), and establishing native title legal rights (Mabo v Queensland (No. 2), 1992; Reynolds, 2000). Woollarawarre Bennelong (1764-1813) was a man of the Eora nation in the Sydney area who was captured by Governor Arthur Phillip, taken to live in Government House, Sydney, and in 1792 to Britain to meet King George III (Dark, 1966; The little red yellow black book: An introduction to Indigenous Australia, 2008).
Bennelong is one of the personalities who featured in early colonial publications and Australian historical textbooks.

The students discussed studying the Stolen Generations in History and Geography, a mandatory topic in the NSW History Syllabus Stage 4 (Years 7-8), and in Stage 5 (years 9-10) Geography. Both include units looking at colonisation, Aboriginal history, and experiences of Aboriginal communities (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2010a). One student spoke of an activity in English:

*Lily:* In English we had to write a journal of Stolen Generation and what it would be like if you were one of those people.

As with the other schools, the students did not recall cultural learning in science, technology or mathematics, and expressed limitations in other subject areas:

*Tom:* good having classes...but don't teach much in other subjects...just history.

*Katie:* Do you do Aboriginal Studies here in the school?

*Lily:* We used to, I did it for a year...in Year 9.

*Molly:* [in art] ...– I do like patterns and stuff... just my own kind of thing ...never really studied anything [Aboriginal], not until next year.

*Katie:* are there more things you’d like to be learning about, about Indigenous culture, stories?

*Jai:* Is the discussion being recorded? [laughter]

*All students:* [silence...laughter...whispering]
Jai’s comment about the discussion being recorded, and the other students’ responses, suggest a reluctance to speak out or be critical of the school, although I had indicated confidentiality (see further discussion in Chapter 7).

Language

Learning the local Gumbaynggirr language had prominence in the school for the Aboriginal students, many of whom were from the Gumbaynggirr nation. In the first discussion group in 2012, the students discussed language learning for Aboriginal students:

*Katie:* are you learning vocabulary or are you learning the whole structure of the language?

*Molly:* the whole thing...in Year 7, 8, 9

*Tom:* It’s just a class that any year can do

*Katie:* Oh, OK so it’s an option elective?

*Tom:* No, it’s just like in class

*Bella:* it happens every Monday...in a certain period, like Year 7 will go in the first period.

Students in other schools had mentioned that the Gumbaynggirr language was hard to learn. I asked these students what they thought:

*Celia:* Some things are hard and some you just pick up ...they’re easier

*Zara:* sometimes names [are hard]

*Tahlia:* getting your tongue to roll, it’s so hard...

In 2013, the school introduced Gumbaynggirr as mandatory for all students in Year 7, replacing French as a Language Other Than English (LOTE), (see also Chapter 7).
However, Aboriginal students still have the option to choose to learn language in other years:

**Jai:** In Year 7 this year...there’s no French anymore

**Tahlia:** Aboriginal language, no French...we can choose but all the year 7s do it.

The students discussed activities at the school and their participation in NAIDOC week, although their responses varied:

**Celia:** [NAIDOC] we don’t really do anything, we have assembly...Indigenous awards.

**Tara:** Assembly...last year we did these posters.

**Zara:** We have a celebration...then we go in and have traditional food....

**Katie:** in assembly do people talk? Do Elders come?

**Lily:** Yeah...not really [a person] spoke last year... he spoke about the tent embassy... some of us do [speak] but some of us don’t...some of us just hold up signs.

**Jai:** one year there was a big thing...rainbow serpent.

Jan, the Aboriginal staff member explained that in 2012 students had painted and carried placards for the NAIDOC Tent Embassy theme, and two senior students were masters of ceremonies at the NAIDOC assembly, while students spoke in their local language.

The students mentioned further cultural and language activities, including events and excursions such as visiting local sacred sites and the local cultural centre, in conjunction with the Gumbaynggirr language classes:
Bella: we have Deadly Days [gatherings of Indigenous students from schools in the region].

Sharon: Me and [a couple of the other girls] do Speaking Hour Lingo [an Indigenous program on local radio]. I had lunch with the justice crew [young people from correctional institutions]... oh my god...they were so good.

Eliza: oh, it was sacred women’s sites where women had their period they go out an island where they go and come back.

Eliza, Sharon, Bella: [cultural centre] stuff... uuum we do heaps of things, we learn about the language... bush tucker...bush walking trip.

Although Aboriginal/Indigenous Studies was not taught as a subject at the school, these comments indicate that the school does have active connections with local places and programs.

Dance

As discussed in secondary school two, Aboriginal or Indigenous dance is a powerful and meaningful cultural activity for the students. Some girls talked about the dance activities they had participated in:

Tahlia: someone was there from Bangarra dance studio... we went to [nearby centre] and we had an audition to get in and we got in, there were 4 of us...There was exactly 300 Indigenous students dancing into one dance, from Sydney to Dubbo and the north coast... We had to have our hair slicked back...and have...in our hair...and down our body across our chest and across our back.

Bangarra Dance Theatre is one of Australia's leading Indigenous performing arts organisations (Bangarra Dance Theatre, 2014). Through the NSW Department of Education and Communities, Bangarra provides opportunities for secondary students to
learn and perform contemporary dance in Aboriginal Dance Workshops, from which a small number of students is selected to join the NSW Public Schools Aboriginal Dance Company (NSW Department of Education and Communities, [2014]).

**Lily:** yeah, we went to [place] to audition...and people were picked out to be in *Bangarra dance and the rest of us went with Schools spec... [we did] the performance... 6 times.*

Schools Spectacular is an annual event presented by the NSW Department of Education and Communities to showcase the talents of the students of New South Wales public schools in dance, singing and orchestral music (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2013). This major achievement for the students was acknowledged proudly in the school and community, but was not accredited academically as part of their study. The praxis and critical pedagogy of indigenous dance in education can provide “spiritual capital… power [and] … wellbeing in culturally distinct ways” that contributes to indigenous students’ critical understanding of their worlds (Cruz Banks, 2009, p. 356), but is not fully recognised in curriculum (see Chapter 7).

The students briefly discussed local community involvement in cultural learning and school activities, including Elders attending a barbeque at the school (see Figure 20), and an Aboriginal Elder visiting the school to talk with the students, and speaking at NAIDOC:

**Katie:** what about Aboriginal Elders, coming into the school?

**Molly:** Aunty M... She tells us stories

**Katie:** Dreamtime stories?

**Lily:** Yeah...not really [someone] spoke last year [at NAIDOC]... he spoke about the tent embassy...
The Aboriginal staff member discussed further Aboriginal community involvement in teaching, often at the request of teachers (see Chapter 7).

**Writing and drawing**

Despite the prompting of the teacher (“we’re going to stimulate them”) and the Aboriginal staff member’s presence, the students were not very forthcoming in the first discussion. Perhaps the teacher’s presence and direct questioning inhibited them, although the teacher appeared to have a close relationship with some of the students. I asked the students to draw and/or write of their cultural learning. Collectively they discussed and summarised their cultural learning and activities at the school as they wrote, including participating in AIME, the Indigenous mentoring program and homework centre:

[Students talking, asking for pen colours; whispering, laughing]

**Jai:** What’s the time?

**Lily:** Time is 3 minutes past…

**Sharon:** so we write down…?

[spelling]

**Bella:** A-I-D-O-C
Things we did.
Deadly days.
We went to sacred sites and learned about the sacredness of the sport.
Aboriginal dancing.
Elders came in and held a barque.
Learned about the stolen generation.
Home work centre.
Nadocie assembly.
Yarrawarra.
Language classes.
Aime
Naidoc week.
Figure 21: Tara, Year 8, writing, Secondary school no. 3
The students’ writings in Figures 20 and 21 summarise and extend their discussions, for example, in Figure 21, references to Elders, painting, screen printing, bush food and dancing.

6.4.2 “Good to know about your culture and how they were”: Connections to cultural learning

A smaller group of students reflected on their connections with cultural learning:

**Katie**: as Indigenous or Aboriginal students do you feel it’s important to learn about your ...?

**Lily**: Culture [finishing my sentence]

**Katie**: Culture and history?

**Students**: Yes [in chorus]

**Molly**: Good to know about your culture and how they were...

**Tahlia**: It’s good and different...our generation

**Katie**: Compared to say your parents’ generation?

**Eliza**: I guess so...we’ve just never seen it...

**Tara**: good to have the learning of the history...background ... it’s good ‘cause you learn new things...

**Tahlia**: ...meet new people.

These students recognised the value and importance for them of learning their history, culture and meeting people. Further, they were aware that such learning was denied to previous generations. In response to a question about further learning, two students from other Aboriginal nations wanted to know about their cultures:
Lily: my culture is from Sydney and my great, great, great, great, 6 greats grandmother was the first Aboriginal to be married to a convict on Australia Day... I only knew three years ago that I was Aboriginal.

Sharon: ...Wiradjuri, that’s my tribe, Sydney as well...

6.4.3 “I think it's really sad”: Impact and consciousness of cultural learning

When I asked how they felt about learning cultural learning, some students reflected on the impact of learning some historical material, particularly the Stolen Generations:

Molly: I think it’s really sad...

Sharon: my Nan was part of the Stolen Generation ... [but] she lives a long way away... I don’t really know...

Cultural safety

At the first discussion, Luke, the non-Aboriginal teacher, asked the students how they felt about the Aboriginal staff member’s room in the school, and they talked about the safety it offered:

Tahlia, Bella: I love it...it’s fantastic...its cool ...it’s great

Katie: So you’ve got a space where you can go and feel...

Lily: safe [finishing my sentence]

Bella: we feel quite safe in there, it’s like a little safe area...

Luke: do you feel like here it’s white stuff, education, when you go there do you feel more Aboriginal?

Students: Yes [in chorus]...can we say that?

Luke: you can say whatever you like...

These students’ attention to the cultural safety provided by the Aboriginal staff member’s room and support, and their hesitancy about agreeing with the teacher’s comment about
distinguishing between “white stuff, education” and being “more Aboriginal” reflect continuing underlying issues that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students face, such as whiteness, especially in schools where they are a minority. In Chapters 4 and 7, I discuss the notion of cultural safety in education further.

### 6.4.4 In summary

Overall, the students at this school were less critical of the nature and extent of their cultural learning than students in the two other secondary schools, with only one or two expressing desires for more learning or activities. This may reflect a climate of recognition, acknowledgement and acceptance of Indigenous cultures and community connections that the school fosters (see Chapter 7), one that the students felt they should not talk out against. For example, one student’s comment about the discussion being recorded suggests some discomfort about being critical. As in other schools, the students recalled learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives primarily in History, Geography, Art and English with little mention in Science, Technology and Mathematics. Although Aboriginal Studies is not offered at the school, learning the local Gumbaynggirr language incorporates elements of cultural and heritage knowledge, and has taken on more prominence, moving from optional sessions for Aboriginal students to a full, compulsory subject for all Year 7 students, replacing French as a language subject. The students’ comments suggest less evidence of high order, critical thinking or political awareness, compared to school two, for example, but the school is demonstrably supportive of Aboriginal and other cultures (see Chapter 7).
6.5 Perspectives and Knowledges

The students’ learning experiences varied among the three schools according to: the subjects taught, the extent of teaching and in which years; who taught the students (non-Indigenous or Indigenous); Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander events and activities at the schools; and involvement of community members in teaching and cultural activities. The students identified cultural learning predominantly in the subjects of Aboriginal Studies, History, Geography, English, Art and Gumbaynggirr language. They discussed learning of life before colonisation; the impact of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, experiences of the Stolen Generations; and Dreamtime stories.

However, apart from land management and botanical plants, the students expressed less cultural learning and knowledge embedded in science, technology or mathematics subjects. This is despite many examples in the NSW secondary school curricula such as sustainability practices, relation to the environment, Aboriginal cosmology, astronomy, ecology, Aboriginal X-ray art (Appanna, 2011; Riley & Genner, 2011), and Aboriginal cross-curriculum content statements in the New South Wales year 7-10 syllabus (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2003a). It may also reflect less student engagement with those subject areas.

Examples of contemporary learning for these secondary schools students include cultural activities with community, learning in dance, art and music, and recognising the living, dynamic nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Some students expressed awareness of content that lacked depth and detail, superficial, that was “bolted-on” (Riley & Genner, 2011, p. 121). The insertion of Aboriginal perspectives into Western-oriented practices and policies, including education, does not always embody an
understanding of Aboriginal experiences (Kerwin, 2011), and can present “superficial, generalised and undifferentiated understandings of the cultures and histories” (Grieves, 2009a, p. 38). However, the significance of learning Aboriginal history from an Aboriginal point of view was expressed clearly by Derrin, the Year 11/12 student from secondary school one, who distinguished between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal perspectives of Aboriginal history.

Students remembered and connected with extended learning, but found other material to be less fulfilling. The Year 7 and 11/12 Aboriginal Studies students indicated deeper connections to, and engagement with cultural learning, a consciousness and awareness of their positioning in society, as well as issues of social justice in contemporary life. Such critical thinking skills and knowledge extend beyond superficial, tokenistic learning for some students in other subjects. In this sense, Year 11/12 Aboriginal Studies appears to have enhanced the previous curriculum which was repetitive of earlier years of learning (Wray, 2006). Students expressed desires for greater involvement of Aboriginal community members in delivering and understanding perspectives and knowledges. Programs initiated by Aboriginal school staff, for example, dance in secondary school two, enable students to connect with and develop pride in cultural heritage. This is discussed further in Chapter 7. However, for these students, the opportunities for cultural learning in their schooling are powerful and meaningful.

6.6 Concluding remarks

Three key points emerge from the student comments in this chapter. First, while the stated aims of NSW Aboriginal education policies are to educate all students about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, perspectives and cultures, the comments from students in these schools indicate variations in the schools’ implementation of cultural
learning and community involvement. Underlying systemic forces such as departmental resourcing continue to position Indigenous education and peoples at the periphery (Herbert, 2012) (see Chapters 2, 3 and 7). Second, NSW education systems and schools have a responsibility through curricula to teach relevant and community-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in a manner and at a level which promotes and respects cultural learning and encourages critical thinking. Such learning has the potential to facilitate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young peoples’ critical analysis and understanding of their positioning, in looking ahead to represent their people, and opportunities for students to “become something more than I am”. Glimpses of such learning emerging from this chapter include Aboriginal Studies, language, Aboriginal perspectives in curriculum, and local community and place connections. Third, the strength of locally embedded cultural learning and cultural heritage, performative expression, such as Aboriginal art and dance, provide a “foundation for strength and wellbeing” (Grieves, 2006, p. 8). In the next chapter, I present and discuss the views of adult educators in relation to cultural learning in their schools.
Chapter 7: Aboriginal Staff, AECG Members, Principals and Teachers

In this chapter, I consider the perspectives of Aboriginal educational staff, AECG members, principals, and teachers regarding cultural learning in the participating schools. Including the perspectives of adults is not to diminish the students’ views, or to provide alternative interpretations of cultural learning, but to acknowledge and seek to understand the co-existing separate material realities presented by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Aboriginal adults and non-Aboriginal adults in the schools (Berryman et al., 2013b; Jones & Jenkins, 2008a). This follows indigenous principles through contextualising the research with relational knowledge, and working with the community (Kovach, 2010; Wilson, 2008). Further, the adults’ contributions inform understanding of past and present systemic, educational, attitudinal, social, political forces, and silences (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) affecting the production of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural learning within the New South Wales education system.

This chapter addresses the third research question:

*What are the systemic policy, structural, institutional factors and individual attitudes that mediate and affect the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ cultural learning experiences?*

7.1 Participants

The adult participants included Aboriginal educational support staff, Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) members, principals, and teachers. In co-constructing the research, the local AECG required a representative to join the student
discussion groups. Often the Aboriginal staff in schools were AECG members. These adults participated in student discussions as co-researchers, to provide cultural safety for the students, to monitor the research, and report back to the AECG (see Chapter 4). The NSW Department of Education and Communities also required a school staff member to attend the student discussion groups for duty of care reasons. In most student discussions this person was also the Aboriginal staff member or AECG representative. In primary schools, an AECG representative, an Aboriginal Education Worker, and a Learning Support Officer attended the discussions. In secondary schools, a Learning Support Officer, an AECG representative, an Aboriginal Education Assistant, and an Aboriginal Education Officer were present, as well as two non-Aboriginal teachers. The Aboriginal adults, five from the local Gumbaynggirr nation and three from other Aboriginal nations, contributed their knowledge and perspectives through student discussion groups and in the adult yarning sessions. Yarning is an Indigenous form of conversation and research that involves establishing relationships over time, developing trust, and sharing information (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010; Carnes, 2014). During visits to schools to arrange student discussion groups, attending AIME mentoring sessions (2011), monthly AECG meetings and cultural events, I developed relationships with Aboriginal staff and AECG members, and through yarning they shared their stories.

In the six schools, I interviewed the principals in person, and some invited other staff members to the interviews. In these semi-structured interviews, principals discussed their roles and philosophies regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural learning, policy implementation, teaching practices, cultural events and community engagement in their schools (see Appendix D for questions). Teachers of Aboriginal Studies, of language, and of classes incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives,
as well as Aboriginal education co-ordinators, shared their views and experiences through informal conversations during the course of the research. Table 4 provides details of the adult participants and schools. I returned to four schools for follow-up discussions to review the students’ comments with principals. I presented a preliminary report of the research to an AECG meeting, where it was discussed and approved. I also presented a selection of students’ comments and analysis to teachers at secondary school one, by invitation to a secondary school that did not participate in the research, and to a class of preservice teachers at Southern Cross University.

The implementation of policy and curriculum, and the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, family and community members in curriculum and school cultural activities are part of the educational discourse that defines the teaching and positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students at a “cultural interface” of Western and Indigenous learning systems and knowledges (Nakata, 2011, p. 2). I begin the exploration of this discourse and the surrounding forces with the perspectives of Aboriginal staff.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Adults</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary School 1 PS1</td>
<td>Small &amp; semi-rural</td>
<td>Principal, PS1 Nora, AECG representative, PS1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School 2 PS2</td>
<td>Suburban &amp; coastal</td>
<td>Principal, PS2 Mark, Teacher, PS2 Keith, Aboriginal staff member, PS2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School 3 PS3</td>
<td>Small village</td>
<td>Principal, PS3 Aunty A., Aboriginal staff member, PS3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School 1 SS1</td>
<td>Large, regional, urban</td>
<td>Principal, SS1 Mark, Aboriginal staff member, SS1 Tyler, Aboriginal education co-ordinator, SS1 Sharon, History teacher, SS1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School 2 SS2</td>
<td>Large, semi-urban</td>
<td>Principal, SS2 John, Aboriginal education committee chair and teacher (non-Aboriginal), SS2 Brett, Aboriginal staff member, SS2 Gemma, AECG representative, SS2 Jane, Year 7 Aboriginal Studies teacher (non-Aboriginal), SS2 Kylie, Year 11/12 Aboriginal Studies teacher (non-Aboriginal), SS2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School 3 SS3</td>
<td>Regional, semi-urban</td>
<td>Principal, SS3 Deputy Principal, SS3 Jan, Aboriginal staff member, SS3 Luke, English teacher (non-Aboriginal), SS3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>21</strong></td>
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7.2 Aboriginal staff in schools: “I’m the only Indigenous person on staff”

In NSW schools, Aboriginal staff are employed within a complex policy and funding environment that is subject to political and ideological influences (Luke et al., 2013; MacGill, 2008; Reid, 2004). Throughout the last 32 years, NSW Aboriginal education policies created Aboriginal educational staff positions to assist with Aboriginal community liaison, literacy and numeracy, educational outcomes and student attendance. The positions of Aboriginal Education Assistant (AEA) and Aboriginal Education Officer (AEO) are funded by both federal and state governments (NSW Department of Education and Training & NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc., 2004). Originally, the appointment of an AEA or AEO related to a percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a school. Following recommendations of the NSW Department of Education and Training and the NSW AECG review of Aboriginal education, the re-alignment of Aboriginal staff support positions to “better meet identified needs of Aboriginal students” (2004, p. 197) placed greater focus on learning skills. The NSW government currently indicates that AEOs “work in schools where significant numbers of Aboriginal students are enrolled” (NSW Department of Education and Communities, n.d.-a, emphasis added) but does not stipulate the number of enrolments. Staffing allocation does not reflect changes in the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student school enrolments. Nationally, Indigenous teachers comprise one percent of the teaching population, compared with five per cent of Indigenous students (More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative, 2014). Only one secondary
school acknowledged teachers who identified as Indigenous, but they did not participate in the research.

The uncertainty of Aboriginal staff employment emerged from the interviews and discussions, highlighting the following points. The appointments of full-time AEOs is static, and funding of existing positions is constantly under threat and subject to political changes at state and federal levels of government. Primary schools employed Aboriginal support staff and language teachers on short term or renewable contracts, and one-off grants in learning support positions such as School Learning Support Officer (SLSO) or as tutors. Two secondary schools employed full-time Aboriginal educational staff. My research shows Aboriginal staff work in an environment of tension in relation to their employment, their functions, and conflict with the system and/or school.

### 7.2.1 Primary schools

Primary school one (PS1) had the smallest Aboriginal student number (five) and thus did not have an Aboriginal staff member. Previously, the recognition and inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives was controversial at this school. The recently appointed principal had intentions to increase cultural learning, but did not discuss plans to employ Aboriginal staff. Primary school two (PS2) employed an off-country Aboriginal staff member four days a week as a Learning and Support Officer, through a NSW government Wambinya Early Years Program, to assist with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ learning in kindergarten.

The third primary school (PS3), with strong community connections, employed two Aboriginal Student Learning Officers and a Community Liaison Officer who worked with students and liaised with community. Aunty A., a local community Elder was employed as a Student Learning Officer to teach the local Gumbaynggirr language to Aboriginal
students. Aunty A. had attended the same primary school as a student where she was a school captain, as she was at the local high school, and her family has ongoing connections with the school. She had worked as a teacher’s aide at the primary school before undertaking language teaching classes at the Muurrbay language centre, enabling her to teach language to students at several primary schools in the area. However, in the following year, funding changes meant Aunty A. was no longer able to teach language, but was employed to provide learning support for Aboriginal students.

7.2.2 Secondary schools

Three Aboriginal staff members held support positions in the secondary schools, but teachers identified as Aboriginal or Indigenous at only one secondary school. Mark, a full time SLSO at SS1, discussed the uncertainty of staffing arrangements for both staff and students:

*The 2004 review...a recommendation ... that they not appoint any more AEOs. So I didn’t get appointed here as an AEO...We had the numbers, according to the formula they had for appointing AEOs ... but they kept holding off saying we’re waiting on the AE review and the outcomes from that and the recommendations were not to appoint AEOs. They prefer that current AEAs be trained up as teachers, rather than appoint any more...so the school’s been applying for funding from different sources over the years and they’ve been lucky to have found it to keep me on...I don’t know what’s happening next year...I’m the only Indigenous person on staff...our guys would have no-one if I wasn’t here* (Mark, SS1).

The review of Aboriginal education in NSW undertaken jointly by the NSW AECG and the NSW Department of Education and Training (2004) limited the appointment of Aboriginal Education Officers in schools. Mark expressed a predicament in the policy...
review outcomes: more trained Indigenous teachers at the expense of community liaison. Yet engagement with community, a key policy objective, depends on liaison. The staff member discussed the challenges of meeting the requirements of learning support officer and the expectations of community liaison and engagement:

I guess from my point of view the biggest drawback, in the past I’ve had the flexibility to organise things like this and NAIDOC week has been full on with bush tucker lunches and such. But because my funding is such that I have to be in classes now, I’m timetabled into six classes now so I don’t get the time to organise these things. Whereas other schools have AEAs who are not in class all the time and they are flexible and they can do all this work to organise things in their school … we just don’t have the time to do that … so things don’t get done as well as they could be done (Mark, SS1).

Mark supported students and liaised with community as much as possible alongside his learning support responsibilities. The school’s Aboriginal education co-ordinator, a non-Aboriginal teacher, commented further on staffing challenges, including: the lack of time compensation for staff involvement in Aboriginal student programs such as developing Personalised Learning Plans, a policy requirement; and the departmental duty of care requirement for staff to accompany students attending programs out of school, such as AIME mentoring sessions.

In the second secondary school (SS2), Brett, a full time designated AEO provided student support, community liaison, organised events, and contributed to teaching Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge, including the school’s Aboriginal boys’ dance group.
Similarly, Jan, the full time Aboriginal staff member in secondary school three (SS3), supported students and established community connections, for example, liaising between staff and community teaching resources:

*I suppose I’m a bit of a middleman... like I say if a teacher feels that they want to involve a community member being an Elder or just an Aboriginal community member then I’ll just contact them, visit them, explain what’s needed...constant contact with our community keeps this door open and that’s what’s really important, to have the community know they can come on in, they’re involved... I understand how Indigenous people feel about authority in general. School can be a very intimidating place, so it just makes things easier for everybody...Knowing what they can and can’t do, is important, meet them halfway* (Jan, SS3).

The Deputy Principal at SS3 discussed how the school supports Jan’s informal contact with Indigenous parents and families:

*We’ve long used the two door policy at this school. I guess we speak about it informally. This is the front door where we are, but many of our Indigenous families they come in the back end of the school, where the car park is anyway, they go to [the Aboriginal staff member’s] office, they have a cuppa, it’s informal. She has a visitors’ book down there, we sign ‘em in* (Deputy Principal, SS3).

The Deputy Principal’s discussion here of the “two-door policy...front door ... back end” highlights separate material realities for Indigenous families and the official school process; however, Jan, the Aboriginal staff member expressed the situation as meeting
“halfway”. The Principal and Deputy Principal recognised the valuable role of the Aboriginal staff member, but noted the ongoing uncertainty of funding:

> It’s really the quality of our Aboriginal worker in the school... she undersells herself, she’s why this place is a real success, and you know we’re really sad to look at funding issues (Principal, SS3).

...every year, every year, hasn’t changed...The Norta Norta [Indigenous tutoring] funds I believe are finishing perhaps...it might come in another form (Deputy Principal, SS3).

The employment of part-time Aboriginal Norta Norta tutors to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with classwork in schools is a successful tutoring program but also depends on NSW government funding. These comments recognise the contribution of Aboriginal staffing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, but express frustration in regard to difficulties in resourcing such positions. Interestingly, the Principal and Deputy Principal were unsure about the teachers who identified officially as Aboriginal:

> ...there are teachers that identify ...I think in the annual school report we had three staff (Deputy Principal, SS3).

I’m not sure about... I know he’s really active... He’s very passionate...put down three (Secondary Principal, SS3).

In the discussion groups, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students expressed the value and the significance for them of Aboriginal staff members, in terms of student wellbeing, community connections, cultural learning and cultural activities in the schools
(see chapters two and three). However, the limitations on employment of Aboriginal support staff in the schools discussed above, with many in part-time or temporary support positions and few Indigenous teachers, not only impact the outcomes of stated Aboriginal education policies, but also affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student cultural learning and their cultural safety.

### 7.3 Cultural safety

The concept of cultural safety originated in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the context of nursing and midwifery. It addresses relationships of power in the provision of service, aiming to empower clients who may not feel comfortable about service to express feelings of unsafety (Papps & Ramsden, 1996). In the context of Australian higher education, the notion of cultural safety expands beyond “special treatment” to include: “(a) designated Indigenous spaces, (b) culturally appropriate curricula (c) culturally appropriate courses and behaviours” (Bin-Sallik, 2003) (p. 27). Some of these educational factors also apply to school education, and emerged from this research, in particular to spaces and curricula.

#### 7.3.1 Designated spaces

Aboriginal people held part-time or short-term positions in primary schools two and three. Aunty A., who was employed in PS3 to teach Gumbaynggirr language to Aboriginal students, did not have a permanent space in which to teach. A separate classroom was not always available, and the lessons often took place in different locations in the school; language teaching did not have equal curriculum priority with other subjects and was funded separately.

Three full-time secondary school Aboriginal support staff had office spaces or rooms. Mark, the Aboriginal staff member in secondary school one, explained that the school
and community established a designated two room space through funding from the
Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness scheme (ASSPA), an initiative of the
1990 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, now discontinued.
Resources included a small kitchen, computers, chairs, tables and art work. The student
discussion groups took place in this space, and Mark discussed its functions to support
study and connect with culture, and how the community came together to decorate the
room:

...we’ve got resources here for you – books and things …2002 [the room was]
officially opened [with painting by a local artist], and students helped... We did it
over 2 weeks and students came in and did little hand prints and dots, the flag,
and [local artist] did the rest (Mark, SS1).

The students referred in their discussion group to the value of having a designated space
(see Chapter 6). In secondary school two, Brett, the Aboriginal staff member, had a small,
designated office with teaching resources, a space where Aboriginal students could meet.
At an AECG meeting I attended at the school, Aboriginal parents and family members
raised concerns about limits on and control of Aboriginal students’ access to the room.
Some teachers apparently felt Aboriginal students spent too long in the space and out of
class. However, the parents reported that some teachers’ racist attitudes towards the
Aboriginal staff member and students often resulted in students leaving class and seeking
refuge in the room (AECG meeting, 21 June 2013 minutes). Following the AECG
meeting, the AECG President met with the school principal to discuss the parents’
concerns, but these issues indicated some underlying tensions at the school, which also
surfaced in a discussion with one teacher (discussed under Racism).
In secondary school three, Jan, the Aboriginal staff member, had a small office, with teaching resources and a space for Aboriginal students to gather. In the first student discussion group, in response to questions from the non-Aboriginal teacher, one student described feeling “safe” in the room, and others discussed the cultural value of the room for them (see Chapter 6). I arranged for the second student discussion group to take place in the Aboriginal staff member’s room where the students were at ease.

The Aboriginal staff members’ rooms play a significant part in enabling the staff to support the students in their wider education, provide cultural safety and advice, and resource cultural learning through the curriculum.

7.4 Cultural Learning in Curricula

The first NSW *Aboriginal Education Policy* (NSW Department of Education. Aboriginal Education Unit, 1982) was designed to address discrimination in both curriculum and teaching practices included Aboriginal culture, history and Aboriginal perspectives across subjects and Aboriginal Studies (Cook, 1995). The policy became mandatory in all schools in 1987. However, reviews in 1992 and 2004 found inadequate implementation of the Aboriginal education policies in the areas of teaching Aboriginal cultural knowledge, perspectives and histories, and continued discrimination (NSW Department of Education and Training & NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc., 2004; Wammarra Aboriginal Education Centre & School of Teacher Education Charles Sturt University, 1992). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curriculum perspectives have continued to be mandated in NSW schools through syllabuses, and a national Australian Curriculum, in the process of being implemented, includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curriculum perspectives, although this has been challenged in a review commissioned by the conservative Australian Government (Wiltshire &
Donnelly, 2014). See Leadership in this chapter, and Chapter 3 for further discussion of curricular and policy development.

In interviews, the six principals shared their views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural learning across curricula in their schools, in relation to particular subjects, and differences and unevenness in the extent and delivery of cultural learning.

### 7.4.1 Primary schools

The recently appointed principal in primary school one observed the current low level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural learning in the school:

> …there doesn’t seem to be a great deal of Indigenous culture, Australian Indigenous culture, reflected in what’s happening in classrooms at present, not to say that it’s not happening or hasn’t happened but I don’t seem to see it…schools in the past have fallen into a tokenistic trap of tick a box programs like NAIDOC … I have a problem with NAIDOC in schools, not NAIDOC itself …how it’s celebrated…If there’s a matrix we’d be down at the bottom end…assemblies, flag raising, typical school things. (Principal, PS1)

With the students’ permission, and at the principal’s request, I summarised and discussed the participating two Year 5 students’ comments (see Chapter 5). In response to my question about whether their level of cultural learning was indicative of Year 5 students overall, the Principal commented:

> No… it gives me a benchmark... I’m not surprised…it depends on the class teacher, the depth of integration that there is so I guess it depends on the classroom teacher. I would say that Aboriginal history and culture is taught right across this school but to what depth is questionable… that’s not necessarily a decision the teacher has consciously made on what they believe is the right thing
to do but possibly... I would say most definitely on the level of expertise they have in that area... where I previously taught it’s heavily integrated...even if it [the Indigenous population] was zero per cent the Aboriginal culture shouldn’t be taught any less... (Principal, PS1).

Thus the Principal attributed the limited cultural teaching at the school to teachers’ lack of knowledge and expertise. As a teaching principal, he invited me to observe a Year 3/4 class that prominently included Aboriginal history and perspectives, contemporary local culture and customs and those from further afield in New South Wales. Students engaged with the content, and shared with me previous class activities such as weaving fish traps from local materials. This contrasted with the more stereotypical knowledge expressed by the two Year 5 Aboriginal students in discussion (see Chapter 5), confirming the Principal’s assessment of limited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges in previous years.

In primary school two, the Principal observed the policy mandate, introducing and promoting several culturally responsive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs across the school. These included: weekly Acknowledgement of Country in assembly, a ceremony that acknowledges local nation custodians and Elders; connecting Year 6 boys with local Aboriginal community members through PaCE (Parental and Community Engagement, an Australian Government funded program to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities in their children’s education) for transitioning to high school; and a walkabout program connecting with local Gumbaynggirr nation country. The Principal discussed the significance of extending learning beyond tokenism:
We do NAIDOC and all that stuff just like any school …but they’re one day a year things, good for awareness training but it’s gotta be all the time. It’s [Aboriginal perspectives] integrated in all that they do. The teachers are very good at bringing an Aboriginal perspective into their work and a lot of the COGS [Connected Outcome Groups] units, the HSIE [Human Society and its Environment], the old Social Studies, they have an Aboriginal perspective in them now, in almost every unit you do there is. In kindergarten the other day they were doing an Aboriginal story …we took the kindergarten kids for a walk …from an Aboriginal perspective so they could relate to how this young fella was feeling…there was a few Aboriginal kids in that class. We took them on the walk. Very powerful, a lot of parents came along too (Principal, PS2).

Beginning cultural learning in kindergarten years supports the significance of “small steps” (Nakata, 2011, p. 7) in primary school teaching, to develop and lead the way for further studies in subject areas. However, the comments of the Year 4, 5 and 6 students in this school’s discussion group (see Chapter 5) suggested less cultural learning in their years. They referred to symbolic events such as repetitive NAIDOC activities and performing Acknowledgement of Country in assembly. The Principal was addressing limited teaching in previous years.

The Principal, primary school three, discussed examples of cultural learning within curriculum and activities:

…it’s a department requirement that Aboriginal education be taught, so across the stages anyway...HSIE and Science and Technology and other aspects of KLAs ...Aboriginal culture is involved in some of those areas. We actually do connected
outcome groups, which is called COGS, and there’s a lot of mention and a lot of focus on the first Australians and Aboriginal Australia and whatever… we also acknowledge Aboriginal, especially in Aboriginal heritage, through NAIDOC week (Principal, PS3).

The Year 3, 4, 5 and 6 students at the school expressed a depth of knowledge of local Aboriginal history, the impact of colonisation, local cultural practices, Aboriginal dancing and Aboriginal art (see Chapter 5), and supporting the Principal’s comments. Aboriginal staff and community members also have a role in the students’ cultural learning (see Leadership and Community engagement).

### 7.4.2 Secondary schools

At secondary school one, the Principal discussed the policy requirements for the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives and knowledges in curriculum for all students:

…it’s mandatory…that’s the first reason, they have to be included and that’s the compliance reason. The more positive reason why you do it is because it’s part of our history, it’s because of where we came from and where we want to be. It’s partly to do with reconciliation, it’s partly to see Aboriginal connection as everyone’s, important for everyone to understand…so that our non-Aboriginal students can get an understanding of Aboriginal culture, heritage, beliefs, values. (Principal, SS1).

Some of these comments reflect the current NSW Aboriginal Education Policy (2012) slogans such as “everybody’s business…core business… education about Aboriginal Australia for all students”. The principal noted changes in the curriculum and wondered how Aboriginal students now regard the integration of perspectives and knowledges:
... even if they notice it happening, how embedded it is so that they don’t see it as that cause it’s not like you flag this is Aboriginal perspectives, but just the way history is taught, like the Myall Lakes massacre and all those events that we didn’t learn about...for someone who has been teaching for this long you can see the enormous change in the textbooks in the whole way Australian history is taught but our students have been brought up with that through primary school so that to them is normal history, that’s so they won’t see it particularly as Aboriginal perspectives (Principal, SS1).

Perhaps, as the Principal speculates, as more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elements are included in curricula, they will become less noticeable, ideological or contested (Nakata, 2011). However, the Aboriginal students who participated in the discussion group were aware of Aboriginal perspectives in their learning, as well as gaps, and expressed desires to learn more (see Chapter 6).

In secondary school two, the Principal discussed the dual audiences (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) of cultural teaching, and Aboriginal student engagement and self-respect through culturally relevant pedagogy:

Our aims with Aboriginal perspectives are a cultural aim and a quality teaching aim. You know, I think the quality teaching aim is that if you can get that connectedness with kids any topic that you’re introducing, if you can connect it to their daily lives, so with Aboriginal perspectives whether it’s PE, where there’s Aboriginal games or whether its mathematics with say an Aboriginal number system or timeline or whatever that connectedness just means that they’re more
likely to relate and want to learn. So ...the other aim I think is just having non-Aboriginal kids gain a greater respect for Aboriginal culture and I think also with some Aboriginal kids getting them encouraging them to have a greater respect for their own culture (Principal, SS2).

These comments also reflect the current NSW Aboriginal Education Policy (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2012) objective to provide opportunities for cultural learning for all students within the departmental quality teaching framework. However, achieving transformation within quality education in Australia may also require teachers to change their habits, and practice “critical and self-reflective ways of knowing” (Semetsky & Lovat, 2011, p. 491) (see Teacher Attitudes).

The third secondary school principal, also referred to the policy requirement of teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives:

*They’re included in all of our subjects I think ...you know it’s embedded across the school as it has to be as it should be...also they’re doing languages with years 8, 9, 10 [Indigenous students] (Principal, SS3).*

The students, however, referred to cultural learning primarily within English, History, Art, Geography, Dance and Language, similar to the other schools (see Chapter 6). Three areas of positive cultural learning with which students identified, and some principals commented on, are Aboriginal Studies, Language and Dance.

### 7.4.3 Aboriginal/Indigenous Studies

In NSW, Aboriginal or Indigenous Studies, the study of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander societies, histories and cultures (Craven, 2011a), is a separate, discrete unit open
to all students in Years 7 to 12. Only secondary school two taught Aboriginal Studies, as a mandatory course for all Year 7 students and as an elective Higher School Certificate subject in Years 11/12. The principal explained that in Years 11/12 Aboriginal Studies is “student driven”: in other words, if not enough students select it as an elective, the subject is not taught. In the year following this discussion, the school would not offer Aboriginal Studies in Years 11/12 because insufficient students chose it, and also because the “teacher with the expertise was no longer available” (Principal, PS2). However, the teacher in question told a different story: that the position was temporarily funded and that funding was not extended beyond 2012. Moving into Year 12, four students would continue Aboriginal Studies by distance education. Through a sharing arrangement, a student from secondary school one joined this school for Year 11/12 Aboriginal Studies. The principal of that student’s school discussed the difficulties in offering Aboriginal Studies:

*We have offered Aboriginal Studies in the past but we haven’t had enough takers at our school - you have to have 10 or 12 kids to be able to offer a subject ... [another] high school offers Aboriginal Studies in Year 11 and 12 so some of our students have been ... participating in that and that’s really great because otherwise if we didn’t have that connection our kids would miss out* (Principal, SS1).

The NSW Aboriginal Studies syllabus for Years 7-10 states that Aboriginal Studies “enables students to develop knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal Peoples of Australia, their cultures and lifestyles. It is designed for all students and is of value to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students” (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2012, p. 6). I observed an Aboriginal Studies Year 7 class at SS2, which included both
Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and was taught by a non-Aboriginal teacher. The topic of the lesson was Aboriginal music, and the teacher used both textbook material and original sources, inviting Brett, the Aboriginal staff member, to share his skills and knowledge of the didjeridu or yidaki instrument with the class. The name yidaki is from the language of the Yolngu (Yol\u) people from northern Australia, the traditional owners of the yidaki (Buku-Larr\'gay Mulka Centre & the Yol\u, 2006). Brett discussed how the yidaki/didjeridu originated in the Northern Territory and how the knowledge of its playing was shared later with people from other nations over the years. He discussed its important ceremonial role in passing on Aboriginal cultural knowledge through song men. Then he demonstrated playing the instrument and invited male students up to the front of the class to play, discussing with the students that according to Aboriginal custom, females did not play the yidaki/didjeridu. A non-Aboriginal student asked Brett if the story he told about the instrument’s origin was real or just a myth. He replied that this is how we know about the didjeridu, this is what his friend told him; in other words, this is how knowledge is passed down. The teacher did not comment, but the exchange could have been an opportunity to discuss different means of knowledge transmission.

The Principal of SS3 rationalised that the school did not teach Year 11/12 Aboriginal Studies because the number of Year 11/12 students was dropping; some students go to other schools for those years:

... unfortunately we always offer it but we haven’t been able to get the numbers....so we have a lot of competition for subjects...I think a lot of that stuff will be taught in the language program too...so indirectly we’re doing the same aren’t we? (Principal, SS3).
Language learning embodies culture and history and is a significant contribution to Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in the school. However, Year 11/12 Aboriginal Studies provides further opportunities for higher order learning and critical thinking (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013; Nakata, 2011). The NSW HSC Aboriginal Studies syllabus, revised in 2010 (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2010b), has a strong critical orientation that includes Aboriginal history, understanding the impact of colonisation, and societal forces. It extends a continuum of learning from kindergarten to Year 10 and in this sense appears to have enhanced the previous Year 11/12 curriculum which was repetitive of earlier years of learning (Wray, 2006).

The student numbers argument referred to by principals is inconsistent: at least one other school in the area has taught Aboriginal Studies with fewer than ten students. Resourcing, in terms of an experienced teacher and schools’ commitment to funding Aboriginal Studies, affects this learning opportunity for all students. Enrolments in Aboriginal Studies across NSW are low, perhaps because of contradictory views of its nature. The lesser academic value of Aboriginal Studies perceived by some universities can influence its selection by students as a Higher School Certificate subject (C. Bellemore, personal communication, 22 September 2014), while for some Aboriginal students and parents, a perception of its high academic rigour is a disincentive (Wray, 2006). However, the critical contributions of Aboriginal Studies secondary students in this research study attest to its strengths in cultural and social learning (see Chapter 6).

7.4.5 Language

Programs to revitalise and teach Aboriginal languages in schools are supported by the NSW Government, but in practice this depends on staff resources and community support. The Gumbaynggirr language was taught in one primary and one secondary
school. In primary school three, Aunty A. taught “lingo”, vocabulary such as “body parts, scenery and animals...to Koori kids” in Years 1, 2 and 3, and talked with students in other years at the request of teachers. She noted that while she talked to Aboriginal students about local history, she did not like to speak about the “bad things” that happened in the area. She is probably referring to a massacre of local Aboriginal people in the 1880s. The students knew about the event and referred to it in their discussions (see Chapter 2). A memorial at the site marks the event and recognises the brutality that occurred (Arrawarra Sharing Culture, n.d.).

The school’s principal discussed teaching Aboriginal students the Gumbaynggirr language:

... We try and get them in the early years which we think that they seem to enjoy and get engaged. So at this stage with teaching our Years 1 and 2, and 4, and the reason that the 4 is... that’s where we have the majority of students, there’s about 5 Aboriginal students in there. We singled that out because we’re focusing on and most of them are on country Gumbaynggirr it’s a good idea that they learn their own language (Principal, PS3).

Until the 1980s, local people were discouraged from speaking Gumbaynggirr outside their community (Smith & Beck, 2003), and for decades NSW school policies denied teaching and learning in language (Fletcher, 1989). The Aboriginal students spoke with enthusiasm about learning Gumbaynggirr, and discussed nuances in the language (see Chapter 5). However, funding for language teaching was discontinued in 2013, the year following this research. Language was not taught in the other two primary schools as both
groups of students noted in their discussion groups; and one student expressed a desire to learn Gumbaynggirr (see Chapter 5).

Secondary school three introduced Gumbaynggirr language as a full, mandatory subject for all Year 7 students in 2013, as a NSW high schools requirement to teach a Language Other Than English (LOTE) in Years 7 and 8, replacing French language. A non-Aboriginal teacher who had learned Gumbaynggirr with Aboriginal speakers from the local Language Centre proposed teaching the class. While NSW AECG policy is that Aboriginal language speakers teach local languages, the NSW Department of Education and Communities requires a fully qualified teacher to teach a full LOTE subject. However, a qualified Aboriginal teacher and speaker of Gumbaynggirr was not available in the area. Several AECG meetings debated and discussed the school’s request and with the support of the community, the AECG approved the non-Aboriginal teacher to deliver the classes. The Deputy Principal and the Aboriginal staff member discussed the genesis and plans for teaching Gumbaynggirr:

*Five years ago, we started the language program in the school, so now we have students in Year 12 who have been right through and started to learn the language in Year 7, so has long been established. So it started off initially as a community of schools initiative, in association with our feeder primary schools. It came from discussions, we put a submission in and we got funding and with that funding we employed tutors and over the years we’ve had quite a few different tutors... all Indigenous* (Deputy Principal, SS3).

*The non-Indigenous students in this school since we started this [language] program have been begging us, why can’t we be involved? Why can’t I come to
the language class? ...so we thought why not? (Jan, Aboriginal staff member, SS3).

The older Aboriginal students identified learning Gumbaynggirr as a significant part of their education (see Chapter 6). Learning Gumbaynggirr as a full subject strengthens the role of language and culture in the curriculum, and for Gumbaynggirr people, connecting with language and culture creates a powerful and intangible sense of belonging and wellbeing (Aboriginal women's heritage: Nambucca 2003; Somerville & Perkins, 2010).

The other secondary schools did not offer language classes, apart from a few words, and students expressed desires to learn more (see Chapter 6). In 2014, responding to community expressions to improve student health and wellbeing through language, the NSW Department of Education and Communities and NSW Aboriginal Affairs established Aboriginal and Language and Culture nests through OCHRE: Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment (2013), starting with five language groups, including Gumbaynggirr.

### 7.4.6 Dance

Two secondary schools included Aboriginal dance activities, through the initiatives of Aboriginal staff, and programs offered by the Sydney-based Bangarra Dance Theatre. In secondary school two, Brett, the Aboriginal staff member, instigated an Aboriginal boys’ dance program, initially as a staff project. Through the dedication and commitment of the staff and students, and support of the school, the dance program became highly successful. Brett shared his experiences in introducing the dance program for Aboriginal students in schools, and the positive value of connecting with culture for wellbeing and engagement with learning. He played didjeridu with a friend, and together they developed dance to accompany the didjeridu. Building on their knowledge of Aboriginal dances that
imitate and incorporate animal moves, the two friends used “ochre...to decorate bodies...went into the bush to observe animals” (Brett, SS2), and recreated dances based on the observed animal behaviour. Through this process, he connected deeply with culture and heritage. Recognising the power and the potential of this connection, Brett introduced dance programs for Aboriginal boys in two separate schools where he worked. The students engaged and connected strongly with learning and performing dance, “more than any departmental program” (Brett, SS2).

For Aboriginal students, dance includes skill-learning “not only in telling about ontology and epistemology, they physically become one with ontology and epistemology” (Williams, 2007, p. 227). Moreover, cultural dance has the potential to enable students to develop critical understanding of the worlds in which they live (Cruz Banks, 2009). However, the academic recognition and acknowledgement of skills and pathways to knowledge and identity (Cruz Banks, 2009) is difficult within the NSW education system. The Aboriginal boys in the group expressed pride and commitment to the dance performances (see Chapter 6). The Principal spoke of the value of the boys’ dance program for the school and the students:

...something that we are really proud of. Sometimes it’s an administrative nightmare because the Year 12 boys complain that they’re out of class too often and I understand that completely... but it’s still worthwhile... maybe when the boys or girls get into Year 12 we sort of say it’s time to concentrate on your studies. I do think the Year 12 boys miss too much class...but it was good for them in terms of leadership so that was the payback (Principal, SS2).
The Principal acknowledged that the intensive engagement is meaningful for the students, but had difficulty reconciling the time performances took from study, especially for Year 12 students. Apart from “leadership” values, there is limited academic recognition of dance performance in the curriculum. In secondary school three, Aboriginal dance performance was also positioned as extra-curricular but without academic recognition. Students participated in workshops with the acclaimed Bangarra Dance Theatre and performed with the Aboriginal Dance Ensemble at the 2012 NSW Schools Spectacular (see Chapter 6). This performance was a major achievement for the students and was acknowledged in the school and community.

Dance is an elective subject in physical education, offering several cultural dance choices for schools and teachers. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance was recommended within creative arts practices in the NSW curriculum, because “[D]ance is integral to the expression of Aboriginal cultural identity” (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2009, p. 5). Strong statements supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance in the Australian Arts Curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2013). However, the Australian Government review noted there was “too much emphasis on dance from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture” (Wiltshire & Donnelly, 2014, p. 217). By contrast, in Aotearoa, Māori dance performance and movement is prominent in curriculum. Kapa haka (dance in rows) is recognised as a culturally responsive pedagogy and dance activity and is accredited academically; as a different but effective way of student learning (Whitinui, 2010a). Māori te ao kori expressive movement in school physical education curriculum contributes to strengthening identity and self-esteem of indigenous students and non-indigenous students through the embodiment of Māori culture (Legge, 2011).
These comments are testimony to the difficulties and challenges of recognising and embedding both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges within a dominant curriculum (Lowe et al., 2014). Recognising variant epistemological knowledges, values and skills within Australian curricula is challenging, and some schools flounder as they attempt to address policy aims. While principals expressed awareness of the mandatory policy requirement to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives, the students’ experiences of cultural learning, expressed in Chapters 5 and 6 often present a different reality from the principals’ understandings. This raises questions of accountability, of how policies are implemented and of how philosophies are transmitted to staff, as discussed next.

**7.5 Leadership**

The leadership role of school principals in maintaining and extending cultural learning opportunities is fundamental in developing a school climate that is supportive of cultural learning, acknowledging the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their cultures and connecting with communities (Lowe, 2011; Matthews, 2012). Together with encouraging high educational expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, leadership is one premise of the Stronger Smarter Institute (n.d.) programs established by Aboriginal educator Chris Sarra. An evaluation of the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities Project (Luke et al., 2013), however, found that teachers were not always aware of the changed approaches adopted by principals, and did not necessarily adopt similar views. While leadership and philosophy are important, they may not always filter through to teachers’ practices. In the interviews with principals, I sought to understand their philosophies and attitudes towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural learning in their schools.


7.5.1 Primary schools

The Principal of primary school one expressed personal views that supported Indigenous cultural learning in education:

I’ve embraced Indigenous culture from my personal experiences and my professional experiences... I also have a strong social justice mind... I think it’s important to educate and re-educate before it’s lost. You know, it’s the oldest culture on the planet and we’ve probably the least amount of knowledgeable history, when I say history there is history but a lot of it’s been erased through white man’s doings (Principal, PS1).

The Principal focuses on redressing the silence of Australian Indigenous histories and cultures in education, but was aware of challenges in implementing curricular changes:

I’ve got a plan, in my head, things will change next term... there’s going to be a bit of a curriculum shakeup... the staff are already aware of it [the Australian Curriculum] and obviously the three areas of Asian literacy, sustainability and Aboriginal culture (Principal, PS1).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures are one of three cross-curriculum priorities in the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2012a). The Principal hopes this focus will increase the level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges in the school curriculum. However, the recent Australian government review of the Australian Curriculum weakens the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives cross-curriculum priority, recommending inclusion “only where educationally relevant”
(Wiltshire & Donnelly, 2014, p. 247). The Principal was concerned that staff not feel pressured about their teaching, and being observed in the research:

...there has been some recent history that rocked the ship a bit, before my time. So I don’t want to put that sort of pressure on them. I want them to get on with what they’re doing, core teaching, and program planning assessment and the children (Principal, PS1).

These comments suggest some tension among teaching staff regarding cultural learning and potential conflict in extending the learning beyond the stereotypical level that the Year 5 girls in the student discussion indicated: limited local knowledge, and a focus on traditional Aboriginal ways of living from the past (see Chapter 5).

The principal at primary school two expressed strong views about cultural differences among students:

...difference is something to celebrate and that’s something that permeates through here. So these kids, I want them to be comfortable with who they are and to be proud to get up there and do the acknowledgement of country at our assemblies, we get them to do that and feel real comfortable doing that and proud, which they are...and that’s the philosophy I want to ensure happens in the school that difference is a good thing... I want them to celebrate being Aboriginal and for the other kids to celebrate that we’ve got Aboriginal kids in our school. And accept that difference as a good thing and that’s something I think that is certainly changing in the school (Principal, PS2).
The Principal discussed implementing inclusive changes and acknowledging positive cultural differences in the school. However, the Year 4, 5 and 6 students indicated a limited level of cultural learning in their experience (see Chapter 5).

The Principal from primary school three discussed social differences between the school staff and some Aboriginal parents in the community:

...a couple of years ago I took all the staff down to [the cultural centre] and we still only had a couple of parents turn up. And it was pointed out to me later on, do you realise how hard it would be, even on Gumbaynggirr land, for a parent to come in with people that are professionals, have been to university wearing ties ... and you know they’ve come from Aboriginal housing and a background that might be minimal education you know and for them to feel comfortable, and really it was a bit of an eye opener for me. What we try and do now is have a... couple of...liaison people (Principal, PS3).

This Principal’s comments invoke Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital in education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) where a dominant group expresses values, behaviour or language which differ from non-dominant groups. Schools can achieve equity for Aboriginal students and their families by developing social capital through networks and connections with communities (Klenowski, 2009). The situation the principal describes is also a legacy of the discriminatory and exclusionary educational experiences of many Aboriginal people educated in the NSW education system (Whatman & Duncan, 2005). The principal discussed teaching Aboriginal students in previous schools:
I’ve always, most of my career which has been on the north coast region has involved teaching Aboriginal students so they’ve been in virtually every community I have taught (Principal, PS3).

Despite this experience, the principal seemed to have been unaware of the barriers for Aboriginal parents in connecting with schools. This lack of awareness may be attributed to limited training in equity principles or acknowledgement in previous schools. The Principal now recognised the need for changed behaviour, meeting with community members outside school, providing opportunities for engaging in and encouraging dialogue:

...some of our staff actually meet parents up the headland somewhere, have the yarn, you know. I think it’s, you know, if you really want to be effective you can’t just be insular and sit in this office and think you do wonderful things and that Aboriginal families are really happy with the job you’re doing. You gotta actually get out there and ask, ask people if there are problems if they’re not directly going to come to you at least there’s avenues for them to vent their frustration, whatever, or just for communication you know (Principal, PS3).

Three Aboriginal staff members at the school connected and liaised with community and provide cultural, literacy and numeracy learning support for students. Their employment underscores the importance of Aboriginal staff in achieving school-community engagement and in facilitating cultural learning for the Aboriginal students.

The two recently appointed primary principals expressed strong views about implementing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives.
However, the student discussions indicate that previous emphasis on cultural learning in the schools was narrow, or it had little impact on the students, and the new approaches had not yet filtered through to their learning (see Chapter 5). The greater levels of cultural learning and connectedness expressed by the Aboriginal students in primary school three support the position that collaboration with local communities (Riley & Genner, 2011) and developing curriculum within an Aboriginal pedagogical framework can resolve “the problem of tokenism and trivialisation of Aboriginal culture in the curriculum” (Yunkaporta, 2009a, p. 37).

7.5.2 Secondary schools

Two secondary principals expressed awareness and positive support for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in their schools, but acknowledged variations in levels and attitudes of teaching staff. The extent of the programs depends on individual teachers’ initiatives and sometimes student choices. The Principal, secondary school one, discussed previous experience in schools with Aboriginal students and Aboriginal staff which contributed to understanding the value of teaching Aboriginal perspectives and knowledges:

In probably all the schools I’ve been in have had Aboriginal students in them ... [one] had the highest percentage so that was a good learning area for me because there were some very active members of staff, teachers’ aides and support teachers, for Aboriginal studies, who helped me get a community perspective on the importance of it … I think the fact that the perspectives are there in the curriculum gives more of a sense of value, more of a sense of worth and therefore gives more connection...Where it’s been difficult for Indigenous students is often the parents have had poor experiences of school, um, and that’s one of our jobs
to overcome that, to try and bring those parents in and make it different for their children (Principal, SS1).

This Principal recognises the legacies of generational experiences as barriers for Aboriginal parents in engaging with the school and that this can affect student learning. The Principal of secondary school two discussed the school’s aims as being inclusive and supportive of Aboriginal students:

...not only through the perspectives but in celebrating success and ...encouraging respect and understanding... you know all of those things that are really important for not just our Aboriginal but all Aboriginal kids, celebrating of success the best way ...you can never say we’ve won the battle. You can only say we’re winning. (Principal, SS2).

The Principal noted enthusiastically that eight Year 12 Aboriginal students would graduate that year: “normally we have a few, two or three, but eight is fantastic... we’re seeing eight really nice, really nice kids graduate”. The school’s Aboriginal Studies program, Norta Norta tutoring, the dance group and student participation in AIME, the Indigenous mentoring program (2011) may all contribute to this success. The Principal further discussed the role of the school Aboriginal Education Committee:

They meet regularly ... probably twice a term maybe more... we discuss anything that we want to do with the AEO, like the Ab Studies. Anything that a faculty wants to do would need to get the OK from the AEO and have input in that area...I know that there are a lot of suggestions in the policy but it’s very hard in practice to do that (Principal, SS2).
Through the efforts of a few teachers, the school taught Aboriginal Studies as a mandatory subject for all students in Year 7, and as an elective subject in Years 11/12, depending on student numbers. The Aboriginal students’ comments in Chapter 6 attest to the depth of learning and positive effects of teaching Aboriginal Studies. However, the Principal noted that encouraging other teachers to engage with cultural learning was a challenge:

*I do think the opportunities are there but staff just don’t have that expertise so they just need a little bit of a spark to ignite that imagination and it could go off... when I was a young teacher, a maths head teacher and looking at some of the Aboriginal perspectives that we could bring in and my young staff felt as though they were being more tokenistic and they were worried about embarrassing the Aboriginal kids* (Principal, SS1).

Staff anxiety about how and what to teach and fear of tokenism is experienced by many non-Indigenous teachers (Nakata, 2011). However, the Principal did not discuss measures or training to address staff attitudes and limited expertise, such as cultural competency and cultural awareness.

At secondary school three, the Principal discussed the school’s support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural learning:

*We have a very in-tune staff. They’re very passionate about getting that knowledge and experience and exposure through their subjects and all their subjects have that as part of their meat and bones of their core curriculum... and adding in the language is going to make it more so* (Principal, SS3).
Comments from all principals interviewed provide insight into the systemic, social values and assumptions embedded in education processes affecting the cultural learning in their schools. Most discussed cultural teaching within the mandate of policy, demonstrating support and some attempts to meet the challenges actively. Yet their philosophies and leadership often are undermined by resourcing issues, teacher attitudes, inadequate training and limited knowledge of appropriate models.

7.6 Teaching Resources

For all schools in this research, the resourcing of teaching materials and people emerged as an ongoing problem, one that persists in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in NSW. Some issues raised by school staff reflect recommendations from reviews and evaluations since the 1982 NSW Aboriginal Education Policy implementation, such as improved, culturally relevant Aboriginal resources for all ages, dedicated textbooks, better distribution of resources regionally, and discretionary funding for schools to employ staff (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2011; NSW Department of Education and Training & NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc., 2004; Wammarra Aboriginal Education Centre & School of Teacher Education Charles Sturt University, 1992).

Unresolved questions of funding culturally relevant resources affects cultural learning in schools. The Principal of the primary school one used departmental and self-developed resources while teaching a Year 3/4 class, but also identified difficulties in resourcing and funding teaching materials, Indigenous teachers and community members:

...it’d be nice if we had more Indigenous teachers or Elders or people with knowledge who’d be happy to come to our public schools for free … I don’t think
we should be paying for it... I have a moral issue with us having to pay to educate the whole community of Indigenous culture (Principal, PS1).

The principal’s comment expresses conflict about the monetary value placed on Aboriginal knowledge within the NSW education system. The government does not necessarily recognise or fund the cost of community knowledge in practice, although it acknowledges in policy, the process of Aboriginal community contribution to curriculum content (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2009b). Schools are not always able to find or allocate sufficient funding for this purpose.

In the primary school two, Keith, the Aboriginal staff member, referred to computer-based resources:

... we have a program on the computer... all about the Torres Strait Islands where he’s [student] from ... because he knows very little about his culture...it’s got things like what they eat... what they wear... it’s really good (Keith, PS2).

Keith added later that culturally appropriate resources for assisting the students with literacy were limited. By contrast, in the same school, the Year 6 class that I observed learning the mandatory subject Stolen Generations was well-resourced. The teacher discussed with students the deliberate and forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities and placement in institutions or foster homes, to separate them from their culture (Williams-Mozely, 2012). The week before this class, the students had watched the first half of the film *Rabbit-proof Fence* (Noyce et al., 2002), based on Doris Pilkington’s published (1996/2002) account of her removal, with two other girls, from their community in Western Australia in the 1930s.
The teacher shared with the class his limited school education about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, land dispossession through colonisation, and the legal notion of Australia as an empty land (*terra nullius*) that denied Indigenous custodianship.

For many decades, the tragedy of the practices of the Stolen Generations were not acknowledged publicly until Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (2008) apologised to the peoples of the Stolen Generations and their descendants; the first official national government acknowledgement. The Stolen Generations became a mandatory part of Australian school history curricula following recommendations in *Bringing them home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families* (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997) and published research by Peter Read (1983, 2006). Current resources include documentary films, books, and teaching guidelines (McKeich, 2009a; Read, 1983). Teaching such historical events is critical learning for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students’ understanding and knowledge, but it raises questions about a curriculum which attempts to address Australia’s colonial history and race relations superficially. For example, the Stolen Generations might be incorrectly perceived as representative of all Indigenous history (McKeich, 2009b; Pearn, 2010). Presenting an Aboriginal perspective is important, although exposing the maltreatment of their peoples is a sensitive topic for Aboriginal students (Williams-Mozely, 2012). Some students may have family or contemporary experiences with separation from families, or of being fostered. The teacher was respectful of the two Aboriginal students in the class and did not directly question them, nor did they comment.
In secondary school one, I observed a Year 9 History class of non-Aboriginal and a small number of Aboriginal students who were studying the Stolen Generations, as stipulated in the History syllabus (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2003b). The teacher led students through an analysis of text and video recordings of the presentation of the official Australian Government apology to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on February 13, 2008, and the response by Tom Calma (2008), the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner. Sharon, the teacher, supplemented the Year 9 syllabus with online materials students could use independently, such as documented experiences and stories of Aboriginal people from the Stolen Generations.

In secondary school two, the non-Aboriginal teacher of a Year 7 Aboriginal Studies class I observed commented that a syllabus exists, and she supplements it with self-selected resources, but there was no dedicated textbook. The teacher invited the Aboriginal staff member to share with the class the history of, and how to play, the didgeridu, inviting students to play. Two other schools used locally produced resources. In primary school three, the Aunty A. used resources from the Muurrbay Language Centre to teach language, and resources developed by the Cultural Centre to teach local history and customs. The students referred to the cultural centre resources and activities in their discussions (see Chapter 5). In the Year 7 Gumbaynggirr language class at secondary school three, the teacher used and adapted resources from the Language Centre. The other schools did not refer to local resources in discussions, interviews or observations, although they may have been used.

The integration of appropriate cultural and educational teaching resources in schools depends on staff initiative and models for involving community (see Community
Engagement). Moreover, developing relevant resources incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledge depends on skill, cultural recognition and partnership between schools, teachers and communities (Purdie et al., 2011b).

7.6.1 Community engagement and local knowledge

The current NSW Aboriginal Education and Training Policy aims to:

… engage the NSW AECG Inc. and Aboriginal communities as partners in Aboriginal education and training… incorporate the cultural contexts, values and practices of local Aboriginal communities into the mainstream delivery of education and training. (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2012)

The extent of community involvement in each school varied. Principals, teachers, Aboriginal staff and AECG members referred to: meeting with Aboriginal community members and parents to develop students’ Personalised Learning Plans (a policy requirement); attending and sometimes speaking at NAIDOC assemblies and including recognised holders of knowledge in some educational programs in two schools.

At primary school one, while the students talked and drew, the AECG representative shared Aboriginal knowledge and customs, local knowledge, and the stereotyping of Aboriginal people and customs within Australian society:

... fish carved in the rock is telling people that there are fish... a signpost... you can get fish here... markers if you’re travelling around... people just don’t realise this culture survived for thousands upon thousands and thousands of years... still surviving despite attempts to stop it... they used the land according to different seasons ... there’s saltwater, freshwater people... different seasons, moved down to the saltwater... very unique culture... Aboriginal people ... were only nomadic
in their own country... there’s so much information there...people just don’t understand ... take it back to local. Aboriginal people do dot paintings but dot paintings are not traditional coastal things...all these things that you see for so many years things have been based on NT [Northern Territory] because that’s where Aboriginal people live...We all dance around in the dirt, put dots on everything... and that’s what people think. Either that or we’re good at sport, pretty much that’s the two things (Nora, AECG representative, PS1).

The depth of knowledge in Nora’s comments contrasts with the stereotypical level of knowledge of the student discussions (see chapter 5).

At primary school two, the Principal discussed engagement with Elders through the government funded PaCE Program, but was yet to engage with parents:

Year 6 Aboriginal students going to meet the Elders once a week...and the Elders are giving a perspective to Aboriginal students about where they want to go and what they want to do with their education...It’s difficult, a lot of Aboriginal parents are working and they don’t get the time to come in, and a lot of them have barriers to schools, barriers that are there from past history, but always very supportive of the school, they always want the best for their children (Principal, PS2).

The Principal had engaged an Aboriginal National Parks and Wildlife ranger to contribute knowledge in developing local walks:

To show us ...from a Gumbaynggirr perspective and what it would have been like...so ...the kids... can all learn about country. There’s evidence ... of
Aboriginal history here and cultural history that we want all kids to be part of and that will involve Elders coming in and talking to kids as part of these walks (Principal, PS2).

In discussion, the students referred to the walks when prompted, but only one discussed engaging with the local knowledge (see Chapter 5).

The Principal at primary school three outlined how the school collaborated with the Aboriginal community through programs at the local Cultural Centre:

*Our school is very strong and because we actually have connections with the local community we regularly have Elders ... open NAIDOC week and ... we used to do it on our own school premises but the last two years we take the whole school down [to the cultural centre] for a day during NAIDOC week to celebrate... using members of the local Aboriginal community to do cultural workshops* (Principal, PS3).

The cultural knowledge, histories and positioning in society that the students at this school expressed validates the opportunities to learn from Elders, Aboriginal history, Aboriginal perspectives, cultural events and activities (see Chapter 5).

In secondary school one, Mark, the Aboriginal staff member, discussed community involvement, but noted untapped resources:

*Elders Lead Youth Succeed [a PaCE program] with six of our boys that we pick to be in that group and that’s specific for those boys with poor attendance or behaviour. We do encourage them, we invite the Elders in for NAIDOC assemblies*
and things like that and in the past we have had the Elders in the school to officially open this room and do a smoking ceremony... I think there’s other resources we haven’t touched upon...like parents you know like grandmas and that, there is so much out there, there are resources in our own families that we don’t utilise as we should (Mark, SS1).

As a Gumbaynggirr local, Mark was aware of the need for more local contribution to teaching and cultural learning. The students at the school expressed desires for more parental and community involvement (see Chapter 6). The Principal acknowledged that community and family connections related more to school requirements than curriculum:

...that’s an area we could, um, we could do more...Aboriginal parents come in for normal school events, so they’re here for parent/teachers [nights], and they’re here for assemblies, and celebrations, and for NAIDOC day. We haven’t had a lot of success in getting parents in for special Indigenous meetings although there’s been a few assemblies where that’s been achieved. They do come in for Personalised Learning Plan meetings (Principal, SS1).

Personalised Learning Plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are a policy requirement following the 2004 review of NSW Aboriginal Education Policy (NSW Department of Education and Training & NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc., 2004). The process involves teachers meeting with parents to develop plans, to monitor, and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ learning achievements.
In secondary school two, Gemma, the AECG member, discussed Aboriginal community contribution to knowledge with the students as they were writing wish lists:

...what would you like to see in high school with Aboriginal Studies...guest speakers coming in...what you just told me... you prefer the real people to come in and teach Aboriginal Studies (Gemma, SS2).

In other words, Aboriginal parents, family and community members who can provide knowledges and perspectives of Aboriginal culture. The Principal’s comments acknowledged this school’s limited success in achieving the input of community members in curriculum:

...their input into Aboriginal perspectives is something we probably need to put a lot more work into... from an Aboriginal Elder’s point of view, they probably feel quite overawed in coming to work with teachers...the best way to really get Aboriginal community assistance with perspectives in the school are people who are comfortable with DET the NSW system (Principal, SS2).

The school’s difficulties in engaging Aboriginal perspectives and the Principal’s comments highlight a perceived incompatibility between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges, and an appropriate model.

By contrast, Jan, the Aboriginal staff member at secondary school three, spoke of how the school incorporates community perspectives and knowledge through connections, liaison and mediating with teachers to include community members and Elders:

Staff ... say to me they encourage the Elders to come into the school for a number of reasons because they can offer so much to the students. History classes, we’ve
recently had one of the Elders come in and speak to one of the Year 10 history classes about what they were studying at the time in comparison to her life. Local Indigenous artists have been in and given a bit of a talk or lesson down there in art. [Teachers say] what can we do to make this class a little bit more interesting and put a little more culture into that and do you know someone who can come in and help with that… I think there’s nothing like the resources of the people, you know, the community...Half an hour with someone like Aunty M. is...priceless...the men’s group (Jan, SS3).

The students referred to the value of Elders’ participation in their cultural learning (see Chapter 6), supporting this position. The Deputy Principal expanded on community events and activities at the school:

...the girls and boys speak in [language in NAIDOC] assembly... very big, all the families come to the school...we have morning tea afterwards which goes into a lunch. We have bush tucker lunch sometimes....We’re very involved with PaCE program...We do the Koori Newsletter, intermittently ... [for parents] and for kids. That just helps increase pride I guess, in culture and for acknowledgement purposes (Deputy Principal, SS3).

The examples discussed here suggest that while NSW policy guidelines emphasise the value of including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives for all students and staff, and curriculum models do exist, not all teachers had implemented such practice.
7.7 Teacher Attitudes

In seeking to understand factors that contribute positively to cultural learning in the schools, I spoke with some teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, perspectives and language. Principals often described these non-Indigenous teachers as passionate, committed and enthusiastic about cultural learning for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. A common factor among the teachers was their connections and relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples locally, or through living and teaching in communities previously.

Sharon, the Year 9 History teacher in secondary school one, had taught previously in remote communities with large Aboriginal populations. At the end of the Stolen Generations class, she issued a challenge for the non-Indigenous students to understand and practice the concepts of equity and equality: “Every time you meet an Aboriginal person and treat them equally you are doing your part.” The next day, the class was going to review past government policies, and perhaps discuss how such policies and service providers have contributed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inequality and disadvantage, and how they must change to meet the unique needs of these groups of people; so that students may better understand the need for “substantive equality” (Behrendt, 2003, p. 13).

At secondary school two, the Principal described the Aboriginal Studies program as being driven over the last couple of years by “newer executive and younger staff [who] have a real passion for it”. In Year 7, two to three teachers “who have a strong feeling about it and really wish to pursue it” taught Aboriginal Studies to all students. Comments from
the students at this school reflect a deeper level of knowledge than in schools without an Aboriginal Studies program (see Chapter 6).

The Principal of secondary school three expressed the passion and enthusiasm of the school’s Gumbaynggirr language teacher:

> So we’ve been lucky enough to have a very experienced teacher here...and he’s been doing a whole lot of work in Gumbaynggirr language for a number of years, and non-Aboriginal, and ...he’s been given permission as a non-Aboriginal person to teach the subject. And we’re going to teach it as the full LOTE subject in year 7...So to me it’s just going to put a whole new perspective on Indigenous education at our school. So I’m pretty passionate about that... If you can’t identify the staff, it’s all about the staff, it’s all about personalities and that’s why it will be a success (Principal, SS3).

The Aboriginal students attested to this teacher’s commitment in teaching the language and Aboriginal perspectives (see Chapter 6).

The comments of students, teachers, and principals suggest a variation in cultural learning across and within schools, for complex reasons. Knowledge and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and societies was omitted from Australian education at least since the end of the nineteenth century (Reynolds, 2000). Instead, a “fabricated history glorified the imperial conquerors, administrators, explorers, discoverers and settlers: Aboriginal people were largely ignored” (Maynard, 2007, p. 118); this was a “cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale” (Stanner, 1968, p. 25). For some NSW teachers, this silence in their learning is responsible for limited knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of being and
doing (Donovan, 2009). Although most universities now include Indigenous or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge units of study in teacher education, and the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (2014) provides resources for initial teachers and professional development for teachers, attitudes and levels of understanding can be slow to change. The continued difficulty, and the challenge, for teachers and teacher educators in moving beyond the embedded attitudes, social and historical legacies discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 became apparent from the responses of teachers and preservice teachers to presentations I gave about this research. One teacher (at a non-participating secondary school) wanted to know how to make contact with and include community members’ perspectives and knowledge. The teachers in secondary school one had no responses, comments or questions. A preservice teacher asked if Indigenous students were interested in engaging with modern technology.

At secondary school one, the principal noted differing staff approaches, despite professional development programs to build Aboriginal cultural connections and competencies:

...with your staff you’d always have people who get it deeply, who understand it and who understand why we’re doing Aboriginal perspectives and have a firm belief in the value of that and there would be other people who do it because they have to do it. And I can’t change that...the variety between faculties, you might get it done better in one faculty than another, or within a faculty within a group of Geography or History teachers you’ll get Aboriginal perspectives delivered, in a more coherent, passionate way than in some classrooms and again that’s the same with any sort of learning, so that’s a challenge (Principal, SS1).
These comments evoke a silence about the uncommitted teachers: they may hold opposite views, an ideological objection to cultural learning, or have limited training or expertise in Indigenous knowledges. In secondary school two, the Aboriginal education committee chair identified resistance from other staff, often older staff, to revising their curricula to integrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives.

However, some non-Indigenous teachers’ positive interactions transcend the lines of cultural and racial segmentation that have stratified Australian society over decades of forgetfulness and denial. These teachers have connections with real Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, not imaginary people created through unfamiliarity or assumptions. They have formed emotional, “affective relations…a sociability [that]…rejects the ambivalent and implicitly suspicious attitude towards difference” (Bignall, 2010, p. 82). However, some less positive attitudes emerged.

### 7.7.1 Racism and deficit thinking

Racism and deficit thinking towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have pervaded Australian education since colonisation (Foley, 2013). Initial biologically-based assumptions about racial ineducability (Elkin, 1937) moved to cultural deficit in relation to learning styles, home background and attendance (Vass, 2012). Deficit discourse blames students and families and fails to examine the assumptions of educational systems and structures (Shields et al., 2005) (see Chapter 3). In this research, racism and deficit discourse emerged in some staff discussions and events, although it was not overt in the student discussions.
In secondary school two, my initial contact was with Geoff, the chair of the Aboriginal education committee, and a non-Aboriginal teacher. As we discussed the research, he commented on Aboriginal students’ behaviour not fitting the mould expected of students, not meeting deadlines, and with homes not conducive to study, while at the same time praising the students’ work. This suggests culturally deficit thinking that persists within some Australian schools (Herbert, 2010; Luke et al., 2013; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009). The teacher promised to pass on the research information sheets and consent forms to Brett, the Aboriginal staff member, to organise students to participate in the discussion groups. Subsequently, the teacher misplaced the research documents, and requested more copies, the sooner the better, making a further deficit comment. Although I delivered extra copies to the school for the teacher’s attention, and emailed another set to the teacher, they did not reach Brett. Later, Brett related that the teacher had placed the research documents in his pigeonhole without discussion, particularly regarding the ethical requirements. I found this disrespectful towards the Aboriginal staff member from the chair of the Aboriginal education committee, although communicating this way may have been standard practice for the teacher. Subsequently, Aboriginal parents raised complaints about racist behaviour of some teachers in the school (see Designated Spaces). However, importantly, despite these undercurrents, from the Aboriginal students’ comments, the cultural learning in this school, in particular Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal dance, provided rich opportunities for in-depth, higher order learning and critical thinking (see Chapter 6, SS2).

In secondary school three, the Principal expressed aims to achieve cultural inclusivity:

*I think all of the kids understand in the school that we value the cultural heritage of the Indigenous Australians... and you walk around here it’s culturally inclusive*
and it’s because of all you know the work that’s done by many, many people.

(Principal, SS3)

The school supported Aboriginal culture and education, with a strong Gumbaynggirr language program, employing Aboriginal staff and support for cultural events. However, one student’s hesitancy about stating and feeling “black” (see Chapter 6, SS3) reveals students’ sensitivity to, and awareness of racial difference. In the same school, another student referred to the discussion being recorded and contributed little to the discussion, suggesting a reluctance to speak out. These silences and hesitations in the students’ comments indicate the presence of forces, gaps and silences which may not surface to school executive level.

In the context of accepting cultural differences, the Principal in primary school two voiced views on racism: “there’s no racism really raising its head. If it does it gets well and truly squished”. For the students in the school, however, racial sensitivity is ever-present. They were embarrassed when identified as Aboriginal and asked to perform Acknowledgement of Country in assembly (see Chapter 5).

The deficit discourse and racism present in some teacher-Aboriginal student and teacher-Aboriginal staff relationships and interactions exemplify a lack of critical understanding of cultural and racial assumptions (Keddie, Gowlett, Mills, Monk, & Renshaw, 2013) affecting the equality and equity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ cultural learning and programs within the curriculum. Cultural awareness and competency programs can counter negative understandings of staff.
7.7.2 Cultural awareness, cultural competence

Within current Aboriginal education policy (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2009b), cultural awareness and cultural competence professional development programs for practising teachers are designed to develop skills and knowledge to engage with Aboriginal peoples. The principals expressed differing views about such programs in their schools. In secondary school one, the Principal described them thus:

_The other thing we’re supposed to do is to have deeper understanding of culture… that will be the second staff development day where we’ve had specific sessions on Aboriginal culture… Elders coming in and refreshing our knowledge of local culture_ (Principal, SS1).

The Principal was aware of professional development as a policy requirement and an opportunity for learning and community engagement. However, another principal was less aware of such training for teachers at the school: “Not that I’m aware of. And I don’t know how much of it [cultural competency] is in teacher training” (Principal, SS2). The Principal’s lack of awareness of cultural training in the school and for inservice teachers or preservice teachers is surprising, considering the number of Indigenous students (13 per cent) at the school.

In secondary school three, the Deputy Principal identified cultural awareness in the current _Aboriginal Education Policy_ (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2009c):

_The theme of it was, it’s everybody’s business, and I think you can tell by the way that we operate at this school that we were already doing that. It’s good that it_
was formalised, I found the increasing cultural awareness of the staff because of professional development we concentrated on ... prior to that we concentrated on preferred learning styles in the professional development of staff (Deputy Principal, SS3).

The reference to learning styles may be to the idea of culturally different Indigenous styles of learning adopted in the 1970s and 1980s, which later became contentious (see Chapter 2). The comment indicates that such views have persisted within education and illustrates the changing forces in pedagogy and policy to which schools must adapt. Cultural awareness is just one step on the path to cultural competence for educational professionals, including “action and accountability” (Scrimgeour & Dunbar, 2009, p. 6) in examining how their attitudes affect their teaching practice.

7.8 Conclusion

Emerging in this chapter from the perspectives of Aboriginal staff, AECG members, non-Aboriginal principals, and teachers, is an understanding of the multiple forces affecting the production of cultural learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools. The factors include employment of Aboriginal staff, cultural safety, leadership, curriculum, materials resourcing, teacher attitudes and community engagement. These forces can be “reactive or active … tacit or performed” (Colman, 2010, p. 13).

Fragments and pieces of personal, historical, social beliefs and educational policies operating in schools and among school personnel thread through the students’ cultural learning. Aboriginal staff experience insecurity, internal complications and variations in their positions. Principals juggle systemic constraints, tensions and differing staff attitudes which can limit the process. Some teachers conform to the dominant educational
approach; others adopt different ways of thinking and teaching, connecting with students and communities. Reviewing the adults’ views of cultural learning in schools suggests assumptions that may be embedded in the experiences and practices of educational staff (see Chapters 2 and 3). These forces affect individuals in different degrees, and often unconsciously (Boundas, 2010). Further, they affect opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to engage through and with higher order cultural learning. The system “continually throws them in the vertiginous gap of being and becoming and failing to become” (Povinelli, 2011a, p. 112). Yet, from the discussion in this chapter, and that of cultural learning expressed by students in Chapters 5 and 6, there are examples of positive and constructive learning opportunities in schools to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to affirm themselves, to imagine their potential, to become-other.
Chapter 8: Students Becoming Through Cultural Learning

Education must first affirm who we are before presenting the potential of who we are ... we must ...start with the engagement of young children, born into the residue of the past, but with full creative capacity to transcend it and to excel. (Dodson, 2011, pp. 8, 11)

…what appears central to the healthy and successful development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is learning about their culture and understanding that this culture and its connections can sit within a mainstream, western cultural context. Whether this understanding of their traditional culture - and an awareness of its traumatic history and current position in relation to mainstream Australian society - contributes positively or negatively to the healthy development of the child depends upon the availability of suitable educational options. (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012, p. 25)

Two of the three key questions this thesis asked were:

1. What is the nature of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are learning in mainstream schooling education in New South Wales?

2. In what ways do the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reflect on the extent and nature of cultural learning?

In other words, this thesis sought to learn and understand the meaning and potential of cultural learning for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in their schools. In this chapter, I discuss the broad understandings and insights arising from this research in
relation to how cultural learning can enrich the students’ knowledge and enhance connections with their heritage and contemporary customs. These understandings can contribute to knowledge of the students’ potential for engagement with education through self-knowledge and self-worth (Cajete, 1994; Royal, 2007). Such understandings also frame a theoretical approach and practice.

8.1 Knowledges and Perspectives: The Students’ Views

Thirty-eight Aboriginal students and one Torres Islander student from three primary and three secondary schools in the land of the Gumbaynggirr nation on the NSW mid-north coast shared their understandings of cultural learning in Chapters 5 and 6. Their discussions indicate that cultural learning across and within the schools moves along a continuum from superficial acknowledgement, add-on material and repetitive activities, to in-depth learning and critical thinking, performative and creative learning. At one end of the continuum, students in two primary schools expressed through their discussions, writing and drawings, a limited level of tokenistic, stereotypical presentation of traditional Indigenous ways of life (“how they used to live”). At the other end of the continuum, in one primary school, the students’ passionate discussions and drawings communicated learning and understanding the connections between Aboriginal historical ways of being, customs, events and contemporary life; the “immediacy of culture” (Hokowhitu, 2009, p. 104). This is cultural learning embodying both breadth and depth, and is strengthened significantly by active learning such as Aboriginal art, dance and language, and community connections.

For the secondary school students, a continuum of cultural learning began with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives primarily in the key learning areas of
History, English, Geography, Art but less in Science, Technology and Mathematics. These experiences of the extent of cultural learning in subject areas are reflected in the literature, particularly limitations in science and mathematics with respect to the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait knowledges and perspectives (Matthews et al., 2005), although positive examples exist, such as the Bemel-Gardoo project to embed cultural content in science and technology (Riley & Genner, 2011). For some students in this research, cultural perspectives made learning more interesting, for example in English, but they were aware that it was a limited proportion of possible cultural learning. They wanted to learn more. At the positive end of the continuum, students engaged with cultural learning, including: depth in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives; critical thinking, for instance in Aboriginal Studies; and the performative and creative activities of art and dance. Although these understandings emerge from across the schools in differing degrees, secondary school two (SS2) in particular stands out, where students expressed passion and a depth of engagement with cultural learning at both a collective and individual level. In other words, while they shared some views, students also articulated personal understandings and a manifesto for the future (see Chapter 6).

Many students commented that they would like more Aboriginal people involved in their cultural learning. Some principals and Aboriginal educational staff supported this position (see Chapter 7). While the importance of creating and maintaining community partnerships is embedded in policy, funding and staffing limitations in some schools prevented Aboriginal educational staff from taking the time to build, maintain and expand community connections. This position confirms some critiques of community partnerships and school-community engagement in the literature, the misrepresentation of the positioning and capacity of parents, communities and schools (Lea, Thompson,
Williams, & Wegner, 2011; Lowe, 2011; Makuwira, 2007), as well as the lack of time in teachers’ busy workloads, and the underestimation of time required for meaningful community consultation (Maxwell, 2012).

From this continuum of student understandings, I argue that cultural learning has the potential to engage the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in meaningful, critical and creative thinking about their past, to connect their past with the present and to their future in Australian society. Cultural learning within the dominant NSW education system enables the students to comprehend the separate realities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultural knowledges and customs, alongside the social and political discourse that surrounds their lives (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013). Within education in colonised societies such as Australia, Canada, Aotearoa/New Zealand and the United States of America, an embedded “whiteness” exists (Moreton-Robinson, Singh, Kolopenuk, & Robinson, 2012, p. 9), a whiteness that “frames Indigeneity” (Andersen, 2009, p. 94). Opportunities to develop understanding of such framing within schools offer students potential to strengthen their views of themselves, as owners of unique knowledge (Kerwin & Van Issum, 2011); to develop a counter-discourse to a dominant whiteness in curriculum and schooling; and to find a “space of becoming” between both worlds from which to position themselves (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Somerville, 2007, p. 232).

In all schools, students identified affirmative opportunities for enhancing cultural learning to facilitate critical thinking and understanding of their contemporary positioning. However, many missed opportunities for relevant and critical thinking emerging from the students’ narratives, including how students through dialogue and active learning can
contribute to and enrich the curriculum for all students. These opportunities are discussed later in the chapter. To consider and understand the positive potential and the actualisation of cultural learning and critical thinking expressed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, I draw on the concept of “becoming” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Somerville, 2007). In this sense, becoming is about dynamic change: in the present it offers productive potential (Stagoll, 2010); it is a juncture between forces of the past which include the histories of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and those of colonisers, with the current political and social discourse. It is a positioning for the future strengthened by an understanding of the survival and the continuation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and cultures. For the students, becoming relates to their “capacity to exist and power to act” (Semetsky, 2006, p. 6), to think, act and become something more than they are, or something that they wish to be. Through becoming-other, the students have an opportunity for generating “new knowledge” in relation to understanding who and where they are positioned (Somerville, 2007, p. 234).

The third research question asked, What are some of the systemic policy, structural, institutional factors and individual attitudes that mediate and affect the students’ cultural learning experiences? Chapter 7 recounts how Aboriginal educational staff and AECG members, non-Aboriginal principals and teachers reflected on the multiple forces underpinning and affecting the production of cultural learning, informing the understandings expressed by the students. I argue in this chapter that within cultural learning, many fragments of experience and knowledge from different milieux of personal, political, social beliefs and policies continue to operate as norms, accepted understandings or practices in schools and among school personnel. These fragments
emerge from historical, sociopolitical and educational discourses and take on new meanings as they thread through contemporary cultural learning. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, many different theories, policies and pedagogical practices have framed the teaching, academic performance, attendance and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in dominant education systems and curricula. However, embedded thinking and teachers’ own educational experiences as school students and preservice teachers, which denied and excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives, can perpetuate educational and behavioural assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the need for and integration of cultural learning. Through developing awareness and consciousness of the multiple forces at a personal level, principals, teachers and preservice teachers can confront their beliefs. This is discussed later in the chapter.

8.1.1 Knowledges and perspectives in policy

Until the 1970s, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives were absent from educational curricula in Australia. As discussed in Chapter 2, this deliberate practice was neither questioned nor challenged by the majority of historians (Reynolds, 2000), but rather accepted as fact. Many generations of Australians learnt only a colonial perspective of history charting and championing the practices and ventures of European explorers, convicts, squatters, settlers and pastoralists, through a curriculum dominated by events and personalities. The absence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, stories, histories and knowledges maintained the invisibility of their cultures.

The current positioning of the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures in educational policy, from a Western viewpoint, aims to address “Aboriginal disadvantage...mostly Western ideas of what it means to be Aboriginal—or
at least superficial, generalised and undifferentiated understandings of the cultures and histories” (Grieves, 2009a, p. 38). Such policies are designed to make schooling and schools more culturally relevant to students and their families. Government reporting emphasises a persistent educational disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students in terms of school attendance, retention and academic outcomes, at a national level. Yet the positive value and effect of cultural learning in education is immeasurable (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014). Culture is difficult to define, and the notion of cultural learning is difficult to measure (see Chapter 3). Hypotheses of a causal relationship between academic outcomes and culturally responsive curricula which acknowledge students’ cultural knowledge are difficult to substantiate (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2014). In this neoliberal era of evidence-based, measurable governance and policy-making where the state controls curriculum (Davies & Bansel, 2007), a policy or program initiative such as cultural learning, whose outcomes are neither well understood, nor easily quantifiable, is in danger of losing support and funding.

8.2 Students Becoming Through Education

*Everyone’s got to commit to it...everyone’s got to play,*

...*each person plays just a little bit it’ll make a big difference* (Darren, Year 11/12 student).

*I hope to become something more than I am today* (Neil, Year 11/12 student).

The students in this research demonstrated that a strength of cultural learning exists in enabling them to know their histories and cultures as separate realities, to become aware of the past and present, and understand how current issues are informed by the past.
Although sometimes difficult and sad to learn of traumatic events, many students recognised that such learning acknowledges and enables them to connect with their stories and their peoples. These students—through pedagogy and curriculum that enables and allows them to learn their stories, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and performances within the framework of mainstream education representing the dominant society—can learn and understand reasons for their ascribed differences. They can choose to differentiate, to become different, to value their knowledges and practice their customs. Through this process of learning the students are "open to becoming different from themselves" (Davies, 2009, p. 19), to become-something-more. This can be a “space of possibility … in which …lines of flight take place” (Davies, 2009, p. 20), where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can meld cultural learning, critical thinking, higher order learning, thinking skills, language (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013; Nakata, 2011), creativity and performance. Such a process is possible, but not easy within an educational assemblage that carries negative historical, social and pedagogical forces: assumptions about educability, learning styles, and academic expectations. However, keeping connection to the dominant space to enable becoming or differentiation, is also important (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), for example, to understand the construction of Indigeneity through whiteness (Andersen, 2009). Within a “contested …cultural interface” that is full of tensions, students need to understand and engage with how "others think and construct the world" (Nakata, 2011, p. 2). Becoming through critical and connected cultural learning, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in this research demonstrated that they can develop a counter-discourse to challenge education and texts that have excluded their perspectives (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Cross & Naidoo, 2012; Rigney, 2006).
Students’ education forms part of their “individuation…the process of recognising ourselves and how we appear to others” (Gannon, 2010, p. 72). For the students in this research, cultural learning offers the opportunity to bring their cultural knowledges and histories alongside education including literacy and numeracy skills necessary for their survival in two worlds. This opportunity for becoming-something for the students through educational encounters combines properties from both worlds (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Nakata, 2011). Further, learning stories, knowledges and customs of the past and the present echoes customary Indigenous learning practices, where knowledge of land and stories are passed to younger generations, for lifelong learning (Valadian, 1992), a process of initiation into two worlds.

### 8.2.1 Being and becoming

A key differentiation of the contemporary sociology of children and young people in research developed from the 1980s onwards, is to regard children as already being, not just as adults in the making. This contrasts with, and is in response to, previous beliefs that regarded childhood as a developmental period in which children are becoming mature adults, for example, in Piaget’s theory of stages of child development. However, this modernist dualistic view of being versus becoming, assumes generational differences; another way to see the lives of children and young people is through a process of “relationality… produced within a set of relations” (Prout, 2011, p. 11). This view connects with indigenous relational ontologies within which children and young people are respected and regarded as already in the present and acknowledges their role in the future. For example, in this research, at the many public events I attended throughout the research, such as NAIDOC celebrations, Elders and community members expressed belief and faith in their children and young people, assigning them responsibility to lead
into the future: “Our greatest opportunity lies in those young children ...” (Dodson, 2011, p. 11).

In contrast with earlier restrictive views of childhood as becoming-adult, the contemporary concept of becoming is about endless possibilities and potential at any time in life (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Becoming is not linear, but is open-ended, and about opportunities for becoming-other (Stagoll, 2010), and self-imagining (Somerville, 2007). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, critical and connected cultural learning in education can transcend limitations imposed by the past and present, to become-other than may be assumed, based on perceptions of the dominant society. This other is not an essentialised 'other' defined by cultural or racial difference (Dei, 2008), but an ‘other’ of the students’ choosing, enabling them to understand, to counter and turn away from the legacies of social and educational positioning to create their own position.

**8.2.2 Educational encounters**

In Chapters 5 and 6, the students identified a continuum of cultural learning extending to possibilities for becoming-through-understanding from educational encounters. Some expressed an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence beyond historical invisibility to value customary ways of being and ways of doing, and to connect with the contemporary, dynamic presence of cultural ways. These students discussed learning the enforced changes to the ways of being and living of their peoples, and made connections between the past and the present: yeah...the old Aboriginals used to hunt for their food ...now they just go down to the shop...and buy [laughs] (Jared, year 6). Many students referred to gaps and a lack of balance in their learning: they wanted to learn more Aboriginal history; how social and life changes came about; to learn both sides of the story. Year 11/12 students of Aboriginal Studies discussed issues of social justice, land
rights and “institutionalised racism”. Their discussions, drawings and writings expressed understanding of the unequal positioning of Aboriginal knowledges, cultures and histories in curriculum.

Other students expressed less connection with their knowledges, culture and customs through their use of the pronoun ‘they’ with the past tense “back then...what they ate...how they hunted with spears ...how they used to live...ages and ages ago… didn’t they use them [clapsticks] around campfires?”. They did not balance these statements or make connections between historical ways of life with knowledge of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life. Both students and adults identified blockages through forces such as assumptions about knowledge, ignorance and limited support, inflexibility in curricula knowledge and resources, and lack of cultural awareness (see Chapters 5, 6 and 7). Curriculum plays a fundamental role.

Next, I discuss the position of cultural knowledges and perspectives in curriculum, and the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in developing curriculum.

8.3 Curriculum

In recent years, curricula at all levels of education in Australia have been designed to change the construction of Australian historical knowledge, through including accounts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of living, being and doing, and interactions with and treatment by colonisers and governments. This has been driven by national and state Indigenous education policy objectives since 1982, attempting to counter Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage, racism and discrimination; to develop understanding and acceptance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, stories,
knowledge, among all Australians; and counter curricula that reproduced “knowledge about Indigenous Australians as silent, invisible and positioned in and by history as mere powerless, dispossessed characters on the landscape” (Blanch, 2009, p. 33). However, “[m]isconceptions and stereotypes about Indigenous Australia have persisted, based on historical attitudes that were not even correct at the time” (Craven, 2011a, p. 5). Decades ago, the Federation of Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (1994) expressed concern that the white Australia legacy continued to exist among many teachers who had grown up during the influence of this policy, and within education structures and systems developed during those times. Many Australian teachers received their education through generations of racism and discrimination that denied Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, languages and histories (Hart et al., 2012). Cultural understanding and cultural competency were all but absent from teacher education programs. A normalised “whiteness” penetrates schooling and curriculum (Reid, Santoro, Crawford, & Simpson, 2009; Vass, 2012), echoing the invisible superiority of whiteness in the construction of knowledge in this country (Moreton-Robinson, 2005; Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012). Critiques of curriculum models operating in schools within Western, colonised systems describe “epistemologies of ignorance” (Malewski, 2011; Malewski & Jaramillo, 2011; McLaren, 2011), which perpetuate such thinking. Thus, curricula are not “culturally neutral... [but] cultural constructions grounded in the worldviews, beliefs and norms of those who conceptualize and teach” (Ball, 2004, p. 456).

In Australia, preservice teachers and other tertiary students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, may undertake Indigenous Studies designed to develop critical thinking and reflection, where they will "learn to …critically analyse… to explore their own identities…to recognise colonial ideologies and power in their application and
interpretation of knowledge", not "learn about... Indigenous people” from an objective, anthropological perspective (Sherwood, Keech, Keenan, & Kelly, 2011, p. 196). This orientation is present in Aboriginal Studies at upper secondary level, as the Year 11/12 students of Aboriginal Studies expressed in this research, and in the syllabus rationale: “enabling students to think critically about the historical and contemporary experiences of Aboriginal peoples” (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2010b, p. 5). As discussed in Chapter 3, through an initiative of the previous Australian Labor Government (2007 to 2013), the recently developed national Australian Curriculum includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curriculum perspectives (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], n.d.). While this is an important curricular development, as with all curriculum, this cross-curriculum perspective in the national curriculum continues to be contested politically. From an Aboriginal position, the perspectives have inconsistent “breadth ...integrity...depth” Lowe and Yunkaporta (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013, p. 3). The recent conservative government-commissioned review of the Australian Curriculum questioned the applicability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across curriculum areas, regarding them as a challenge to the “Judeo-Christian heritage of Australia” (Wiltshire & Donnelly, 2014, p. 138). This invokes an epistemological difference between Indigenous and Western knowledges, and a fear of diminishing the position of the latter.

At the time that this research took place, in 2012, the schools had not yet implemented the Australian Curriculum, as it was still in the process of being completed and adapted for NSW curricula (it has now been implemented). However, as discussed in Chapter 2, NSW policy has mandated the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives several times since 1982, as many principals mentioned (see Chapter 7). The
students valued the cultural learning they received through the NSW curriculum, but raised questions about the extent and delivery of cultural learning, and questioned whose knowledge they were learning. They commented on teachers’ knowledge, for example: stereotyped assumptions made about Aboriginal peoples, and that they would like the “real” people, Aboriginal people, to teach in Aboriginal Studies. The number of trained Indigenous teachers in Australia is around 1 per cent of teachers compared to 2.5 per cent of the population (Griffiths, 2011), and non-Indigenous teachers are often uncomfortable about teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives with which they are unfamiliar (Nakata, 2011). The difficulties inherent in this disparity surfaced in one secondary school (see Chapter 7). AECGs require Aboriginal speakers to teach Gumbaynggirr language in school programs and community, but the NSW Department of Education and Communities requires a departmentally accredited and trained teacher to teach the language as a full subject for all students. Integrating Aboriginal dance into the curriculum emerged as an additional issue.

8.3.1 Dance

As discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, Aboriginal dance performance emerged for some students in the research as a significant, meaningful activity. Dance is a means of Aboriginal cultural expression, of converting “intangible knowledge…into a tangible cultural expression” (Kerwin, 2011, p. 254); it expresses epistemologies and cultural heritage. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance performances embodying ceremony, deep knowledge and skill continue as an integral part of practised culture and custom in some communities, particularly in northern Australia. In other areas, as a result of assimilative and forced movement practices, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ ceremonial connections with cultural dance have lessened. However, contemporary Indigenous dance performance is flourishing, drawing on “historical
practices” (Casey, 2011, p. 54), as well as creating new dance incorporating histories, political and social issues of concern to Indigenous peoples, and landscape.

Education systems in some Western-oriented societies such as Australia regard Indigenous dance as entertainment or exercise more than knowledge transmission, reflecting a Western construction of knowledge (Cruz Banks, 2009). The dancing students in this research expressed “pride and honour” for their community, as a Year 11/12 student in secondary school two noted, and for themselves, as another Year 11/12 student in the same school commented, “which is pretty good”. Although acknowledged as a valuable activity by the schools, the inherent learning qualities, skills and cognitive role of Aboriginal dance are not recognised academically in the NSW curriculum. Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander dance performance features as an optional perspective within physical education in the NSW curriculum (and in the recently introduced Australian Curriculum). This contrasts with education in Aotearoa, where Māori kapa haka, dancing in rows, is offered as an academic subject, not just a “cultural add-on” (Whitinui, 2010b). The educational benefits from the curricular positioning and academic recognition of kapa haka for Māori students include wellbeing and engagement with wider learning. In this research, the staff and students at the schools with Aboriginal dance programs recognised and acknowledged the importance of student participation, and yet the continuation of Aboriginal dance performance in its own right depends on special or external funding. This represents a missed opportunity to integrate equally a cultural learning activity, recognising students’ cultural heritage and knowledge into the curriculum.
8.3.2 Students becoming with curriculum

Some principals in this research expressed difficulties in engaging Aboriginal community members in teaching and curriculum, for reasons such as lack of funding, or a perceived lack of models or processes for incorporating local Aboriginal viewpoints (see Chapter 7, Community engagement and local knowledge). However, successful examples exist, through engaging community members and working with the AECG and Aboriginal staff, as some schools demonstrated. Primary and secondary students in the research discussions shared many suggestions for enhancing their cultural learning. These included going out in groups to talk to community, and bringing Elders and community members in to participate in an end of year school activity. As Larry, a Year 11/12 student commented: “and that might even get other people involved like non-Indigenous people that actually do want to learn about our culture”.

Precedents exist for community engagement through curricular activities: the NSW Year 11/12 Aboriginal Studies syllabus includes two major fieldwork research projects where students connect with the stories and experiences of local Aboriginal community members. In the year following this research in the schools, secondary school one engaged students in a project to gather local stories from local Aboriginal Elders and community members and to develop the stories into enactments which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students later performed publicly, to great acclaim. These examples of strength and connection demonstrate the powerful role students can play in gathering local and relevant knowledge for curriculum. Further, such actions acknowledge students’ own knowledge and family knowledge and enable students to connect school with community, country and home (Rigney, 2011b). In this way, through building connections, and learning for themselves, students can contribute to curriculum:
becoming-with-curriculum. This involves rethinking education as a "project of creation" (Wallin, 2013, p. 212), enabling students to differentiate, to think for themselves and to value difference.

8.4 Difference

Being Indigenous “emphasises the right to be different in some senses and the same in others – the opportunity to live in the modern world while at the same time preserving one’s ancient cultural heritage” (O'Sullivan, 2007, p. 1). Yet, Australian society and implicitly, education, has a difficult relationship with Indigenous difference. Governments attempted to “whitewash” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture through exclusion from educational curricula (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013, p. 12). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learning styles, suggested as different ways of learning, became positioned uncomfortably in the dominant education system (see Chapter 3, Learning styles), sometimes leading to separating students into special learning classes with assumptions of low expectations and inadequate curricula (Hewitson, 2007). More recently, the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curriculum perspectives in the Australian Curriculum has raised questions of “how to encourage a particular ethics around difference without essentialising that difference in the process” (Watkins, 2011, p. 844).

For the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in this research, difference emerges at two levels: through learning that includes cultural knowledges and perspectives, students can engage in a process of becoming-different (Stagoll, 2010) in understanding their position within two worlds; and through critical and cultural learning, connecting past history and cultural knowledges with the present, the students have the potential to “celebrate difference as being an opportunity” (Whitinui, 2010a, p. 20) in learning.
Australia’s racial positioning from colonial times as the basis of “systemic inequality” persists as an embedded way of thinking that permeates into the present (Bignall, 2007, p. 204). A reconciliatory, transformative process can “create difference, rather than … negate it”, enabling “Australians to ‘turn away’ from habitually colonial assumptions and practices” (Bignall, 2007, p. 208). A similar process can apply to education whereby schools and staff move beyond assumptions to accept, value and celebrate difference, as the Principal, Primary school 2 commented (see Chapter 7, Leadership).

8.5 Bridging Gaps Between Theory, Policy and Practice

A surprising but perhaps to be expected understanding emerging from this research is the perpetuation of systemic problems and hindrances affecting the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and perspectives in the schools (see Chapter 7). While positive examples of cultural learning exist, some issues arising from the yarning, discussions and interviews with educational staff in the schools reflect concerns that have been highlighted in the multiple reviews, inquiries, reports and research regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education at national and state levels since the 1970s (for example, Aboriginal Consultative Group, 1975; AcilAllen Consultants, 2014; NSW Department of Education and Training & NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc., 2004; Yunupingu, 1995). To differing degrees, these factors include: the need for more Indigenous teaching staff; the need for more culturally relevant, quality curriculum materials developed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; inadequate resourcing for curriculum development, materials and staffing; racist and deficit attitudes; limited understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and knowledges among non-Indigenous staff; the need for more professional development and cultural competency for school staff; and, a perception of incompatible or inequitable knowledge systems.
In education, changed thinking and progress in the integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives is slow, generational and incremental. Since 1982, through NSW Aboriginal education policies, the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives has at times been declared mandatory (see chapter two). The school principals in this research referred to mandatory policy requirements, but also discussed problems such as teacher intransigence, lack of curriculum models for community involvement; and limitations to ongoing funding for Aboriginal staff positions and community participation in curriculum. Such examples highlight persistent disparities and disconnections between policy and the realities of practically embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in education. However, positive examples emerging in this research reflect on the enlightenment, encouragement and affirmation of some teachers and principals.

A lack of consistent theory underlying practice for indigenous education is one limitation (see Chapters 2 and 3). Addressing the absence of a theoretical basis in the 1982 NSW Aboriginal Education Policy, including the positioning and teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, Cook (1995) proposed 48 theoretical constructs. To facilitate and support the integration of Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum in Manitoba, Canada, Kanu (2011) proposed a “reconceptualized theory of curriculum” embodying four metaphors of curriculum. These were: “curriculum as currerre” (pp. 204-5), where curriculum is recognised as a personal educational journey for students; “curriculum as a spiritual journey and transcendence” (pp. 206-8), recognising the spiritual and transformative potential for students; “curriculum as conversation” (pp. 208-
emphasising listening, dialogue and understanding; and “curriculum as community” (pp. 210-12), where community holds together the first three metaphors.

Bridging theory, policy and educational practice is difficult. As discussed above, rarely is policy informed by theory; and more often it is driven by opposing political constructs such as social inclusion and conservative neoliberalism, inviting disagreement. The 1982 NSW Aboriginal Education Policy was regarded as a "controversial and revolutionary document" because it addressed a specific population group (Wammarra Aboriginal Education Centre & School of Teacher Education Charles Sturt University, 1992, p. 16). The ideological nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in Australian education can lead to contestation in the classroom, because it implies holding a position with which teachers may not agree, or may resent (Nakata, 2011). As more Indigenous content is included in curricula, however, the ideological nature of such material may diminish (Nakata, 2011).

A recent government review of the Australian Curriculum questioned the relevance and extent of the cross-curriculum priority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in all learning areas (as well as the two other priorities Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia; and Sustainability) (Wiltshire & Donnelly, 2014). This creates further tensions between policy and practice, complicating the position for principals and teachers.

**8.6 Teachers Becoming with Students**

The students in this research emphasised the value of relevant cultural learning which connects with community; that is active and in which they can participate; and, that strengthens their positioning. A shared characteristic of the teachers of Aboriginal
Studies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and the Gumbaynggirr language, with whom I spoke and whose classes I observed, was their previous experience working in schools and connecting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, staff and communities. Principals also discussed learning from, and connections with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander populations in previous schools, or personal indigenous connections. While the principals set examples, encouraged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and learning, and expressed discouragement of racism, some also acknowledged that they could not enforce teaching practices. Blockages which the students and adults in this research identified include assumptions, ignorance, limited support, knowledge and resources, and lack of cultural awareness. For example, one Year 7 student referred to teachers’ assumptions: “most teachers are like what most people would have assumed...that they [Aboriginal people]...walked around with no clothes on” (see Chapter 6).

Responses from school teaching staff and preservice student teachers to presentations I gave about the research suggest difficulties for them in connecting with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ perspectives. This may be a result of the multiple forces of their own education and a sociopolitical discourse depicting a homogenous, educationally underachieving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student population in comparison to the dominant non-Indigenous student population. Indigenous presence in Australian tertiary institutions in terms of students, staff and curriculum began only in the 1970s (Bunda et al., 2012). In the past 20 years, university Indigenous Studies has moved from an historical, anthropological basis to a more critical approach with a focus on Indigenous knowledge, as constructed and represented by Indigenous peoples (Mackinlay & Barney, 2012).
However, not all teachers or preservice teachers may have had an opportunity to embody this understanding, and the extent of learning Indigenous Studies or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives at tertiary level varies. For example, in response to a comment from a Year 11/12 school student in this research, who distinguished between learning Aboriginal history and history from non-Aboriginal perspectives, a preservice teacher suggested that further knowledge of Aboriginal history may be found in anthropological texts, as if Aboriginal accounts did not exist. This comment aligns with the earlier position that Mackinlay and Barney (2012) referred to above. Although some ethnographic data relating to Australian Indigenous peoples are valuable records (Langton, 2011), history or events as documented in anthropological accounts may purport to represent, but are not necessarily the same as, Aboriginal experiences. There can be different “materializations” of events that go beyond those accepted in archival or anthropological accounts (Jones & Jenkins, 2008a, p. 126).

Teachers and preservice teachers can benefit from confronting, understanding and challenging their own unconscious thinking that may be influenced by legacies of negative beliefs, perpetuated by publicly reported information, to reflect actively and to question embedded attitudes. For example, in research with preservice teachers in rural Australia, “ethical positioning” was used as a pedagogy to shift their “racist values and attitudes” (O'Dowd, 2010, p. 30), enabling the students to move beyond their ethnocentric thinking. Many had acquired their knowledge of Aboriginal people from local and family “conversations … Yet the same students wanted to assist young Indigenous students in their classrooms” (p. 34). When challenged from an ethical position to reflect on their views, the students began to understand racist thinking and to consider the continuation of the past in the present.
Through developing an awareness and a consciousness of the forces that surround Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in education, including facing up to the possibility of skewed personal assumptions and ignorance, teachers and preservice teachers can begin to transform their thinking. The PEARL teaching model emphasises transformative learning for non-Indigenous students at tertiary level, for example, learning “to ask questions about the possibility of social justice, self-determination and sovereignty for Indigenous people in Australia” and to replace their old thinking with new (Mackinlay & Barney, 2012, p. 14), although students often felt powerless and uncomfortable with the challenge. This raises questions of how non-Indigenous students as preservice teachers connect and learn at a personal level with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, such as those in this research who spoke about the injustices their peoples have experienced and continue to experience.

In large metropolitan university programs designed to increase cultural awareness, logistics and lack of time often prohibit students meeting in person with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students and communities (personal communication, March 2014). This may be a reflection of the commitment and structuring of such instruction. However, value in “[L]earning from each other” through personal connections between schools, teachers and preservice teachers with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and students is shown to deliver successful, practical examples in schools (What Works team, 2011, p. 10). Te Kotahitanga, a government supported professional development program was designed to improve Māori student-teacher relationships in schools in Aotearoa (Bishop & Berryman, 2010; Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2007; Bishop et al., 2003) Teachers were brought face-to-face with the feelings and
experiences of Māori secondary students within an education system whose colonial orientation and cultural focus differs from that of the students.

Changing attitudes embedded and reinforced in multiple layers of history and learning is often a personal affair. A possibility for such change exists in establishing affirmative relations between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians through bodily, performative connections (Bignall, 2010). This process of developing an “affective relation” (p. 80) can be achieved through encounters, as some teachers of cultural perspectives and Aboriginal language in this research expressed through positive relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (see Chapter 7). Over time, the sharing of understandings through art, music, dance and language, for example, can become sites of “positive interaction" (Bignall, 2010, p. 85).

The structural and hierarchical nature of schooling and relationships of teachers with students can preclude exchange of learning in the direction of student to teacher, because teachers instruct students. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in this research shared their insights and feedback on teachers’ delivery and the extent of cultural learning. Reversing the hierarchical relationship, teachers can learn from students, as Alison Cook-Sather (2010) has demonstrated in projects involving secondary students in Pennsylvania contributing to the preparation of secondary school teachers. With training and appropriate skills, the students acted as “pedagogical consultant[s] to prospective teachers” (p. 557), moving beyond objects of teaching to become “subjects and actors” (p. 559). The projects aimed to develop effective pedagogies and supportive classrooms, to prepare preservice teachers through dialogue and feedback on their teaching, and to understand their teaching from another perspective. Such a program involving Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander school students, preservice teachers and teachers would benefit cultural learning and teaching in Australia. For example, the AIME (2011) Indigenous mentoring program connecting university students and staff as mentors to Indigenous secondary students provides opportunities for two-way learning. From my participation in AIME, I learnt from the Indigenous students whom I mentored, and other mentees, of their educational challenges. A recent review of the AIME program highlighted the powerful capacity-building for the university students and schoolteachers who participate in the AIME program in understanding and engaging with Indigenous students, as well as the value of AIME’s acknowledging the “cultural wealth” of the Indigenous students (Harwood, McMahon, O’Shea, Bodkin-Andrews, & Priestly, 2015, p. 234).

8.7 Limitations of the Research

In this thesis, I have sought to learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a localised study about the nature and extent of their cultural learning, in order to contribute to deeper understanding of such learning. I did not seek to determine a universal representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through cultural learning, nor to present generalisations regarding the path of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in schools.

While the emphasis is on the students’ viewpoints, the research recognises that adults are part of, and influence any learning process, connecting relationally with children and young people (Mannion, 2007). Parents and caregivers are the major influence on the cultural learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. AECG members who were parents and grandparents of school students contributed their views at student discussions, in yarning discussions and at AECG meetings. Collectively, they expressed strong interest in hearing the students’ views of their cultural learning. However, because
the focus was to understand the students’ views of their cultural learning in schools, I did not in the research seek the views of all parents and caregivers regarding the participating students’ cultural learning in schools. The role and views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents regarding the cultural learning of children at school and at home is a significant area for future research.

To understand the constructive, positive and prohibitive, limiting forces surrounding the students’ cultural learning, I interviewed school principals about their philosophies and leadership. I spoke with teachers who taught Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in class, Aboriginal Studies and the Gumbaynggirr language, in order to understand the contributing conditions and factors (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002). However, I did not seek the views of all teachers with whom the students interacted, or learned from, for two reasons. First, I did not wish to diminish the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who are considered less often in research studies and rarely in quantitative research and statistical reporting. Second, discussion of the challenges for teachers and teacher education exists in the literature (for example, Andersen, 2012; Craven, 2011b; Harrison & Greenfield, 2011; Hart et al., 2012). However, I do make some practical suggestions regarding teachers learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (see Chapter 9).

I did not seek to establish a causal relationship between teaching and cultural learning; as in earlier chapters, because such causality is difficult and contested. Further, to avoid the limitations of statistical “gap talk…policy as numbers” emanating from Closing the Gap policies and programs (Lingard et al., 2012, p. 330), I did not include measurement of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ learning or statistical outcomes.
The localised nature of the study separates it from large quantitative and longitudinal studies sometimes recommended for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education (Craven & Bodkin-Andrews, 2011; Mellor & Corrigan, 2004a). However, the scale of this in-depth research, conducted in partnership with the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, has provided opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to think about and share their insights of cultural learning. The research understandings contribute to knowledge of how cultural learning can build students’ capacity for understanding their social positioning, for becoming-other. This knowledge contributes a further dimension towards understanding how cultural learning affects the students’ potential, for engagement with education, and perhaps even their self-esteem.

8.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed how this research illuminates, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, the understanding and the role of cultural perspectives and knowledges in their education: to guide them through a process of higher order learning and critical thinking; to knowing their histories, the value of their cultures and worldviews within the broad continuum of knowledge and learning; to actively experience their cultures and customs; and, to leading to an understanding of their positioning in society today. Students discussed a continuum of learning, of opportunities to engage with their histories, cultures, knowledges and communities, to develop a depth of consciousness of their worlds. At the same time they shared awareness of the gaps in their learning, desires to extend their knowledge.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who live and learn at the cultural interface of Western and Indigenous worlds, education strives for “wholeness … a level
of harmony between individuals and their world” (Cajete, 1994, p. 208). This wholeness involves understanding their two worlds equally in order to fashion their position, to locate a place for themselves, and to become-other. This is not an easy process; it is “a tearing apart to create a new order at a higher level of consciousness” (Cajete, 1994, p. 209). The intangible and immeasurable element of cultural learning sit uneasily in the current neoliberal education climate with a focus on literacy and numeracy outcomes as measurements of learning achievements. In the next chapter, I discuss some suggestions and recommendations to enhance cultural learning, crystallising from the research.
Chapter 9: Conclusion and Recommendations

In this chapter, I discuss implications and possibilities from this research for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural learning. The students participate in contemporary, twenty-first century living, but they also have rights to maintain, participate in and adapt their cultures, languages and customs. Learning which involves “culturally sustaining pedagogy … can support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities … the dynamic, shifting, and ever-changing nature of cultural practices” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). However, this does not mean making deterministic and essentialist connections between language, culture and race; in other words, expecting all non-dominant students to feel the same about their language and culture or that they want to live or recreate historical practices and customs (Paris, 2012).

Australia has a responsibility to enable and ensure the continuation of cultural learning, to educate non-Indigenous Australians in the knowledge of separate histories and the dynamic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997; Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody et al., 1991). This thesis has highlighted the affirmative possibilities of cultural learning expressed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and the forces affecting such opportunities. Secondly, the thesis has identified complexities of incorporating cultural learning within the dominant education system and its associated legacies of negative policies, attitudes and beliefs about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The emphasis of this research is not on measurable learning outcomes of success, but on the value and meaning of learning cultural knowledges, skills and
creativity: on “multiplicities of becoming, or transformational multiplicities, not countable elements and ordered relations; fuzzy, not exact aggregates” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 505-506).

From the knowledge that both students and adults shared, this research draws further on potential, missed or undeveloped opportunities. Within their schools students locate the real, actual complexities of cultural learning, and the difficulties of the equal integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives into curriculum and schooling. Further, and importantly for the students’ overall learning, this research demonstrates that the recognition of cultural knowledges and perspectives within the dominant school curricula contributes to the students’ pride and self-knowledge. Later in this chapter, I discuss opportunities for enhancing cultural learning expressed by the students and emerging from the research, and make some recommendations for advancing these ideas.

This research had two primary aims. The first was to learn and understand from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in six New South Wales public schools, the extent and nature of the cultural learning they receive as part of their schooling, and how the students feel about and respond to such learning. The second aim was to understand the systemic, policy, structural, institutional factors and individual attitudes mediating and impacting on the students’ cultural learning experiences. The students’ perspectives emerging from the first aim elaborate how cultural learning that connects with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, histories, cultures and languages can contribute to the students’ consciousness, awareness and understanding of the complexities and the contexts of their positioning in society, and through developing the capacity to make
sense of their positioning, contribute to their becoming. The students’ views indicate a continuum of cultural learning that can inform ongoing curriculum development.

Elements from the students’ perspectives in relation to the extent and delivery of cultural learning contribute to the second aim, as do the perspectives of Aboriginal educational staff, AECG members, principals and teachers, in Chapter 4. The analysis of historical, social and educational forces in Chapters 2 and 3, together with the viewpoints of students and staff in Chapter 7, illuminate the ongoing and intense challenges for students and staff in achieving the broad policy goals of increasing and enhancing cultural learning and knowledge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, non-Indigenous students and staff. For example, when I presented students’ comments and conclusions to teachers in two schools and to a university class of preservice teachers, some responses indicated that gaps in understanding persist, perhaps because of the more than thirty years of changing educational policies and strategies.

The research in this thesis has implications for further research in the field of cultural learning, pedagogy and teacher education. Responding to the students’ comments and suggestions in the research, teachers may review assumptions, to understand the multiplicities and forces which exist in the milieu of Indigenous education, the intrinsic value of cultural learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and how, as teachers, they might contribute to the students’ positive and critical learning. To facilitate understanding of the student perspectives and their learning desires, I have made connections between dominant education and systemic, historical, educational forces, assumptions and unconscious thoughts, and the students’ cultural learning, to see, from the students’ standpoints, the positive possibilities that such learning offers.
In Australia, as in communities worldwide, Indigenous research emphasises the importance of the process in terms of respecting protocol and in the negotiation, guidance, monitoring and dissemination of research involving Indigenous peoples and communities, and of building relationships (Dudgeon et al., 2010; Martin, 2008b; Nakata, 2007b; Smith, 2012). The research for this thesis was co-constructed with the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group who monitored and participated throughout the process as co-researchers in student discussion groups. Developing trust and maintaining relationships with the AECG members and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was key to the design of this research, and I reported regularly on progress to AECG meetings. At both a professional and personal level, I learned significantly from the research.

Before publication or presentations beyond the local community, I presented the results of the research, including recommendations, to the AECG who endorsed the outcomes and recommendations. These have been subsequently shared with the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs, school representatives at AECG meetings, and all school principals.

Practical recommendations are an important outcome of Indigenous research. Aware that broad recommendations relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education are often repeated in research and reviews, I discuss and make some specific recommendations for school principals, teachers, universities and preservice teachers:

- network with other schools to strengthen cultural learning in the face of staff and curricular funding and resourcing challenges;
• review and rethink the pedagogical and academic skills embedded in performative (dance) and creative (art) activities;
• students at all levels to actively contribute to culturally relevant curriculum through projects focused on learning with and from local community members;
• students to provide pedagogical feedback and knowledge to teachers and preservice teachers; and
• preservice teachers’ mentoring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to be recognised academically.

9.1 Recommendations

9.1.1 Aboriginal Studies or Indigenous Studies

Students in this research have demonstrated that Aboriginal Studies, from Year 7 to Year 10, and particularly in Years 11/12, provide powerful opportunities to develop knowledge that extends beyond superficial, tokenistic learning and that includes critical thinking skills. Further, Aboriginal Studies can extend and enhance the transmission of knowledge beyond the teaching of perspectives in other subjects. However, as this research demonstrates, in secondary schools, Aboriginal Studies may be excluded or not offered for logistical reasons. Offering Aboriginal Studies or Indigenous Studies as a subject in secondary schools is a local school decision. In this research, one secondary school offered Aboriginal Studies, as a mandatory subject for all students in Year 7, and as an optional Higher School Certificate subject for all students in Year 11/12. In two schools, principals cited insufficient numbers of students opting to take Aboriginal Studies in Year 11/12, which prevented it from being taught, often to the disappointment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who may comprise a small percentage of the population, especially in Years 11 and 12. Two secondary schools combined to teach
Aboriginal Studies, and thus boost numbers. Other reasons for not teaching Aboriginal Studies in the schools were the lack of suitable staff or funding for staff.

Aboriginal Studies or Indigenous Studies enables students to reflect upon their own lived experiences, and with such learning and reflection they can become agents of change (Herbert, 2010). It is an opportunity that enables students to engage in higher order learning, develop critical thinking and self-knowledge. Expertise and students are available in the region, and by combining resources this important educational option could be extended to those students who wish to participate.

Recommendation No. 1

That all secondary schools in the area commit to, and share, teaching knowledge, resources and expertise to provide Aboriginal or Indigenous Studies for all students from Year 7 to Years 11 and 12, in a location that provides the best access, resources and teaching skills.

9.1.2 Gumbaynggirr language

This study shows that teaching the local Gumbaynggirr language varied within the schools. In one school, optional learning for Aboriginal students in Years 7, 8 and 9 extended to a mandatory language subject in Year 7 for all students, replacing French as a language other than English. In other schools, a small amount of language learning was included in project-based learning such as bush tucker, or within Aboriginal Studies class. Aboriginal students in all schools responded positively to learning the language, articulating a connection between language, identity and culture: it should be really important to have your Aboriginal language, just like any other culture. Reckon having your language is a big part of who you are, where you come from (Neil, Year 11/12 student).
Teaching local Aboriginal languages is supported by the New South Wales and Australian governments which provide funding in recognition of the importance of reclaiming Aboriginal languages. Within the Gumbaynggirr nation, a well-established language centre teaches local language and provides training for others to teach in schools and communities. The commitment of the language teacher and the principal in the secondary school teaching Gumbaynggirr language offers a model that other schools may follow or connect with and share resources. However, as with Aboriginal Studies, teaching Aboriginal languages in schools is a local decision that varies according to available resources, commitment and staffing in schools.

**Recommendation No. 2**

A language nest program for teaching Gumbaynggirr language to all students has been established in the area through a NSW Aboriginal Affairs plan called OCHRE — Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment (NSW Aboriginal Affairs, 2013)—to facilitate and support the expansion of teaching the Gumbaynggirr language as part of a continuous pathway of learning from pre-school to tertiary education for Aboriginal language learners and teachers. It is recommended that schools in the area take advantage of this opportunity and commit to sharing teaching resources and expertise to extend Gumbaynggirr language teaching for all students in locations that provide the best access, resources and teaching skills.

**9.1.3 Art**

In Aboriginal learning practices, art is used to convey meaning and knowledge, beliefs, cosmology and law. It is the act of "conveying meaning through abstract principles...sign-posting knowledge ...the medium for articulating intangible knowledge (thinking) to symbolic abstract" (Kerwin, 2011, pp. 255-256). The students in this research engaged with opportunities to participate in the practice of Aboriginal art, but others spoke of
limited options: “it’s mostly just fruit bowls...you can’t do anything else” (Year 5 primary student); “[in art]…never really studied anything [Aboriginal], not until next year” (Year 10 secondary student). Thus, reasons for the limitations in learning and practising Aboriginal art may be related to curricular choices, or staff resourcing. However, practicing and teaching Aboriginal artists live in the area.

**Recommendation No. 3**

*That schools in the area to commit to and share teaching knowledge, resources and expertise to provide Aboriginal or Indigenous art classes for all students in a location that provides the best access, resources and teaching skills.*

**9.1.4 Dance**

The recovery of dance and performance among indigenous peoples living in colonised nations, along with visual and performing arts, is part of an ongoing assertion of indigenous rights to history, language and culture. Further, the powerful role of indigenous historical and contemporary dance in contributing to the wellbeing, cultural knowledge and educational engagement of Indigenous students within school education in Australia is recognised (Britton, 2000). Some students in this research learnt and publicly performed Aboriginal dance and their comments are testament to the strength and value of such activities. However, student dance performances can be regarded as extra-curricular and do not always translate directly to academic credits.

**Recommendation No. 4**

*That schools and government education departments review a path for academic recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance in curriculum through consideration of factors such as the students’ connection to cultural knowledge, contribution to student cultural wellbeing, critical understanding and overall learning.*
9.1.5 Teacher professional development and student teacher mentoring

Some teachers and preservice teachers indicated limited knowledge or understanding of the positions and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Connecting teachers and preservice teachers with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can contribute to improved understanding of teachers and students. In Aotearoa, the Te Kotahitanga program in secondary schools brought teachers and Māori students together and led to the development of an Effective Teaching Profile (Bishop & Berryman, 2010). In another example, students act as “pedagogical consultants” (Cook-Sather, 2010, p. 557) to preservice teachers.

Recommendation no. 5

That government education departments and universities investigate a path for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to share with teachers and preservice teachers their experiences of cultural learning in curriculum, and cultural knowledge, to contribute to teacher and preservice teacher understanding, and to students’ overall learning.

Through AIME (2011), the Indigenous mentoring program operating in many Australian universities, students mentor Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary students in developing skills and aspirations for further education and assist in learning through homework centres. There are clear positive benefits for school students and student mentors engaging in mentoring. Acknowledging the positive value for preservice teachers in their own teaching education, universities can credit participation as AIME mentors within the preservice teachers’ academic program (J. Wilks, personal communication, June 2014).
Recommendation No. 6

That universities implement academic accreditation for preservice teachers who participate as mentors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the AIME program, to acknowledge and encourage pre service teachers’ understanding of students positioning and to equip the preservice teachers for practical teaching in schools.

9.1.6 Students contribute to curriculum

In response to the limited involvement of community in their cultural learning, the students in this research made several suggestions for enhancing community participation and contribution. One suggestion builds on examples in Year 11/12 Aboriginal Studies and a drama project in one school. This was to engage students themselves in researching and learning from community about local knowledges and histories.

Recommendation No. 7

That primary and secondary schools extend programs and projects in a range of subject learning areas where students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, research knowledge, histories and stories within local communities, develop research and analytical skills and use and learn with the resources in local cultural and language centres. This can enable the enrichment of curriculum with Indigenous knowledges and perspectives and at the same time connect students and staff with communities and local knowledges.

9.1.7 Cultural learning in higher education

Cultural learning in schooling incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, histories and perspectives can contribute to the transition and retention of Indigenous students into higher education. Where secondary teachers hold low expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and where a school accords a low priority to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, histories and
perspectives, these influences contribute to low numbers of Indigenous students transitioning into higher education (Kinnane, Wilks, Wilson, Hughes, & Thomas, 2014). Further research is recommended to explore the potential of students’ cultural learning to enrich their critical thinking capacities and understandings about their positioning in contemporary society, to build their aspirations to participate in, to engage with, and enhance their capacity for learning in higher education.

**Recommendation No. 8**

*That research be undertaken to explore the contribution of Indigenous knowledges, histories, languages and stories within schooling to the successful transitioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into higher education. This will contribute to understanding the value of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in schooling, and at the same time connect researchers with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, communities and knowledges.*

These recommendations were shared with the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, NSW, the school principals and the NSW Department of Education and Communities.

**9. 2 Conclusion**

As I discussed in Chapter 8, it is important to note that this research is located in six schools in one regional area of the state of NSW, and has not set out to establish general principles or universal facts regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural learning in schools. The understandings from students and adults in this research demonstrate that variations in cultural learning exist within and across schools, although circumstances in the schools will and have changed.
The aims of the thesis were to understand and contribute to knowledge and dialogical conversation about enhancements to the means and processes of cultural learning. In this spirit, and honouring my promises to the AECG, to the participating schools and most importantly to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who shared their stories with me, I offer the recommendations in this chapter.
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Research consent form NSW AECG Inc. (Coffs Harbour)

Project: Aboriginal children, young people and education policy in New South Wales

Principal Researcher: Katie Wilson (mobile 0415367794, katie.wilson@scu.edu.au)

Research Organisation: Southern Cross University

Hodene Faulks confirms that the NSW Aboriginal
Education Consultative Group Inc. (Coffs Harbour) gives its consent to the above research project, subject to the following conditions:

1. We have the right to withdraw our consent and cease any further involvement in the research project at any time without any penalty and without giving any reasons.

2. The purpose of the research, as outlined in the attached information sheet, has been explained, and we have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. We have received satisfactory answers to our questions and have been given adequate time to consider the appropriateness of the project.

3. We have been provided with the following information in writing:
   - The names of all people and organisations responsible for the security of data and who will have access to the data.
   - Details of the proposed storage and destruction of data.

4. The researcher will need to obtain additional consent from us if there are any changes to the project from the information provided under paragraphs [2] and [3] above.

5. Any information that any member of our organisation provides or any personal details obtained in the course of this research, are confidential and any information that could identify individual participants will neither be used nor published.

6. Unless otherwise explicitly agreed, any information provided in the course of this research that identifies our organisation or the Aboriginal communities which it serves will not be used nor published without our written permission.

7. The researcher will ensure there is continuing consultation with our organisation during the course of the research. The research will not proceed until all required negotiation has occurred to our satisfaction.

8. The researcher will obtain the written individual consent of all participants in the research.

9. Research findings will be discussed and shared with our organisation and parents in a manner to be agreed with us.

10. We understand that if we have any complaints or questions concerning this research project we can contact the principal researcher mentioned above or Southern Cross University as follows:

May 2012 Katie Wilson
Appendix B: Information and consent forms

Information Sheet NSW AECG Inc.
Topic: Aboriginal children, young people and education policy in New South Wales

Katie Wilson, Southern Cross University
Mobile: 0415367794 Email: katie.wilson@scu.edu.au

My name is Katie Wilson and I am undertaking research as part of my doctoral studies at Southern Cross University. Dr Judith Wilks at Southern Cross University and Professor Neil Drew, University of Notre Dame, are my supervisors. My study is looking at the learning experiences of children and young people in schools in relation to New South Wales Aboriginal education policy.

The research is being undertaken in two phases. In Phase One, which was approved by the Southern Cross Ethics Committee (approval number ECN-11-261), consultations took place with the NSW AECG Inc. Coffs Harbour local committee about the research proposal, including the selection of schools, of children and young people, and the involvement of parents and AECG representatives in the conduct of the research. The outcomes of these consultations are an integral part of the planning and the design for Phase Two of the research. Consultation with the NSW AECG Coffs Harbour local committee will continue throughout the research process. It was agreed with the NSW AECG Coffs Harbour local committee that the research findings will be discussed with the committee and responses included in the final report. Results of the research will be distributed to the NSW AECG Coffs Harbour local committee, the NSW Department of Education and Communities, the participating schools, and will be available to be shared with teacher education students in the School of Education, Southern Cross University. It is intended that the research findings will contribute to an understanding of the role and contribution of Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge to the learning environment for Aboriginal children and young people in NSW schools.

The second phase of the research involves talking to Aboriginal children and young people in up to four primary and secondary schools in the Coffs Harbour region about their learning of Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge at school. Selection of schools will follow the suggestions of the NSW AECG Coffs Harbour local committee to include schools with different levels of cultural programs, and selection of participants in schools will ensure that all children of Aboriginal descent are invited to participate, in consultation with the school principals. The format of the research will include focus discussion groups with participants in each school, with additional options of drawing or writing, and an exploration of cultural safety in the school environment. As requested by the AECG committee a parent or AECG representative will be present during the
research. Information will also be collected from the schools about their Aboriginal cultural programs and teaching of Aboriginal perspectives.

With the permission of parents and the AECG the focus group discussions may be taped and I will use the recordings to make a transcript of the discussions. Excerpts from the transcript may be used in reports and/or publications, with the permission of the AECG and parents. If they wish, children and young people will be able to choose or be allocated a pseudonym that will be used in place of their real name in the transcription that is made of the interview. This ensures that they cannot be identified. My supervisors and I are the only people who will have access to this information.

In order for children and young people to participate in the research, I will need the parents and individual children and young people to sign a consent form. Participation is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the project at any time by contacting the researcher by telephone or email, and any data collected will be destroyed. The consent form will indicate their agreement to participate in the research, and agreement to the content of our discussion forming part of the research. I will also sign the consent form and this will require that I protect identities, that I secure the research information and that I take every step to ensure that confidentiality is maintained. I am also bound to destroy these records if so requested.

All collected research data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet for 7 years and will then be destroyed. Only my supervisors and I will have access to the data.

Stage Two of the research has been approved by the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee. The approval number is: ECN-11-172

When you have read this information I will be available to answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please contact me (mobile: 0415367794, email: katie.wilson@scu.edu.au).

If you have any questions or concerns about what I am doing please contact Dr. Judith Wilks at Southern Cross University, on 02-6659-3911, or judith.wilks@scu.edu.au

Many thanks

Katie Wilson (Researcher)
School of Education
Southern Cross University
Hogbin Drive
Coffs Harbour NSW 2450

If you have concerns about the ethical conduct of the research, please contact:
The Ethics Complaints Officer
Southern Cross University
PO Box 157
Lismore NSW 2480
Email: ethics.complaints@scu.edu.au
All information is confidential and will be handled as soon as possible.
Informed consent form AECG

Name of Project: Children, young people and Aboriginal education policies in New South Wales.

1. I … (please print name) wish to take part in the research project entitled “Children, young people, and Aboriginal education policies in New South Wales”.

2. I have read, or had explained to me, the Information Sheet prepared by Katie Wilson that explains what this stage of the research is about.

3. Katie Wilson has discussed the project with me and I am satisfied with the information she has provided.

4. I agree to take part in the research. I know I can decide to withdraw from the research at any time. I also know that if I withdraw that I can request that any data collected prior to data analysis be destroyed.

5. I am aware that I do not have to answer any question I don’t want to or that I can request that the discussion be terminated if I want it to.

6. I agree/do not agree (delete one) to having this discussion taped. If the interview is not taped I agree to the researcher taking hand-written notes.

7. I agree that information gathered for this project may be published and my name may be included if I wish. Or I may require that my name or other information which might identify me is not used, except with my permission.

8. I understand that all information provided is treated as confidential and will not be released by the researcher unless required to do so by law.

9. I understand I will not receive any personal benefit from taking part in the project.

10. I understand that Southern Cross University’s Ethics Committee has approved this project.

11. I will be given a copy of this Consent Form and the Information Sheet to keep.

12. I am aware that I can contact Katie Wilson at any time after the interview. If I have further questions about the study I am free to contact Dr Judith Wilks at Southern Cross University on 02-6659-3911.

.................................................................................................................................
(Signature of informant)      (Date)
.................................................................................................................................
(Signature of Witness)     (Date)
Letter of invitation – school principal

School of Education
Southern Cross University
Hogbin Drive
Coffs Harbour
NSW 2450

Dear

My name is Katie Wilson and I am undertaking a research project as part of my doctoral studies at Southern Cross University, Coffs Harbour Campus. My supervisors are Dr. Judith Wilks, School of Education at Southern Cross University, Coffs Harbour Campus, and Professor Neil Drew, University of Notre Dame Australia.

Research Project: Indigenous knowledge in schools: perspectives of Aboriginal children and young people in New South Wales

I am inviting your school to participate in this research project.

I am investigating the learning experiences of Aboriginal children and young people in relation to Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge in the New South Wales education curriculum in schools in the Coffs Harbour region. An important part of this study will be to explore the views of Aboriginal children and young people about the learning process. I am also interested in exploring the school’s teaching of Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge, and operation of Aboriginal cultural programs.

The information from the study will be used to contribute to knowledge about the experiences of Aboriginal children and young people in learning about Aboriginal cultures, knowledges, histories and languages, their own cultures, and to identify strategies to enhance their learning experiences. Findings will be reported to participating schools, the Department of Education and Communities, and the NSW AECG Coffs Harbour. It is also envisaged that further school-based strategies may be identified through the research that may be progressed through school-community partnerships.

To assist you in deciding if you would like your school to participate I have provided a summary of what the project will involve for your school.

The research will undertake:

1. Observation of the teaching of Aboriginal perspectives in a class
2. A 15-20 minute interview with yourself; and a 10 minute questionnaire to be filled in by your school.
3. A 30 minute focus discussion group with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
4. A 20 minute discussion with the participating students about the findings.
The research will take place over the period August – December, 2012.

The participation of your school in this project is voluntary and the school is free to withdraw its participation at any time, without consequence.

This research has been approved by the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee. The approval number is: XXXX. The project has the support of the NSW AECG Coffs Harbour and the Department of Education and Communities. The AECG has requested that an AECG member or parent be present at the discussions with Aboriginal students.

When you have read this information I, as principal researcher, and Dr Judith Wilks, as my supervisor, will be available to answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact us using the details provided below.

I will be in touch shortly to confirm whether you wish your school to participate in the project.

Sincerely,

Katie Wilson

Principal Researcher
Katie Wilson
School of Education
Southern Cross University

Principal Supervisor
Dr. Judith Wilks
School of Education
Southern Cross University
Information sheet for parents

Researcher: Katie Wilson
Southern Cross University
Mob 0415367794
Email: katie.wilson@scu.edu.au

Name of Project: Indigenous knowledge in schools: perspectives of Aboriginal children and young people in New South Wales

Who is involved in the project?

This research project is being conducted by me, Katie Wilson.
I am studying education at the School of Education, Southern Cross University and this project is part of my PhD study.

The project has been developed with the NSW AECG Coffs Harbour who have signed a letter of agreement for the project.

This project has been approved by the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Education and Communities.

What will the researcher do?

Teaching Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge in schools is part of the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy developed by the NSW AECG and the NSW Department of Education and Communities, and in the new Australian Curriculum. I am trying to find out what Aboriginal students learn from the teaching of Aboriginal cultures, ways, stories and histories at school, and how they feel about this. I am also interested in finding out what Aboriginal activities and programs happen at the school and how students feel about such activities.

I would like to ask if your son or daughter would be able to be part of a discussion group for about 45 minutes with other Aboriginal students in the school to talk about this. If you agree that your son or daughter can take part in this study, the discussion group will be audio-recorded and this will happen at xxx School, in ___ 2012. There will be another discussion with the students at another time to talk about what we found in the first discussion. The audio recordings will be kept by myself, the researcher.

An AECG person and a teacher or teacher aide will also be present at the discussions with the students.

Participating in this project is voluntary. If you do not wish your son or daughter to take part, it will not affect their results at school. If you or your son or daughter changes your mind about taking part, even after the study has started, just let me know by telephone or email and any information already collected about your son or daughter will be destroyed.
**What will the researcher do with the information she collects?**
The information will be used to write a report and I will share the findings with the local AECG, parents, the schools, and with student teachers who will be teaching in schools in future.

I will not use any names to identify the students who participate in this research.
I will keep the notes and tapes of the discussion groups in a locked filing cabinet at Southern Cross University for up to 7 years, as required by the Southern Cross University Ethics Committee. After that, I will destroy them.

If you agree that your son or daughter can take part, I will ask you to sign a consent form and also your son or daughter to sign a consent form agreeing to take part. I will also sign the forms.

Dr Judith Wilks at Southern Cross University is helping me with this study. After you have read this, if you have questions about what I am doing you can contact me on my mobile phone 0415367794 or Judith on her mobile phone 0413524441.

If you have concerns about the ethical conduct of this study please contact:

The Ethics Complaints Officer  
Southern Cross University  
PO Box 157  
Lismore NSW 2480  
Email: ethics.lismore@scu.edu.au

Thank you.

Katie Wilson  
Southern Cross University  
School of Education, Coffs Harbour Education Campus  
Hogbin Drive  
Coffs Harbour NSW 2450  
Email: katie.wilson@scu.edu.au

September 18, 2012
CONSENT FORM (parent/guardian/caregiver to fill in and sign).

Research Project: Indigenous knowledge in schools: perspectives of Aboriginal children and young people in New South Wales
Researcher: Katie Wilson, Southern Cross University, Coffs Harbour

NOTE: This consent form will remain with the Southern Cross University researcher for her records. If you wish to receive details of the project’s findings, please provide contact details at the end of this form and tick this box: ☐

Tick the box that applies, sign and date and give to the researcher

I agree to my child taking part in the Southern Cross University research project named above ................................................................. Yes ☐ No ☐

I have been provided with information to understand the purpose, methods, demands, risks, inconveniences and possible outcomes of this research......................... Yes ☐ No ☐

I have discussed taking part in the project with my child and my child agrees to participate in a focus group discussion with you................................................................. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that my child’s participation is voluntary................................. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that I or my child can choose not to participate in part or all of this research at any time, and we can do so without consequence. ........................................ Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that there will not be any information that may identify me or my child, and that any information produced by the study cannot be linked to me (Privacy Act 1988 Cth)................................................................. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that neither my name nor any identifying information will be disclosed or published, except with my permission................................. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that a member of the Coffs Harbour AECG, a teacher or teacher aide will be present during the focus group................................................................. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that audio recordings will be made as part of the study for the researcher’s purposes only. The recordings will take place at xxxx xxxx School on xxxx, from 9am to 3pm ................................................................. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that information gathered in this research is confidential. It is kept securely and confidentially for 7 years at the University (unless there are special circumstances), after which time it is destroyed......................... Yes ☐ No ☐

I am aware that I can contact the researcher at any time with any queries ........ Yes ☐ No ☐
I understand that the ethical aspects of this research have been approved by the SCU Human Research Ethics Committee.

Parent /Caregiver’s name: ______________________________________

Child’s name ____________________________    Class: ______________

Parent /Caregiver’s signature: __________________________________

Date:  ______________________________________

Contact details (if you would like to receive details of the project findings)

Telephone:_______________________________

Email: _________________________________
INFORMATION SHEET School principal participant

Name of Project: Indigenous knowledge in schools: perspectives of Aboriginal children and young people in New South Wales

My name is Katie Wilson and I am undertaking research as part of my doctoral studies at Southern Cross University, Coffs Harbour Campus. I am investigating the learning experiences of Aboriginal children and young people in relation to Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge in the New South Wales education curriculum. My supervisors are Dr. Judith Wilks, School of Education at Southern Cross University, Coffs Harbour Campus, and Professor Neil Drew, University of Notre Dame Australia, Broome, WA. An important part of this study is to explore the children and young people’s engagement with Aboriginal cultural activities in the school. As part of the study I am interested in your views on your school’s approach to the teaching of Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives.

The information from the study will be used to understand how Aboriginal children and young people are learning about Aboriginal cultures, knowledges, histories and languages, and specifically about their own culture, and to identify strategies to enhance their learning experiences. Findings will be reported to participating schools, the Department of Education and Communities, and to the NSW AECG Coffs Harbour. It is also envisaged that further school-based strategies may be identified through the research that may be progressed through school-community partnerships.

I am inviting you and your school to participate in this research project. The school’s involvement will be to share information about the school’s Aboriginal population, programs, and to enable the participation of Aboriginal children and young people in the discussions about the topic.

If you agree to take part in this project I am inviting you to participate in a 15 - 20 minute interview to be conducted at your school. Participation is voluntary. If you wish to withdraw from the project at any time, just contact the researcher by telephone or email and any data collected will be destroyed.

As principal researcher I will take steps to ensure you will not be able to be identified from the results of the study. You will be allocated a code which will be used to de-identify the information collected in the questionnaire before inclusion in any reports and/or publications. You may also choose or be allocated a pseudonym that will be used in place of your real name in the transcription that is made of the interview. This ensures that you cannot be identified. All data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet for at least 7 years and will then be destroyed in accordance with ethics requirements. Only myself as researcher and my supervisors will have access to the data.

You should also be aware that if you take part in this study the interview will be audio-recorded. The recordings will be collected on [specify date, time].

I will use the recording to make a transcript of the interview. Excerpts from the transcript may be used in reports and/or publications. Only participant pseudonyms will be used, not real names.
This research has the support of the NSW AECG Coffs Harbour and the NSW Department of Education and Communities. It has been approved by the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee and the approval number is: ECN-12-72.

If you have concerns about the ethical conduct of the research, the following procedure should occur.

Write to the following:

The Ethics Complaints Officer  
Southern Cross University  
PO Box 157  
Lismore NSW 2480  
sue.kelly@scu.edu.au

All information is confidential and will be handled as soon as possible.

When you have read this information I, as principal researcher, and Dr Judith Wilks, as my supervisor, will be available to answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact us.

Thank you for your interest in this study.

Sincerely

Principal Researcher     Principal Supervisor  
Katie Wilson            Dr. Judith Wilks
CONSENT FORM (teacher to fill in and sign).

Research Project: Indigenous knowledge in schools: perspectives of Aboriginal children and young people in New South Wales
Researcher: Katie Wilson, Southern Cross University

NOTE: This consent form will remain with the Southern Cross University researcher for her records. If you wish to receive details of the project’s findings, please provide contact details at the end of this form and tick this box: ☐

Please tick the box that applies, sign and date and give to the researcher

I agree to participate in the Southern Cross University research project named above .................................................................Yes ☐ No ☐

I have been provided with information to understand the purpose, methods, demands, risks, inconveniences and possible outcomes of this research.
.................................................................Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary.................................Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that I can choose not to participate in part or all of this research at any time, and we can do so without consequence.................................................................Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that there will not be any information that may identify me, and that any information produced by the study cannot be linked to me (Privacy Act 1988 Cth).................................................................Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that neither my name nor any identifying information will be disclosed or published, except with my permission.................................Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that the researcher will observe me teaching a class with Aboriginal students and she will take notes about the way Aboriginal perspectives are incorporated .................................................................Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that information gathered in this research is confidential. It is kept securely and confidentially for 7 years at the University (unless there are special circumstances), after which time it is destroyed.........Yes ☐ No ☐

I am aware that I can contact the researcher at any time with any queries .................................................................Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that the ethical aspects of this research have been approved by the SCU Human Research Ethics Committee.................................................................Yes ☐ No ☐
Teacher name: ______________________________________

Class: ______________

Teacher’s signature: __________________________________

Date: ______________________________________

Contact details (if you would like to receive details of the project findings)

Telephone: ______________________________

Email: ______________________________
Confidentiality Agreement for AECG representatives, Teachers and Teacher Aides

Project title: Indigenous knowledge in schools: perspectives of Aboriginal children and young people in New South Wales

Principal Researcher: Katie Wilson

Please tick in each box below to indicate your understanding of the confidentiality of the discussions.

[   ] I understand that all that I will observe and hear in the focus discussion groups for the above project is confidential.

[   ] I understand that the contents of the discussion group sessions can only be discussed with the researcher.

[   ] I will not make any notes or recordings of the discussions or repeat contents orally to any third party apart from the researcher.

Observer’s signature: ________________________________

Observer’s name: ________________________________

Date: ________________________________

Signature of Principal Researcher: ________________________________

Name of Principal Researcher: ________________________________
Information sheet and Consent form (for primary school children to sign)

**Name of Project:** *Indigenous knowledge in schools: perspectives of Aboriginal children and young people in New South Wales*

My name is Katie. I am studying education at Southern Cross University and I am doing a project for my course.

I would like to find out what you think about learning about Aboriginal ways of life, and Aboriginal events that happen at school, what you like about this and what you don't like about it.

I would like to talk to you in a group discussion with other Aboriginal students from your school, for about 45 minutes, and later to talk about what we talked about.

You can have a secret name which I will use in anything I write about our discussion. An AECG person and a teacher or teacher aide will be at the group discussion.

You can say yes or no. It is up to you whether you take part.

If you would like to talk to me, I would be very grateful if you could sign the attached form and return it to school.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and for your help.

Katie
Consent form (for primary school children to sign)

I understand that:

I can say ‘no’ or ‘stop’ or ‘pass’ at any time and I don’t need to say why;

I can decide not to join the project and the way the school and teachers treat me will not change;

I can choose a secret code name and the researcher will not use my name in anything she writes about our discussions;

The researcher will record the discussion and keep it locked up and private;

I can talk with someone else if I feel upset about the project;

An AECG person and a teacher or teacher aide will be there when I talk with the researcher;

I can ask any questions about the project;

I wish to choose my own secret name that the researcher will use in place of my real name.

My secret name is____________________________________

I have decided that I would like to talk to Katie about her project. Please put a circle round No or Yes.

[ ] No          [ ] Yes

Name:__________________________________________ Year__________

Signed:________________________________________ Date:____________

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Information sheet and Consent form  
(for young people to fill in and sign)  

Dear Student

My name is Katie Wilson and I am a student in the School of Education at Southern Cross University. I would like to invite you to participate in a project called *Indigenous knowledge in schools: perspectives of Aboriginal children and young people in New South Wales*. The project aims to find out about what Aboriginal students think about learning Aboriginal ways of life, cultures, histories, people and stories at school. I would like to hear about your views and experiences of learning Aboriginal cultures and of the Aboriginal programs and activities that happen at your school, what you like about this and what you don’t like.

**WHAT I WOULD LIKE YOU TO DO**

If you choose to take part I will ask you to be part of a 45 minute discussion group with other Aboriginal students about learning Aboriginal cultures in your school. The interview will be in a place where you feel comfortable talking and will be recorded. Questions include: Can you name one thing that is good about learning Aboriginal ways of life, cultures, histories, people and stories at school? Are there others? What is one thing that is not good?

After listening to the recording I would like to come back later and discuss with you what was said in the discussion groups. You are free to decide if you want to be involved in this project or not and you can stop participating at any time. If you decide to stop participating any information you have given will not be used. A member of the AECG and a teacher or teacher aide will be present at the discussions. A report will be provided to the Department of Education and Communities but I will not use your name in any part of the study.

If you agree to take part would you please sign the attached consent form and return it to school.

**ETHICS REVIEW AND COMPLAINTS**

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Southern Cross University (approval ECN-12-72) and has been developed with the Coffs Harbour AECG. If you are not happy with the way this research has been conducted, you can tell your parents or teacher who can contact the Ethics Complaints Officer at the University on (02) 6626 9139 or email at: ethics.lismore@scu.edu.au
Thank you for your interest in this study.

Katie Wilson, School of Education,
Southern Cross University, Mobile: 0415367794, Email: katie.wilson@scu.edu.au

Consent form (for young people to fill in and sign)
Project name: Indigenous knowledge in schools: perspectives of Aboriginal children and young people in New South Wales.

NOTE: This consent form will remain with the Southern Cross University researcher for her records.

Tick the box that applies, sign and date and give to the researcher

I agree to take part in the research project specified above…………………Yes □ No □

I have been provided with enough information to understand the purpose, methods, demands, risks, and possible outcomes of this research………………Yes □ No □

I agree to participate in a focus group discussion conducted by the researcher………………Yes □ No □

I agree to allow the focus group discussion to be audio-taped………………Yes □ No □

I understand that my participation is voluntary…………………………Yes □ No □

I can choose not to participate in part or all of this research at any time without consequence…………………………………………………………Yes □ No □

I understand that an AECG person and a teacher or teacher aide will be present during the discussions…………………………Yes □ No □

I understand that there will not be any information that may identify me and that the information produced by the study cannot be linked to me. (Privacy Act 1988 Cth)………………Yes □ No □

I understand that all information gathered in this research is confidential. It is kept securely and confidentially for 7 years at the University (unless there are special circumstances, which have been explained to me)………Yes □ No □

I am aware that I can contact the researcher at any time if I have questions…………………………………………………………………………………………Yes □ No □

I understand that the ethical aspects of this research have been
approved by the SCU Human Research Ethic Committee………………Yes ☐ No ☐

I wish to choose a secret research name that will be used by the researcher in reports. The secret name I choose is Yes ☐ No ☐

______________________________

Participant name: _____________________________Class____________

Participant signature: ___________________________________________

Date: ____________________________________________________________________
Appendix C: Discussion group questions for Aboriginal students

Name of Project: Indigenous knowledge in schools: perspectives of Aboriginal children and young people in New South Wales

[Before starting, identify with participants a place in the school where they feel comfortable and culturally safe, and, where the discussions can take place.]

Introduce self, outline project, ask students to introduce themselves, name, year. Explain confidentiality of discussions and option for code/secret name.

1. Can you talk about what makes this [location for the discussions to take place] a good place to be and talk?

2. What you are learning at school: Aboriginal culture, history, people, and stories?

3. In what subject areas or classes at school are you learning culture, history, people, and stories?

4. Are you learning local Aboriginal history, stories and people from around here?

5. Are you learning the Gumbaynggirr language or other Aboriginal language at school?

6. As an Aboriginal student, how do you feel about learning Aboriginal culture, stories and histories at school? What are the good things about learning Aboriginal culture, stories and histories at school? Start with one. What are the benefits of learning Aboriginal culture and histories at school?

7. As an Aboriginal student what are the things about learning Aboriginal culture, stories and histories at school that are not so good?

8. What are some of the Aboriginal programs and activities that happen at your school?

9. Do Elders come to the school to talk to you? What do you learn from them?

10. Can we use some other ways that you would be able to share your stories about learning through Aboriginal ways at school - drawing, writing?

Thank you for being part of this project.
Appendix D: Interview questions
School Principal

Name of Project: Indigenous knowledge in schools: perspectives of Aboriginal children and young people in New South Wales

1. How long have you been working at this school, and how long as principal?

2. How did the approach to the teaching of Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge develop in your school?

3. What are the aims of including Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge in the school’s program? How do you think these aims are achieved in your school?

4. Could you tell me about some of the Aboriginal cultural activities or programs that take place in your school?

5. How does your school work with the local Aboriginal community in the teaching of Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge? What have you and your staff learned from this process?

6. How do your school’s Aboriginal programs relate to the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy?

7. What are your views on the connection between overall learning and outcomes of Aboriginal students and the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives and activities in your school?

8. Do you have any other comments you would like to make about teaching Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge in schools?

Thank you for your time and participation in this study.
Appendix E: Certificate of Appreciation

awarded to

________________________

of ______________________ School

for

Taking part in my project about learning Aboriginal histories, culture and people at your school in 2012/2013

Katie Wilson

School of Education, Southern Cross University

August, 2013
Appendix F: Permission to use student drawings

Name of Project: *Indigenous knowledge in schools: perspectives of Aboriginal children and young people in New South Wales*

My name is Katie. I am studying education at Southern Cross University in Coffs Harbour, and I am doing a project for my course.

Last year I talked with you about what you think about learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories, histories and cultures, and events that happen at your school.

As part of the project you drew a picture which I photographed and then returned to you.

I would like to ask you if I can use a copy of your drawing in the report that I will write about my project and in books or stories that I might also write. Your name will not be on your drawing or in what I write.
If you agree to allow me to use the drawings in this way can you please fill out the form below?

I have decided that I agree to let Katie use my drawing in her project reports, books and stories.

Please put a circle round No or Yes.

- [x] Yes
- [ ] No

Name:______________________________ Year_____________

Signed:_____________________________ Date:_____________

Thank you!
Permission to use student writing and drawing

Name of Project: Indigenous knowledge in schools: perspectives of Aboriginal children and young people in New South Wales

I hope you will remember me! My name is Katie Wilson and I am studying education at Southern Cross University in Coffs Harbour.

Last year I talked with you about learning Aboriginal or Indigenous histories, people and cultures in your school subjects, and also Aboriginal or Indigenous events that take place at school. I was interested in what you think about all this.

You might remember that as part of the project you wrote or drew a picture which I photographed and then returned to you.

I would like to ask your permission to use a copy of your drawing or writing in reports, books or stories I write about the project.

If you agree with the following two statements can you please fill out the form below?

1. I agree to let Katie Wilson use my drawing or writing in her project reports, books and stories.

2. I understand that my name will not be connected with my drawing or writing.

Name: _______________________________ Year ____________

Signed: _______________________________ Date: ____________

Thank you!
Appendix G: Questionnaire for schools

Name of Project: *Indigenous knowledge in schools: perspectives of Aboriginal children and young people in New South Wales.*
Researcher: Katie Wilson, Southern Cross University, School of Education

Please answer the following questions for your school __________________________

1. What is your total school enrolment? _______________________________

How many students in your school have identified as:

Aboriginal (total) ___ in years___________________________________________

Torres Strait Islander (total) ___ and in which years__________________________

2. What are the total numbers of teachers and support staff at your school? _______

What are the numbers of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander teachers ______ and
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander support staff? ______

3. In which KLAs and subjects are Aboriginal perspectives or studies taught in your school?

______________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________

4. Are there, or have there been language classes in the school in the local *Gumbaynggirr* language? Who teaches or has taught the classes?

5. What kinds of Aboriginal teaching resources are used by the school’s teaching staff? For example, Departmental resources, locally produced resources?

6. How many of your staff undertake or have undertaken Aboriginal cultural awareness or cultural competency education or training?

7. What sorts of Aboriginal activities or Aboriginal cultural programs take place at your school, e.g. specific observance days, visits by parents, or Elders?

8. Do you have any other comments about teaching Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge?