

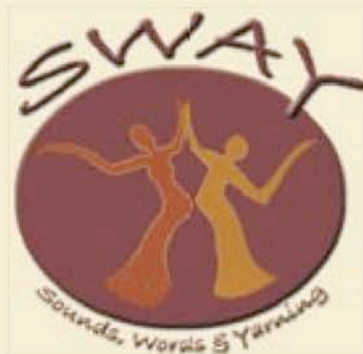
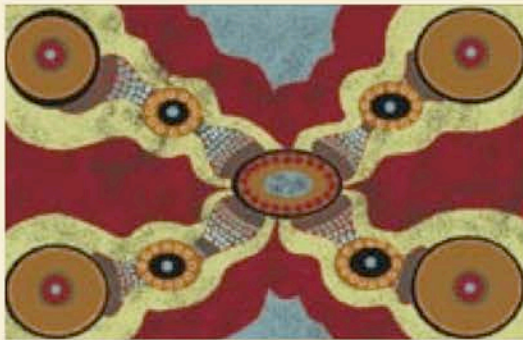


New South Wales Department of Education and Training  
Australian Government Quality Teacher Program  
Quality Teaching Indigenous Project

## Evaluation study of professional learning on teacher awareness of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and its impact on teaching

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Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences  
University of Technology, Sydney



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*Disclaimer*

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All images of artworks used in this report are either the work of individual students or a result of the school - community collaborations that have taken place as part of the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project.

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## Executive Summary

### Background

The implementation of the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training was made possible through the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program initiative that commenced in 2000. One of its key aims was “to raise the quality, professionalism and status of Australian teachers”. The Quality Teaching Indigenous Project was a specific initiative to support professional learning on Indigenous issues and to improve student learning and engagement. The New South Wales model of pedagogy, as described in *Quality Teaching in New South Wales Public Schools* (May 2003), informed the professional learning activities in schools. Teachers were selected to join school-based action learning teams and then to identify their professional learning needs and design their projects. The teams engaged in cycles of action learning to implement their projects.

Among the main aims of the project was to provide teachers with the opportunity to strengthen their professional learning about Indigenous cultural knowledge and its application in culturally appropriate pedagogical practices in the classroom. The ultimate objective was improving student engagement and learning outcomes as well as to strengthen relationships with the local Aboriginal community.

The project began in 2006 with eleven schools and expanded in 2007 to twenty schools, which continued with the project until mid 2009.

A team of education researchers from the University of Technology, Sydney was selected in 2007 to carry out an evaluation study that investigated the extent to which teachers and their teaching practices were inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge and how this has changed as a result of the project; the impact these inclusive practices had on teacher and student learning, and in particular on how they enhance learning for Aboriginal students and the effectiveness of collaboration with local Aboriginal communities in teaching and learning practices in enhancing learning outcomes for students.

The project team used a mixed method approach, drawing on a range of data sources including a literature review, school data collected from school visits, meetings, interviews and focus group discussions. The results of two school surveys conducted by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training, one in 2007 and the second in 2008, were included in the evaluation. Seven schools were selected for more detailed case study analysis and these constituted the seven school case studies detailed in this report.

### Findings

A review of recent research studies reinforced the value of professional learning for teachers and its positive impact on teaching practices. This study has highlighted the importance of providing external support for professional learning initiatives to enable teachers and other key members of the school’s staff to work in teams, to collaborate in designing innovative teaching and learning programs and to have the time to reflect on the effectiveness of these new processes and methods. In this project all teachers involved, including the members of the schools’ executive teams, noted the value of being able have time to learn about Aboriginal histories, cultures, and knowledges and to improve their capacity to connect with local Aboriginal communities.

One major finding is that all teachers valued the time allowed by the project for reflection on their pedagogical practices and to work in teams collaborating with their colleagues on improving their teaching practice. This focus on professional learning is vital for teacher “renewal”.

The project showed that adopting a collaborative action learning team based approach was an effective method of enabling school change. A focus on particular projects that further developed knowledge of, and contact with, local Aboriginal communities and their cultures, supported by an academic partner to assist in the design and implementation of a particular project, were key elements of the approach taken.

Given that teacher education programs have only recently started to include mandatory units about Aboriginal cultures and histories, most teachers across the project schools said they needed and wanted to extend their knowledge about Aboriginal people and their cultures. For many teachers having the opportunity for professional development led to significant changes in their attitudes and improved the quality of their teaching practices. Schools showed an increased and genuine willingness to engage in discussions about Aboriginal cultural knowledge and an increased willingness to learn and talk to local Elders and parents.

The project also highlighted the differing views on what constitutes Aboriginal cultural knowledge(s) in the general sense, but more particularly in terms of local Aboriginal knowledge and the importance of including local perspectives in the curriculum of each school. For differing reasons, including historical ones, some schools have greater access to local knowledge and local Aboriginal people. Access to local knowledge and resources facilitates the development of appropriate curriculum resources within a school.

Increased engagement with local Aboriginal communities and organisations was a feature of most of the schools in the case studies. However, concerns which emerged in some schools related to debates about which organisations, groups or individuals best represented the local Aboriginal community. Some teachers also expressed initial anxiety about exploring avenues to involve both parents and the community in the school. A feature of the way the project developed in most schools was that there was an initial period of confusion and uncertainty, both in relation to direction and involvement of Aboriginal stakeholders, before schools found their own approaches to enable them to work more confidently with them

The connections built with local Aboriginal communities through shared community based projects such as creative arts projects, commemorative bush gardens, murals, local history projects and digital technology projects were excellent examples of how schools and the local Aboriginal communities worked to bridge the divide that existed between school, home and the local Aboriginal community. In reporting on the main professional learning outcomes for the staff involved in the project, the findings have been analysed across three key areas – professional learning, Aboriginal knowledge and community engagement.

## **Professional learning**

### *Project teams*

The membership and size of the project teams varied from school to school. The most effective teams had a variety of active stakeholders including members of the school’s executive, teaching staff, Aboriginal parents and community representatives connected with key local agencies outside of the school, including local and state government bodies and arts centres. In optimal circumstances this brought the community together and engendered a greater awareness of Aboriginal culture within that community.

### *Impact on teaching practices*

The survey findings illustrated that the project had made a significant difference in the level of professional learning in Aboriginal education, involving a high proportion of school staff and assisting a proportion of teachers to substantially adjust their teaching practices to better meet the needs of their students. At the same time, teachers indicated that their increased involvement in professional learning in literacy and numeracy had also made a significant impact on their teaching practices.

### *Value of collaboration*

The importance of professional collaboration in the introduction of any new program in schools was highlighted again and again in the findings. The value of collaboration, the enabling of a mentoring process for new teachers and the creation of a forum for professional conversations were all seen as key aspects of the project. Within the professional conversations which occurred, the opportunity to expand professional awareness and to combine theory and practice through action learning and the pedagogical practices in the Quality Teaching model were highly valued. Time to reflect on practice was also appreciated. Teachers valued the opportunity and time to discuss and reflect on their teaching practice.

As a result, teachers noted a sense of renewal and revitalisation of their teaching practices across a number of key areas, including the adoption of new teaching strategies, engaging in some very innovative student based projects involving digital media, and making stronger connections with local Aboriginal communities. A large proportion of teachers noted that after they adjusted their teaching to better meet the needs of Aboriginal students, there had been a corresponding increase in student engagement. Further they noted an increase in the promotion of a culture of high expectations for Aboriginal students.

### *Attitudinal change*

Almost all teachers (over 90%) felt that there were areas of their practice in Aboriginal education that needed improvement. The findings illustrated that improvements had occurred over the life of the project. There was evidence of notable attitudinal change among many of the participants in the schools and an indication that for some participants the changes were transformational.

Teachers were more willing to engage in adopting creative practices as a result of the project. This was particularly so in the use of digital media and interactive technology. For many teachers, the ability to combine an increased awareness of Indigenous cultural knowledge with new digital media was very invigorating. This improvement in their level of skill with digital media enabled them to extend their repertoire of strategies and new knowledge to other subjects.

### *Leadership*

Among the schools where the most significant positive changes occurred, the project teams were generally marked by a high level of commitment by the team leader and what the literature describes as a distributive or facilitative leadership. This enabled team members to feel encouraged and supported to make decisions and to follow them through, resulting in the team accepting responsibility for progressing the project.

### *Academic partners*

The support of academic partners did make a positive contribution to the project and to the professional development of teachers. Relationships worked optimally where the correlation between the expertise of a partner and the direction of the project was high.

### *Department of Education and Training Project Manager*

There was agreement by school stakeholders that the New South Wales Department of Education and Training Project Manager in the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project played a

key role in setting up each school project, providing teams with an orientation program, monitoring their progress, and helping to address issues as the projects evolved. As well as resourcing and supporting project teams, her responsiveness and ability to render practical assistance was exemplary. Regular site visits were made to all schools and additional visits were made to those schools seeking clarification and support in devising their own solutions to issues which had arisen in developing or implementing action learning plans. The Project Manager's introduction of alternative reporting methods resulted in increasingly dynamic presentations by school teams in 2008. Examples of teacher and student work were able to be showcased more effectively in these presentations, which were videotaped, than in earlier text-based reports, also helping to limit the more time-consuming written reporting tasks associated with the project. The expertise and skills of the Project Manager, together with her energy and commitment to the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project, were widely acknowledged as key elements in ensuring its success.

### **Aboriginal cultural knowledge**

Most teachers agreed that the inclusion of Aboriginal cultural knowledge(s) into the curriculum was a whole school responsibility, rather than that of the individual teacher. The role of the local Aboriginal community was also considered to be important. While there was initial confusion and discussion as to what constituted Aboriginal cultural knowledge, during the project teachers did gain a greater understanding of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and improved their capacity to embed this knowledge into their teaching practices in particular subject areas.

In addition, the interpretation of what constituted Aboriginal cultural knowledge(s), protocols and traditions and who had access to that knowledge, varied among the school communities. Negotiating the parameters of these discussions sometimes required additional time and resources for the school community to understand the nature of their local context, its history and the cultural sensitivities which applied to allow the differing voices to be heard.

### *School teams focus*

Among the projects that school teams focused on were a creative arts project that linked the school with the local art centre; a commemorative bush garden that expanded the students understanding of bush foods and sustainable environmental practices; murals and local history projects that expanded local research and library resources and digital technology projects that helped students use technology to write or document their own life stories or those of their home communities and families.

### *Local Aboriginal resources*

One important issue that emerged in several communities was the availability of local Aboriginal resources, both in terms of primary and secondary source materials, to enhance teaching practices. Different communities reported different levels of access and availability to local expertise and local historical sources and materials. Often this was a function of both the local histories and the contexts in which the schools were situated.

### *Community engagement*

It is important to acknowledge that the nature of each of the local Aboriginal communities connected to a school varied considerably in their size, connections to the school and in its capacity to be engaged in making connections with school staff and students to share local cultural knowledge(s). It can be said that on the whole, the project did enable schools to improve their engagement with their local Aboriginal community, including to a lesser extent with parents.

### *Aboriginal parents*

Some schools noted that their links with Aboriginal parents and the participation of Aboriginal parents in the school had improved. In one school the project was the impetus to

start up a regular Aboriginal community newsletter to inform parents about their children's learning.

#### *Community engagement projects*

Notable examples of increased community engagement included the raising for the first time of an Aboriginal flag at one school, setting up a Koori room as a teaching and learning environment that was also a welcoming space for the community and starting up an Aboriginal dance group. In one school the process of creating a large canvas artwork through a creative arts project was a successful way of involving a number of members of the local Aboriginal community with the project.

#### *Respect for Aboriginal staff*

A notable change observed among teaching staff was their new found respect for the Aboriginal staff (including support staff and teachers) at their school. A growing awareness of the cultural knowledge that they brought to the project and the help they provided in establishing or improving connections to students, parents and carers and the local Aboriginal community was observed. It was also noted that Aboriginal staff, as well as other teachers, were always under a time pressure and often had many roles to play within a school. This needed to be taken into account when planning consultations with Aboriginal communities.

#### *Project sustainability*

While this project faced several challenges in achieving its outcomes, a major concern that emerged was the need to ensure the project's sustainability within the schools. Clearly, ongoing funding was one way to ensure its continuation. Teachers noted that the New South Wales Department of Education and Training's new policies on Aboriginal education and training provided support for new initiatives. The need was identified for sustained funding of the development of local resources in schools with the assistance of Aboriginal communities.

In summary, the project demonstrated the benefits of a project that allowed teachers to engage in professional learning over a period of time. It demonstrated the importance of:

- providing adequate resources for teachers to be able to meet with colleagues and to consult with local stakeholders;
- planning and designing innovative curriculum strategies to meet student needs;
- engaging in the process of applying these new ideas and
- reflecting on their effectiveness as pedagogical strategies within the New South Wales Quality Teaching model.

## **Recommendations**

The main recommendations arising from this study were:

### **Supporting teacher professional learning**

- **Support for collaborative teacher professional learning** – It is important for programs like this to be well resourced to provide a way for teachers and school staff to be supported in developing their inclusion of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and engagement with local Aboriginal communities.
- **Support a collaborative, strategic activity with a common purpose** - The project showed that taking a collaborative action learning team-based approach, supported by an academic partner, can benefit teachers. Having a strategic and common purpose enables teachers and the other staff involved to further develop their knowledge and skills in addressing issues related to Aboriginal education.



- **Provide adequate funding** – Providing adequate funding is crucial to the success of a professional development program engaging teachers in a renewal process. The pressures are evident in any school setting, yet it is vitally important to allow teachers time to reflect on their practices individually, in collegial groups or through paired observations of each others’ practice. It is imperative that adequate funding is provided for professional development programs in such area as Aboriginal education.
- **Choosing the right combination of staff** to implement projects using the Quality Teaching model is important to their overall success. Similarly, engaging an academic partner requires the team to firstly understand the direction and approach their project is going to take so that there is a correlation between the needs of the school team and the skills and expertise of the academic partner.
- **Encouraging a whole school approach is essential** to the teaching of Aboriginal cultural knowledge(s) so that it can be linked into the assessable elements of the curriculum in the Key Learning Areas and within the rigour of the Intellectual Quality domain of the Quality Teaching model. Often Aboriginal cultures and histories are segmented from the mainstream curriculum and are treated as ‘special events’ to be incorporated into Reconciliation Week or National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Observance Committee activities. This project has made headway in establishing links with the everyday curriculum in schools, but there is some concern that this will not be sustained without continued Departmental support.
- **Collaboration and consultation with experts from the local Aboriginal community** - It is important to support staff in their efforts to foster closer collaboration and consultation with their local Aboriginal community whenever possible, because it builds on the notion of a shared history for the school, the students and the community.
- **Using the project as a starting point**, develop school and locally based resources to promote local Aboriginal cultures
- **Sustain a culture of high expectations for all students, but in particular for Aboriginal students** - This can be supported by a series of professional learning seminars for school staff that highlight the findings of research into the impact that effective teachers can have on student outcomes.

#### **Achieving positive change**

- **Adopt an action learning change model** - There is a clear value in adopting an action learning change model. It is one way of helping to frame future professional learning activities.
- **Provide the necessary infrastructure, support for innovation and the use of digital media in creative teaching strategies** - To improve teachers’ effective application of the media will require an additional focus on the provision of resources for staff development, especially in the use of interactive white boards and movie making.

#### **Leadership**

- **Adopt a collaborative and distributive leadership model** which is inclusive of Aboriginal people and values their expertise is important to the success of any professional development project.

- **Establish a supportive leadership team** that understands the exigencies of working with Aboriginal communities.

### **Engaging with Aboriginal communities**

- **Who is the community?** – It is important that schools are encouraged to explore who makes up their local Aboriginal community and to make contact with representatives of local Aboriginal bodies such as their Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and Elders groups. At the same time it is important that school staff also understand the various pressures that these groups face and that may affect their capacity to respond to requests from schools at the time that requests are made.
- **Increase the use of communications technologies** such as interactive whiteboards and video conferencing in schools. This helps schools to link up with communities in different parts of Australia and indeed other parts of the world. In this way students can gain a greater understanding of Aboriginal peoples throughout Australia and internationally.
- **Provide additional training for Aboriginal staff working in schools**, such as Aboriginal Education Officers. In this way they can act more effectively as advisors to teachers in accessing Aboriginal knowledge(s). Also important is that Aboriginal staff are remunerated appropriately in these positions in their school.
- **Ensure that schools are welcoming of Aboriginal parents** and members of the school's local Aboriginal community. Some of the effective ways include organising morning teas, barbecues and other family events to welcome parents. Calling or texting to encourage attendance can be a useful way of linking up with parents and the community. Newsletters can also be used to maintain contact.

### **Including Aboriginal cultural knowledge(s)**

- **Teachers and schools need to work together** with their local Aboriginal community to provide both a local as well a national perspective on what constitutes Aboriginal cultural knowledge(s). Fostering local knowledge(s) enables all students – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – to gain an appreciation of their community's Aboriginal history, local sites and language(s).
- **Include Aboriginal cultural knowledge(s) in the curriculum** – This should be done wherever possible with the expert advice of local Aboriginal Elders and the community.
- **Support a small grants program for local resource development** – Developing a small grants program or a similar initiative in partnership with the New South Wales Department of Education and Training, the New South Wales Board of Studies and other key agencies like local councils would assist schools and teachers to develop resources. A priority could be those schools with significant enrolments of Aboriginal students to enable them to research, collect and develop locally specific resources about their local Aboriginal community.

### **Sustainability**

- **Arrange a conference** – Provide an opportunity for teachers from the participating project schools to write up and report on the achievements and challenges with their projects and to disseminate their findings at an appropriate state-wide conference.
- **Incorporate the Quality Teaching model into the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Strategy** – This should be done in ways which ensure that release time is provided for both teachers and support staff to learn about the model.



## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

The Australian Government Quality Teacher Program funded the New South Wales Department of Education and Training to implement a Quality Teaching Indigenous Project, focussing on teacher professional development in a number of selected government schools. The initiative was part of the Australian Government's efforts "to raise the quality, professionalism and status of Australian teachers". The Quality Teaching Indigenous Project was a specific initiative to support professional learning on Indigenous issues and to improve student learning and engagement. The main aims of the project, within the context of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training Quality Teaching model, were to focus on:

- teachers – to provide teachers with the opportunity to strengthen their professional learning about Aboriginal cultural knowledge by enhancing their understanding of pedagogical practices that maximise student learning outcomes;
- students – to improve engagement and learning outcomes, and
- local communities – to strengthen relationships with the local Aboriginal community.

### **Objectives of the study**

The objectives of this evaluation study, as outlined in the original tender process, were to investigate:

- the extent to which teachers and their teaching practices are inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge and how this has changed as a result of the project;
- the impact these inclusive practices have on teacher and student learning, and in particular on how they enhance learning for Aboriginal students;
- the effectiveness of collaboration with local Aboriginal communities in teaching and learning practices in enhancing learning outcomes for students;
- whole school factors and circumstances that encourage positive learning environments in culturally appropriate ways;
- critical issues that impact on teacher and student learning over time, and
- the creation of professional learning communities which are inclusive of local stakeholders.

It is important to note that in May 2008 the New South Wales Department of Education and Training reappraised the objectives of the study to focus primarily on teacher professional learning. This report therefore reflects this directive and has placed less emphasis on objectives related to student learning and the creation of professional learning communities which are inclusive of local stakeholders.

### **Background to the study**

Before the study could commence a number of steps were taken by the evaluation team to assist with the management of the project, and to ensure that a distinctive Aboriginal perspective was included in both the research design and the research processes. This included:

- setting up of a reference group for the project which included key stakeholders from the Aboriginal education sector, including from the New South Wales Department of Education and Training, the New South Wales Board of Studies and the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), and

- gaining ethics approval for the research.

### **Terminology**

Throughout this report we use the terms ‘Aboriginal people’, ‘Indigenous Australians’, and ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’ to refer to the descendants of the original inhabitants of Australia. Also in this report where the terms ‘Aboriginal person’ or ‘Aboriginal people’ are used they represent both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We have used the term ‘the Department’ to refer to the New South Wales Department of Education and Training.

### **Approach to the research**

The project team used a mixed method approach in the evaluations carried out for this report. This involved drawing on a range of data sources and carrying out an analysis of the seven case studies included below. Among the research methods used were:

- a literature review – focussing on key concepts and recent research studies;
- data collection – notes of school visits and school meetings, interviews, focus group discussions, notes of telephone conversations and emails, annual school progress reports, notes from New South Wales Quality Teaching Indigenous Project conferences in June 2007 and 2008, and a visual arts project;
- teacher reflections – recorded by a number of teachers in their professional journals;
- school surveys – two school staff surveys disseminated by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training, and
- case studies – a total of seven case studies were researched and analysed by the academic team members.

### **Literature review**

A literature review was carried out into a number of research fields including professional teacher learning, quality teaching, professional learning communities, action learning and change. We also drew on studies in the fields of Indigenous research, Indigenous research paradigms and Indigenous education, as well as the two key concepts of Indigenous knowledge and local Aboriginal communities. The review helped frame the analysis, in particular the case studies, and assisted with developing our findings and recommendations.

For this study action learning was defined in the project handbook (Wood 2007) as a process that involved a cycle of planning, taking action, describing the action and then reflecting and evaluating the actions. The key characteristics of school-based action learning teams were having a small team of teachers, using project-based learning that was participant directed and involving cycles of inquiry, discussion and reflection and learning partnerships with external bodies such as professional associations or universities.

### **Data collection**

The evaluation team carried out research in seven case study schools, starting in 2007. Case study schools were selected from the schools that took part over Phase One and Phase Two of the project. In Phase One, starting in 2006, a total of eleven schools were involved and in Phase Two starting in 2008 a further nine schools were added, making a total of twenty schools. At the case study schools research data were gathered from school visits, attending school planning meetings and by carrying out interviews and focus groups with various school participants. This was supplemented by a series of telephone meetings and email correspondence. The participants in these processes included:

- teachers from each school’s action learning team;
- classroom Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs);

- the school principal or deputy principal;
- each school's academic partner or cultural mentor;
- members of the local Aboriginal communities, and
- local Aboriginal Elders/mentors who were specifically involved with the school.

Members of each evaluation team were able to view and reflect on data about relevant aspects of teaching and professional learning; needs analyses; indicative records; attendance and participation in project events by school staff, students, parents and local communities; and celebrations of successes and the enhancement of professional learning. They were also able to attend a Quality Teaching Indigenous Project conference in mid 2007 to listen to key presentations and discussions about the project. Members of the team presented preliminary findings and observed presentations by Quality Teaching Indigenous Project school teams at the 2008 conference, also attending informal meetings with case study school representatives.

In one school an innovative visual arts project method was used. Members of the local Aboriginal community worked collaboratively with a member of the evaluation team and the school, resulting in the creation of a large canvas artwork. As a process, the use of a collaborative arts-based practice was one of the ways selected to engage and involve local Aboriginal community members. As an object, the canvas had the advantage of being transported to Aboriginal community members' homes or being worked on in the school's Koori Room. From the evaluation team perspective, the Aboriginal staff members, who had an existing relationship with members of the local Aboriginal community, were able to manage the timing of and access to the painting process over an extended time frame. It is unlikely that this could have been achieved through other agencies, particularly those that were external to the school. The Aboriginal staff role in this process was critical to its success.

### **Teacher reflections**

A number of teachers recorded their reflections in project journals and these were collected and analysed at a number of the case study sites. Teacher reflections collected by the Department's Senior Quality Teaching Indigenous Project Officer, the Manager of the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project activity, were also made available to the research team.

### **Annual Progress Reports**

All Quality Teaching Indigenous Project schools were required to prepare an annual Progress Report for the Department. These reports were initially prepared in a text based format, however a review of the reporting process led to the Manager of the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project activity providing schools with the opportunity to present their 2008 report during school visits. This enabled team members to focus on different aspects of their work with students and to use selected audio visual and other material to illustrate elements including their approach to programming and student achievements. Presentations were video recorded and the video reports by case study schools were made available to the research team for their analysis.

### **Project surveys**

A survey instrument was drawn up by the Department and it was administered twice, once in 2007 and again in 2008, to school staff at all the participating schools. Participation in the survey was voluntary and it was open to all the teaching and administrative staff at each participating school. In October 2007 a total of 274 participants took part in the survey. A year later, in October 2008, the number increased to 429 participants. Results of the two surveys were aggregated by departmental staff and are discussed later in this report.

### **Case studies**

A total of seven case studies were prepared. A key feature among the schools was the extensive effort made to involve and consult with key Aboriginal staff at each school and to

ensure, where possible, that contacts were made with key local Aboriginal communities, especially with groups that were interested in school education. At the end of the study a draft of each case study was circulated to each school for comment, before being included in the report.

### **Participatory inquiry**

While one of the aims of the evaluation project was to include a fuller, more participatory inquiry dimension across the work of the teams, it became evident that this could not be addressed over the life of the projects. Barriers to implementing a participatory evaluation approach in the case studies included the difficulties of imposing such a requirement on school team members who were already limited in terms of their time and other resources. The capability of case study Quality Teaching Indigenous Project teams for collaborative teamwork, reflection and evaluation is evident from the seven case study findings. However there were insufficient resources, including time available to explore how these capabilities might have been extended to enable a participatory evaluation process to be more fully implemented in the work of evaluation teams with their case study schools. Even so, each of the academic teams writing their case studies did consult with a range of key participants during the drafting of their case study reports, and in most cases received feedback on their drafts.

### **Project orientation**

The Department provided central support for the project, with both the New South Wales Australian Government Quality Teacher Project Manager and the Project Manager of the New South Wales Quality Teaching Indigenous Project supporting the schools over the life of the project. At the start of the project the Department provided a project orientation to each school. A handbook, the *Quality Teaching Indigenous Project Handbook 2006-2007* was produced by the Department to assist with the project orientation for all the schools. It outlined the action learning approach to teacher professional learning, the important role of reflection as a tool, the role and responsibilities of the academic partner and the project reporting requirements. It included information from various relevant websites and a set of templates and proformas for reporting progress to the Department. Schools were encouraged to develop their action learning plans with the assistance of their academic partner. The academic partners acted as a critical friend and provided advice about Aboriginal education issues and research methods. Throughout the projects the Department's Project Manager for the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project was a vital link with schools in assisting them to design their projects.

During the life of the project the Department maintained strong links with participating schools and monitored progress through school visits and through the work of the academic partners. Progress reports, detailing action plans and approaches were submitted to the Department and its website acted as a useful source of information on past projects and on the dimensions and elements of the Quality Teaching model. In the initial stage of the evaluation an attempt was made to set up an interactive webpage for academic partners so that they too could share ideas, exchange academic articles and set up collegial networks. Time constraints and accessibility problems rendered this unworkable. Contact was maintained with academic partners via telephone interviews and email correspondence.

### **Organising project conferences**

A feature of the project was the support provided to school teams through three major conferences attended by members of the project school teams. The first, a two day orientation and planning conference in July 2006, *Acknowledgement, Respect and Understanding of Cultural Background*, involved a number of keynote presentations, workshops and school performances. Associate Professor James Ladwig from the University of Newcastle outlined their major Australian Government Quality Teaching Program study of cultural knowledge in New South Wales schools and Dr Wendy Hanlen from the University of Newcastle discussed

Aboriginal and Western cultural literacies. Leading Aboriginal actor and writer Leah Purcell was a guest speaker. Presentations were made by David Ella from the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group on forming partnerships and Harshi Gunawardena from the University of Sydney on survey design.

A second three day *Sharing and Planning* conference was organised in May 2007. This enabled school participants to hear from a number of keynote speakers, take part in a number of teaching workshops and small group discussions, and have the opportunity with other schools to share their experiences through conference presentations. The conference was also a chance for schools to further develop their plans for the project. Among the keynote speakers, Associate Professor James Ladwig and his team from Newcastle University reported some of the findings from their study. Dr Penny van Toom from the University of Sydney, a specialist on early Aboriginal cultures of writing, also presented. Dr Wendy Hanlen from the University of Newcastle spoke on Indigenous literacies and Susan Mathews from the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group outlined the ways of forming sustainable partnerships. Other guest speakers included Dr Anne Marshall, an Indigenous social ecologist and Brian Giles-Browne from the Australian Principals Association's Professional Development Council.

A third *Sharing and Planning* conference was organised in June 2008. The conference was designed to allow schools to share their progress through either poster presentations or workshops where school teams were able to detail their projects. Plenary sessions included a presentation by Professor Susan Groundwater-Smith from the University of Sydney, who discussed student voice. Dr. Wendy Formosa from the University of Newcastle led an important session about Aboriginal cultural knowledge, which was explored through an analysis of student work samples.

Action learning team members reported that they found all three conferences of great benefit in learning about the project, finding out about the work of other schools and establishing collegial networks.



## Chapter 2. Background

### Areas of research

The main areas of research drawn on for this study include the extensive field of professional teacher learning, change, quality teaching, professional learning communities, and action learning. Also important were the fields of Indigenous research and Indigenous research paradigms, Indigenous education and Indigenous knowledge, as well as Aboriginal community and parent engagement. Our literature review highlights a selection of relevant and recent studies that have helped to inform this study.

### Professional teacher learning - Quality teaching

A major review of evidence by Hattie (2003) highlighted the key role of teachers in determining student achievement at school and the importance of focusing on supporting excellent teachers. A further important research finding is that providing opportunities for teachers to be involved in professional learning does have a substantial impact on student learning, according to Timperley et al. (2007:xxv) in their synthesis of international and New Zealand research.

In Australia, a major Australian government initiative, implemented since 2001, has supported professional teacher learning across schools in all states and territories. The aim of Australian Government Quality Teacher Program (AGQTP) has been to promote quality teaching in a number of national priority areas including literacy, numeracy, mathematics, science and technology. The program has provided support for projects in all states including New South Wales. Among the professional learning areas that New South Wales projects have focused on have included:

- developing high quality teaching practices,
- building professional relationships and networks, and
- building connections and partnerships with communities.

In developing its quality teaching approach to support teachers in New South Wales government schools, a model of pedagogy developed by Gore and Ladwig (2003) was adopted. It set out three key pedagogical dimensions:

- promoting high intellectual quality,
- a quality learning environment, and
- making explicit to students the significance of their work (NSW DET 2003:5).

In further developing these dimensions, they highlighted ‘connectedness’ and ‘cultural knowledge’ including Aboriginal history and knowledge, as important elements of the ‘significance’ dimension.

As the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program developed, individual states included other priority areas in their programs. The Department in partnership with the University of Newcastle funded a longitudinal study of the relationships between pedagogy and student outcomes, measured against the key dimensions of the Quality Teaching model, including a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Ladwig et al 2008). Reporting on New South Wales Australian Government Quality Teaching Program projects in 2003 Ewing et al. (2004) noted that 50 projects had received grants of between \$10,000 and \$60,000 to support teacher professional learning. By 2006, in that year alone, approximately 4,000 teachers had taken part in 179 Australian Government Quality Teaching Program funded projects across Australia (Curriculum Corporation 2007). The project we

report on here - the Quality Teaching Indigenous Program project in New South Wales - was funded from 2006-2008 to support the professional learning of teachers in a number of selected schools, taking an action learning approach.

### **Building professional relationships**

While the concept of setting up a professional learning community among teachers as a way of improving teaching emerged in the United States in the 1990s, more recently educators in the United Kingdom have focused on the need to provide national support for building a professional learning community among teachers in schools. A major review by Bolam et al. (2005) found that where a learning community had been established in a school and was working well, it was contributing to both improved professional learning among teachers and improved student learning in schools. Timperley et al. (2007:xivi) identified a professional learning community as a key necessary factor of effective teacher learning programs.

In reporting at an Australian Government Quality Teaching Program forum Dinham (2007:19-20) highlighted that learning communities are developed and sustained by having a focus on teaching and learning; having their members feel supported and seeing that they and their students are improving; recognising the need to change, being concerned with a continuous cycle of improvement and not just being satisfied with the status quo.

In seeing how relevant the notions of professional learning communities and communities of practice were to Australian schools Hayes et al. (2006:194) emphasised that “discourses of schooling offer not solutions but opportunities to engage with institutional practices in order to foreground...learning.” Teacher professional activity was seen as only one of a number of ways to further develop schools as places of learning. At the same time Hayes et al. (2006:197) saw that while professional development was important and valuable, “just providing opportunities for formal learning for teachers ... does not in itself guarantee that learning takes place or that teacher professional communities will spring up.”

Drawing together data from the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program in 2006, a report on key aspects of professional learning (Curriculum Corporation 2007:7-8) found teachers had developed a stronger sense of themselves as researchers and their classrooms as a focus for their action learning. They had also recognised the importance of developing learning communities, not just among the teachers through their school learning teams, but also through collaborations with parents and their local and wider communities.

### **Action learning and Action learning teams**

A key concept that underpins any professional learning development is a view of change. One of the leading educational thinkers who has researched and written about educational change is Michael Fullan. He recently reflected on the meaning of educational change and sketched how his ideas had developed over almost thirty years (Fullan 2005). He pointed to his simplified view of the change process, developed in 1982, which saw change occurring as an interactive ongoing process of initiation, implementation, continuation and outcomes that developed both the inner and outer learning capacities of individuals and groups in schools. At the same time he highlighted the crucial role of the ‘culture of the school’ as a key factor in affecting teaching and learning. He stressed the importance of teachers developing their own capacities, seeking out ‘kindred spirits’ and learning from those who disagreed with them (p.212).

A transformational view of change, as outlined by Mezirow (2000) points to the need for those undergoing major change to move through a process where they may feel initially discomforted and then move through a number of stages of cognitive restructuring and reconciliation of their experiences and actions. Taking an action learning change approach to quality teaching initiatives has been described by Ewing (2004) as a powerful model for

developing teachers' professional learning, because it allows teachers as a group, to step back from their teaching and have focused collegial discussions about their practice.

In their study of fifty Australian Government Quality Teaching Program projects implemented in 2004 in New South Wales schools Aubusson, Brady & Dinham (2005:4) concluded that using an action learning approach 'promoted collaboration both within teams and between schools, ... fostered reflection as a part of teaching practice' and 'facilitated ongoing change involving the continued use of the action-reflection cycle'. One way of more effectively applying the action learning change model in New South Wales schools has been through action learning teams. Ewing et al. (2004) reported on the value of *Action learning for school teams* in their review of a number of New South Wales Australian Government Quality Teaching Program projects. They made it clear that the key features of effective *Action learning for school teams* projects were that the project team had a critical mass of teachers, an allocation of substantial funding to buy time and resources for the project team, and the team had access to external expertise through either a funded academic partner or a regional departmental consultant. Also the most successful projects were characterised by a school community culture that focused on learning and emphasised teacher learning and a well developed project plan that included clearly planned opportunities for team members to implement an action cycle in their teaching.

### **Aboriginal cultural knowledge**

The concept of Aboriginal cultural knowledge is central in any professional learning program with teachers that seeks to improve Aboriginal student learning. As Nicholls, Crowley and Watt (1996) argued it is important not to essentialise, reduce or see Aboriginal knowledge, history and culture as frozen in time, but rather to acknowledge its dynamic, diverse and evolving nature. As a starting point Janke (1998:11) focused on an agreed view of Indigenous culture and heritage that was defined in terms of languages; literary, performing and artistic works; spiritual knowledge; scientific, agricultural, technical and ecological knowledge; and cultural environment resources.

In defining cultural knowledge Amosa and Ladwig (2004) suggested that Indigenous knowledge "is legitimised when there is explicit valuing and authentic consideration of cultural identity represented in such things as beliefs, languages, practices and ways of knowing" (p.1) But they pointed to little evidence of this happening in Australian schools. Amosa and Ladwig (2004:3) suggested there was much more to be learned about how cultural knowledge occurred, was fostered and impacted on student learning. They raised the issues of whose cultural knowledge was to be drawn on and how could schools, teachers and students effectively incorporate that knowledge to support teaching and learning. Hooley and Ryan (2008) also pointed to the difficulties teachers faced in their lack of knowledge about their local Aboriginal communities and of teachers being uncertain how to change their teaching so that it was more culturally inclusive.

### **New approaches to Indigenous research**

New approaches emerged in response to the ongoing concerns about the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge. According to Rigney (2006:32) knowledge production about Indigenous people has always been obscured by the 'cultural and race bias of the non-Indigenous interpreter'. In developing his Indigenous standpoint theory (Nakata 1998) emphasised the need for Indigenous researchers to better understand dominant discourses and to extend those discourses to include what has been submerged or excluded by non Indigenous researchers. For Foley (2003) and Quartermaine (2003) it was more important that when research was being undertaken in Indigenous communities that it was carried out by Aboriginal researchers.

More recently Nakata (2007) has argued for making sure that researchers acknowledge and incorporate the views and experiences of Indigenous people into their research, and in the

process take advantage of the critical analysis of accepted or dominant views and arguments. At the same time, in arguing for a greater role for Indigenous researchers, O'Brien and Rigney (2006) emphasised the notion of 'shared spaces' in the design of research with Indigenous communities – where both dominant and Aboriginal perspectives are respected and included.

In searching for new approaches Rigney (2006:32) suggested that “the rise of Indigenous research by Indigenous scholars has produced new ways of knowing the past ... and exploring new forms of theoretical and methodological issues as part of an Indigenous research reform agenda”. A number of key features of this agenda meant involving Indigenous communities in:

- the design, execution and evaluation of the research;
- consultation and negotiation through the life of a research project;
- determining research priorities and benefits to the community and
- linking research to community development and social change and training Indigenous researchers (p.36).

Other new approaches to have emerged include taking a custodian stance (Oates 2003), using a circle methodology (Graveline 2000) or developing a partnership approach between researchers and Indigenous community organisations (Fredericks 2006). Data generation through means that are different, but complementary, to other research methods can resonate in culturally diverse contexts. Visual arts-based inquiry in Aboriginal community settings (Evans & Skuthorpe, 2009) provides an alternate opportunity for Aboriginal community members to communicate information within research and evaluative frameworks.

### **Aboriginal education**

Despite efforts by both national and state educational authorities to close the gap in educational attainment for Aboriginal students, recent studies (Productivity Commission 2009; Long & North 2009) indicate that there has been little overall improvement in school learning outcomes. Long & North (2009:8) found few signs of the gap in educational attainment narrowing for young Aboriginal Australians and they continue to have markedly lower levels of attainment than non-Indigenous Australians. According to the latest Productivity Commission report on government services (2009) in New South Wales government schools, Aboriginal students:

- make up 5.1% of the school population;
- only 40% complete Year 12;
- their learning outcomes, judged by reading, writing and numeracy (based on test scores in years 3, 5, and 7) continue to significantly lag behind non-Indigenous students.

A major review of Aboriginal education in New South Wales government schools (Department of Education and Training 2004:76-79) acknowledged quality teaching professional development as a key strategy for improving Aboriginal student learning. It also highlighted the need for more systematic efforts to improve teachers' knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal students and the importance of working more closely with Aboriginal people through better links with parents, community members and Elders.

The need for specific and targeted teacher training and professional development in Aboriginal education, along with a closer relationship between the school and its community, as key ways of improving learning outcomes, has been highlighted by many researchers for more than a decade (Partington 1998; Craven 1999; Burrige 2000, 2006; Mellor & Corrigan 2004).

### **Promoting a culture of learning and high expectations**

The importance of promoting a culture of learning within a school and its community, and setting high learning expectations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has been argued by former Aboriginal school principal and teacher educator Chris Sarra. Key aspects of Sarra's approach in turning around the school attendance and learning outcomes of Aboriginal students at Cherbourg school in a regional Queensland Indigenous community (Sarra 2003) involved challenging the status quo, in particular changing the culture of expectations among teachers, students and the local community, strengthening the sense of Aboriginal identity of students, and also changing the teaching practices in the classroom to help achieve those expectations.

Reporting on their longitudinal study of the impact on classroom teaching of using the Quality Teaching model and teacher professional development with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students Griffiths, Amosa, Ladwig & Gore (2008) found evidence that despite the Quality Teaching framework being in place, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at a classroom level, in classes where there was a high proportion of Aboriginal students, were still not receiving a high quality pedagogy. This was in terms of the intellectual quality or significance and its connection to students' background knowledge and life experiences. (Note: the study tracked three cohorts of students over four years in 33 New South Wales schools.)

Based on these findings, Gore et al. (2008) argued that teachers "need to understand the importance of, and know how to include, more challenging and meaningful work for Indigenous students" (p.5) and that the Quality teaching model "is worth pursuing in teacher education" (p.7).

### **Engaging with Aboriginal communities**

There is an extensive body of research about the importance of schools developing and sustaining connections with local communities, including Aboriginal communities, as a way of improving learning outcomes. The need for strengthening school involvement with local Aboriginal families and communities was highlighted in New South Wales in 2001 by the Board of Studies (Board of Studies 2001) and it produced a guide for community consultations, together with a set of protocols. Mellor and Corrigan (2004) suggested that having a broader relationship between the school with its Indigenous community was one of the five key principles of effective education provision.

Bin-Sallik and Smallacombe (2003:11) in reviewing Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies, including two in New South Wales, found that while generally these bodies had become less clear about their functions and priorities, more reactive and often mediating in disputes between parents and schools, some had nevertheless established "good linkages with schools and Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness committees".

On the other hand a recent study by Hooley and Ryan (2008:2) suggested that close and respectful links between schools and their local Indigenous communities have not been established. At the same time the "white curriculum has found it extremely difficult to incorporate Indigenous knowledge, history and culture so that school subjects can relate to daily community life". Among the main reasons that Aboriginal children in Australia were continuing not to succeed at school, according to Hooley and Ryan (2008), was because of the lack of close and respectful relationships between schools and local Aboriginal communities. Another reason was that school curricula were unable to incorporate Aboriginal knowledge, history and culture into school subjects.

Recent efforts have been made in New South Wales to support schools with dedicated funding to further develop their engagement with local Aboriginal communities. A *Schools in Partnership* initiative (New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2007)

provided funding to 30 New South Wales government schools with significant Aboriginal student populations to assist them to “build capacity and strengthen partnerships with community members and other agencies”... particularly... “to improve the literacy, numeracy and participation outcomes” (p.3). In this program the school community was seen in broad terms and included staff, students, parents and local community agencies. Key features of the program were support for professional development of teachers, quality teaching, Aboriginal cultural education for all staff, and work with other agencies (p.5).

### **Engaging with Aboriginal parents**

Providing a place for the involvement of parents and local communities in supporting student learning has been a feature of school improvement discourse since the mid 1990s.

Approaches developed in the United States by Joyce Epstein, in the United Kingdom by Lyn Tett and her colleagues, and more recently in Australia by Dave Turner for the New South Wales Priority Schools Funding Program, saw community school involvement as one of the key ways to address the needs of disadvantaged schools (Hayes & Chodkiewicz 2006). In a major review of research evidence of the community and family influences on children’s educational achievement Biddulph et al. (2003:vi) concluded there was a role for genuine home-school collaborations, and that accessing local community agencies would enhance children’s achievements. At the same time they warned that the research findings were relatively complex, particularly in working out what could be applied in particular school settings.

A study of an action research project in an inner city government school with a significant proportion of Aboriginal students enrolled (Chodkiewicz et al. 2008) showed that schools, in their efforts to involve Aboriginal families and community relationships to support student learning, needed to make more consistent and ongoing efforts to reach out and include families and the local community. Both families and community groups and agencies were willing to be involved, but schools needed to take the lead to initiate relationships that would support learning, and then they needed to keep following up with efforts to maintain them, otherwise the efforts dropped away.

On the need to support an Aboriginal language program in schools Lowe (2001) emphasised the importance of communities and schools working together to revitalize Aboriginal languages. And Christie (2008) suggests that the success in teaching the Yolngu languages and culture, in a remote Northern Territory community, has occurred because of the collaborative engagement of teachers and researchers with the local community, especially the Yolngu Elders. By 2008 as a result of support by the Board of Studies in New South Wales, many government schools had introduced an Aboriginal language program into their school (Lowe 2008).

## Chapter 3. Project schools and school surveys

### Project schools

The project developed over two phases with the eleven Phase One schools, starting in 2006 and continuing for three years. Among these schools:

- there were eight primary schools, two high schools, and a special needs school;
- the primary school enrolments ranged from one small primary school with 76 students to the largest with over 600 students;
- both high schools had enrolments of around 1,000 students, and
- there was at least one school from each of the ten school regions across the state.

Among the nine Phase Two schools starting in 2007:

- all were primary schools;
- enrolment ranged from small schools with just over 80 enrolments to the largest with almost 470 students, and
- they were drawn from 7 school regions.

### Project teams

At each of the schools, a project team was formed to manage the project and provide a supportive team over the life of the project. The reports from schools show that among the Phase One schools in 2006/7 a total of 78 teachers, school support staff, and some community members participated as members of a school action learning team. While in 2008 among the twenty Phase One and Phase Two schools the number involved more than doubled to 160 teachers, staff and community members.

The team members included members of the school executive (principals, assistant principals, etc), class teachers, Aboriginal Education support staff and parent/community members. Each team was supported by an academic partner. A number of schools included other specialists as part of their team, including a speech pathologist, a departmental consultant, a Support Teacher Learning Assistance and School Learning Support Officers. During 2006/7 the numbers of participants in each team ranged from a low of five to a high of ten members. In 2008 the size of the teams increased slightly, with the numbers of team members involved ranging from five to eleven.

The number of Aboriginal staff in the teams also increased from eight Aboriginal Education Officers and one Aboriginal Education Resource Assistant to 13 Aboriginal Education Officers, one Aboriginal Education Resource Assistant, one Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer and one Aboriginal teacher / cultural adviser in 2008. Across the teams we were aware of only two Aboriginal teachers who were included as members of a team.

Team leadership was important. In 2006/7 in most cases the team was led by the school principal (5/11), with the remainder led by a deputy principal or an assistant principal (6/11). A notable feature was that in 2008 there was an overall decrease in the proportion of principals involved as team leaders, with only seven out of twenty school teams led by the school principal.

The inclusion of parent and community members in the teams was encouraged in the project guidelines, but overall the numbers involved across the project schools were modest. Among the school teams there was a slight increase in the number of parent/community members –

increasing from a total of seven in 2006/7 (note: at one school there were 4 parents) to nine in 2008.

### **Aboriginal student numbers**

The schools taking part in the Quality Teaching Indigenous Program in 2006 were selected because a significant proportion of their students were Aboriginal. In most cases the proportion ranged between 10 and 20% of enrolments. By 2009 these percentages had changed. Among the project primary schools in 2009 the proportion of Aboriginal students ranged from a high of 35% of enrolments at a small regional school to 9% at a medium sized regional school in the state's central west. Among the high schools and special needs school the proportion was much smaller with a high of 6% at a large outer suburban Sydney high school to 1% at a northern Sydney school.

### **Aboriginal communities and community representatives**

It is important to acknowledge that the nature of each of the local Aboriginal communities connected to schools varied considerably in their size, their prior connections to the school and in their capacity to work with school staff and students to share local cultural knowledge with the school. Socio-economic disadvantage was also an important factor. In many cases the communities were relatively disadvantaged in terms of educational attainment, employment, health and housing. Community members also continued to experience the impact of dispossession of their land, disconnection from their culture and ongoing exclusion from the mainstream. In some schools this meant the school had to work out who they felt best represented the community on education issues, who should be asked to be involved, and how should they be approached. It was noted by Departmental representatives that staff in some school teams reported never having spoken to an Aboriginal person before embarking on the project.

In some school communities Aboriginal community representatives were already actively involved with their local schools and that involvement was deepened as a result of the project. In other schools the involvement was limited, as there was only one Aboriginal community organisation or member who was active on education issues and in a position to act as a local Aboriginal community representative with schools, however Aboriginal parents and staff members were also acknowledged as community representatives.

### **Parents**

The connections with and inclusion of Aboriginal parents in schools around learning activities varied among the school communities. In some schools parents of Aboriginal children were included explicitly as a part of the school's community, and efforts were made to regularly inform and involve them in their children's learning. In a smaller number of schools, no special efforts were made to reach out to and involve Aboriginal parents, apart from the normal school newsletters and school reports.

### **School surveys analysis**

A feature of this study was that the New South Wales Department of Education and Training gathered both quantitative and qualitative data over the life of the project from the schools involved. The Department designed and administered a survey to teachers in all participating schools in 2007 and again in 2008. The survey was sent to all teaching and administrative staff and participation in the surveys in both years was voluntary, therefore the cohorts undertaking the survey may vary from one year to the next. In this section we report on the 2007 and 2008 aggregated school survey data of teachers and staff in the schools taking part in the project.



The surveys aimed “to assist teachers to strengthen the cultural inclusiveness for Aboriginal students in the school” and “explore the conditions in the school that best support the learning environments for Aboriginal students and partnerships with parents/care givers and community”. The findings from the two surveys have been analysed and compared in terms of the following key areas:

- professional learning;
- teaching practices;
- culture of expectations;
- including Aboriginal cultural knowledge;
- assessing student learning;
- engagement with the Aboriginal community, and
- Aboriginal parents.

### Professional learning

In considering the impact of a project in New South Wales schools, it is important to note that the first Aboriginal education policy in New South Wales government schools was published in 1982, followed by a comprehensive second policy in 1996 that for the first time introduced a five year plan for teacher professional development on Aboriginal issues. This was followed by a major review of Aboriginal education in New South Wales carried out in 2004 (Department of Education and Training 2004) which resulted in an updated Aboriginal Education and Training Policy in 2008 (Department of Education and Training 2008). This means that while teachers may have been involved in professional learning, until the project started in 2006 there had been no other major cross regional teacher training initiative in Aboriginal education in New South Wales government schools since the end of 2001.

The survey data showed that the funding provided by the project had made a significant impact on staff at the schools involved in the project. A high proportion of respondents, 78% in 2007 increasing to 87% in 2008, said that they had participated in professional learning about Aboriginal education. The responses showed that there had been a significant increase between the first and the second surveys.

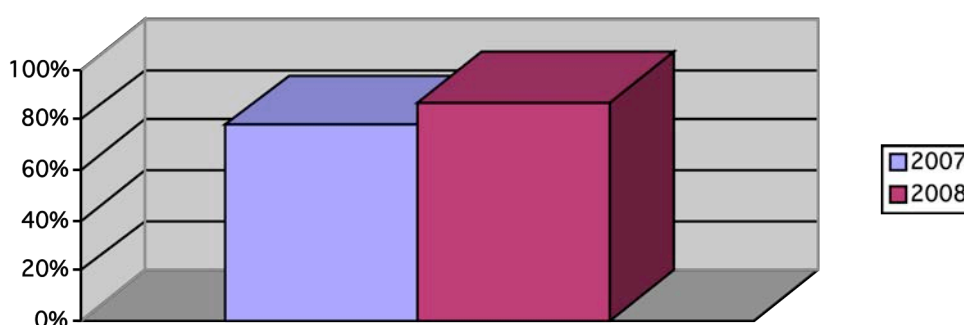


Figure 1. Participated in professional learning

Most reported that their experience was quite recent, taking place over the past two years for 76% in 2007 and 84% in 2008. Professional learning had occurred at least once a year over the last two years for most of the respondents (68% and 69%). Given that universities have only recently started to include Aboriginal Studies as a mandatory part of their teacher education programs, the survey data showed that only a proportion (36% in 2007 and 38% in 2008) reported having any formal university or college based training in Aboriginal education.

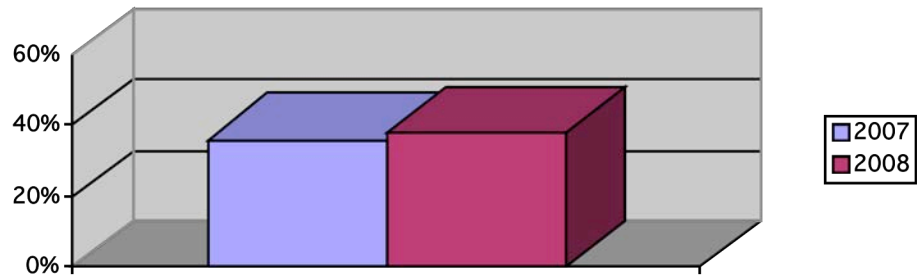


Figure 2. Undertaken university or college training

**Literacy and numeracy training**

Over recent years a major effort has been made by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training to provide literacy training for teachers across K-12 years in New South Wales government schools. The *State Literacy Plan* identified *Literacy on Track* as a key professional learning course for teachers, and it was being delivered across regionally targeted schools in 2007 and 2008 (Tasik 2007). When asked about their involvement in literacy and numeracy training over the previous two years, less than half (47%) had taken part in 2007, with a higher proportion (56%) having undertaken literacy training in 2008. The data on numeracy training over the previous two years showed that only 41% undertook any training in 2007, and the proportion dropped to 36% in 2008.

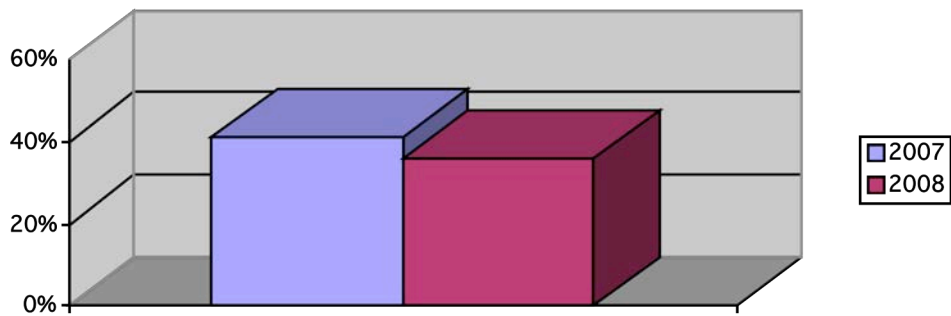


Figure 3. Literacy and numeracy training

In terms of the impact of literacy training on teaching practice there was a noticeable increase in the proportion who said it had made a significant impact, rising from 28% in 2007 to 43% in 2008. The proportion indicating that their numeracy training over the last two years had a significant impact on their teaching practice also increased, from 22% in 2007 to 34% in 2008. This was also reflected in a noticeable drop in those who felt the training had made either a 'slight' or 'no' impact on their teaching practice, from 26% to 14% for literacy and from 44% to 19% for numeracy training.

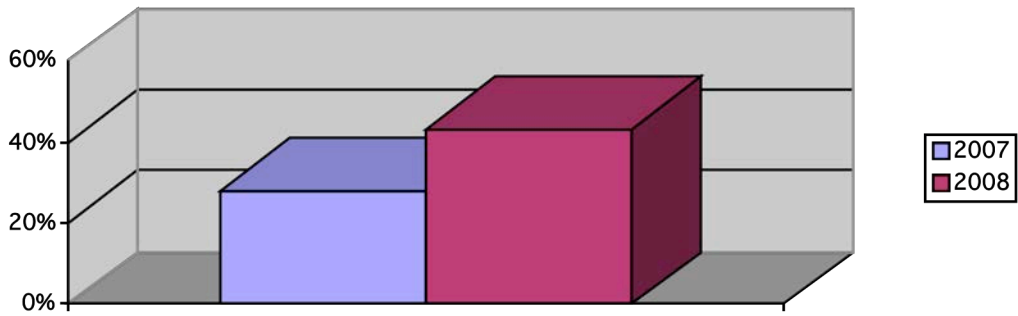


Figure 4. Impact of literacy and numeracy training

### Teaching practices

In relation to Aboriginal education, teachers did feel they needed to improve their teaching practices, and the survey data showed that the project assisted teachers to adjust their teaching strategies to better meet the needs of their students. Almost all the respondents in both surveys (93% in 2007 and 93% in 2008) felt that there were areas of their teaching practice in Aboriginal education that needed to be improved. However no follow up question was asked in order to explore which particular aspects of their practice were of major concern.

When asked specifically about how often they adjusted their teaching strategies to better meet the needs of Aboriginal students, the proportion who said they did so ‘frequently’ increased from 37% in 2007 to 50% in 2008. The proportion who said they did so ‘occasionally’ decreased from 48% to 42%, leaving only a small proportion, 17% in 2007 and 8% in 2008, who ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ adjusted their teaching practices.

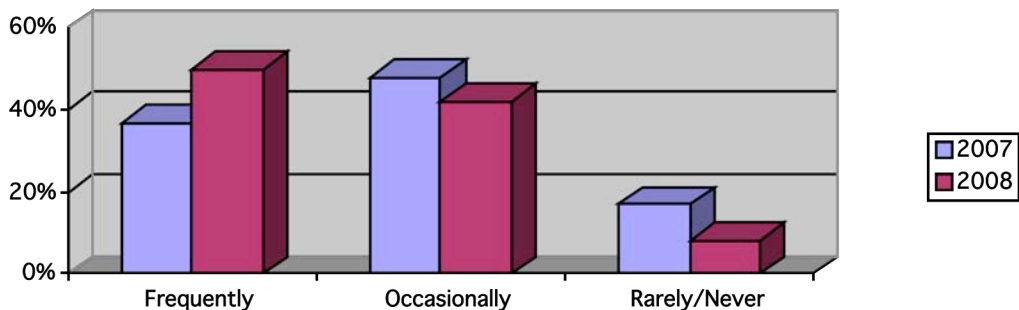


Figure 5. Adjusting teaching strategies

The impact on teaching practices of teacher engagement with their local Aboriginal community was assessed as ‘substantial’ by 27% in 2007, increasing to 36% of respondents in 2008. On the other hand there was a similar proportion, 27% in 2007, dropping to 14% in 2008, who said the engagement had ‘very little or no’ impact at all on their teaching. Significantly, about half, 47% in 2007 and 50% in 2008, said that engagement impacted only ‘somewhat’ on their teaching.

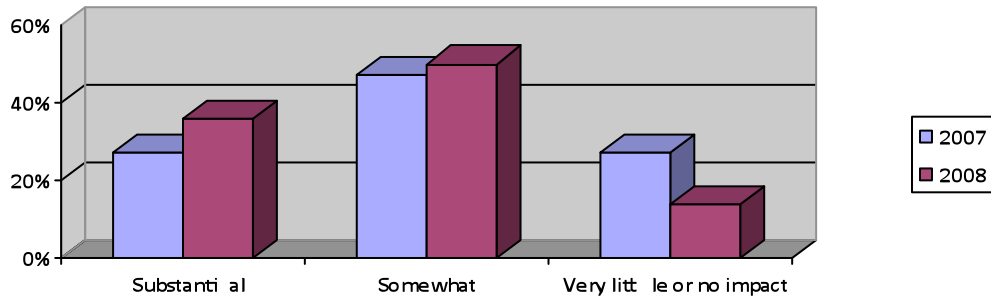


Figure 6. Engagement with Aboriginal communities

When asked about the resources teachers used to inform their own understanding of Aboriginal education a majority reported that they used:

- resource guides about Aboriginal education (64% in 2007 and 60% in 2008);
- information from their local Aboriginal community (62% and 72%);
- Aboriginal education policy documents (61% and 68%);
- relevant reports and reviews (57% and 50%) and
- information from specific Stages or Years (53% and 57%).

The least used resources were those obtained through Internet access (42% and 48%).

The kinds of resources teachers said they used ‘usually’ and ‘always’ to inform the teaching of Aboriginal cultural knowledge were generally traditional text based and media forms. They ranged from curriculum resources materials (53% in 2007 and 56% in 2008) and textbooks about Aboriginal culture (51% and 50%) to audiovisual resources (27% and 37%) and journals and magazines (27% and 17%). Also used were Aboriginal guest speakers, which increased from 19% in 2007 to 32% in 2008, as did computer assisted programs incorporating Aboriginal culture, which increased from 13% in 2007 to 21% in 2008. Although field trips to local Aboriginal communities were the least used kind of resources, the proportion saying they ‘usually’ and ‘always’ used a field trip, grew from 9% in 2007 to 13% in 2009.

### **Culture of expectations**

Given that developing a culture of high expectations for students has been recognised as an important factor in improving Aboriginal school student outcomes (Sarra 2003; Rowe 2003), a significant proportion, 41% in 2007 increasing to 49% in 2008, said that their school ‘substantially’ had a culture of high expectations for the achievement of Aboriginal children. This meant that only a small proportion (11% and 6%) said that the school had ‘very little’ or ‘not at all’ this kind of culture of high expectations, while 49% and 45% rated the culture of expectations as ‘somewhat’.

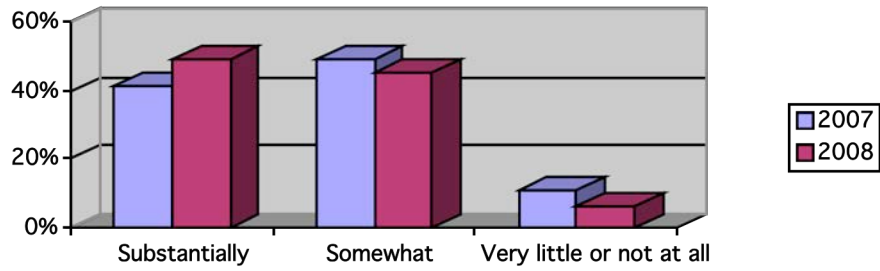


Figure 7. Culture of expectations of Aboriginal students

**Including Aboriginal cultural knowledge**

Another important area was the inclusion of Aboriginal cultural knowledge in teaching. A majority of respondents, 56% in 2007 and 59% in 2008, said that their teaching strategies were ‘somewhat’ inclusive of Aboriginal cultural knowledge. The proportion who said their practices were ‘substantially’ inclusive increased from 18% to 27%. This was accompanied by a drop in the proportion from 27% to 15% who said they did ‘very little’ to be inclusive of Aboriginal cultural knowledge, or answered ‘not at all’ to this question.

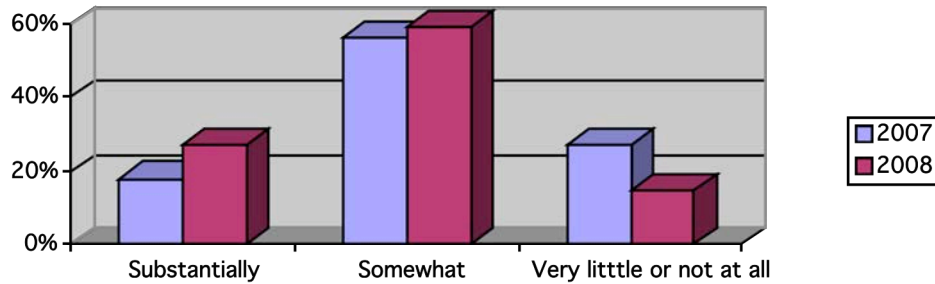


Figure 8. Inclusion of Aboriginal cultural knowledge

Including the discussion of contemporary Aboriginal issues in class was not a feature of most classroom teaching. When asked about it only a small proportion, 13% in 2007 and 16% in 2008, said they did so ‘often’. On the other hand there was a noticeable increase in those who said they did so ‘occasionally’ increasing from 35% to 50%. And there was a drop in the proportion who said they did so ‘rarely’ or ‘never’, falling from 51% to 35%.

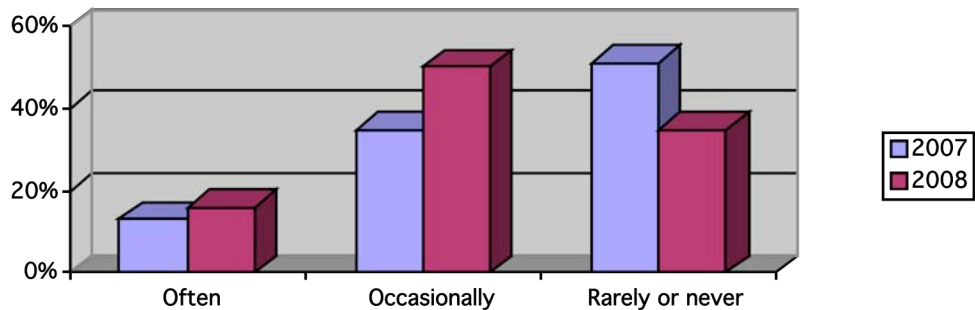


Figure 9. Discussion of Aboriginal issues

When asked about who was responsible for Aboriginal cultural knowledge being shared at the schools, most strongly agreed that it was a whole school responsibility, with 55% in 2007 and 61% in 2008. Others key players were identified, and ranked in descending order. 30% and 33% considered that the local Aboriginal community were responsible. Significantly, only a small proportion, 14% in 2007 and 13% in 2008, believed that the teacher was responsible for sharing Aboriginal cultural knowledge. At the same time Aboriginal staff in the school were also not seen as having responsibility, with only 9% and 13% agreeing that they were responsible.

### **Assessing student learning**

Another part of teachers' classroom practices surveyed was how their students' understanding of Aboriginal cultural knowledge was assessed. Generally there was little change in teacher assessment methods over the two surveys. The most frequently used methods were through:

- artwork (76% in both 2007 and 2008);
- story telling (68% and 67%) and
- oral assessments (63% and 66%).

Other methods mentioned were anecdotal records (55% and 62%); presentations (51% and 56%); music and/or dance (51% and 52%) and extended open response items (45% and 49%). Notable among the least frequently used methods were written assignments (37% and 41%) and objective tests (23% and 33%). The use of both of these forms of assessment had increased noticeably over the two surveys. These statistics are noted without any comments related to the effectiveness of these assessment items in terms of student learning. It should be noted that the effectiveness of assessment was not considered this evaluation.

### **Engaging with the Aboriginal community**

Two aspects of schools and their staff being able to better engage with the local Aboriginal community were having a culture of respect for Aboriginal families and being able to understand the educational issues facing a school's educational community. Most respondents, 62% in 2007 increasing to 67% in 2008, felt there was a culture of respect for Aboriginal families at the school, with only a very small number, 4% and 3% saying their school had 'very little' respect.

Most felt that they understood the educational issues facing their school's educational community 'somewhat', with 54% in 2007 and 56% in 2008. Notably an increased proportion, rising from 24% in 2007 to 31% in 2008, said that they 'substantially' understood the issues, with a noticeable drop in the proportion, from 23% to 13%, who said they understood the issues 'very little' or 'not at all'.

A very high proportion of respondents, 84% in 2007 increasing to 92% in 2008, said that their professional learning activities did involve engagement with Aboriginal people. However it appeared that despite having this high level of engagement during professional development, this did not necessarily translate into further ongoing involvement with the local Aboriginal community. If engagement is seen as more than just making contact during their professional development - and is seen in terms of discussions and exchange of information about education - an important survey finding was that the proportion who reported 'occasionally' engaging with the local Aboriginal community to discuss their views about education increased from 24% in 2007 to 34% in 2008. The proportion who 'never or rarely' did so fell slightly from 69% and 56%. There was a quite small proportion, 8% in 2007, increasing to 10% in 2008, who did so 'frequently'. This points to the fact that despite the project, a majority of respondents continued to be uninvolved in any discussions or exchanges with the local Aboriginal community on education issues.

### **Aboriginal parents**

Another aspect of engagement with the Aboriginal community was involvement with Aboriginal parents. The only question that explored this relationship asked about having the opportunity to discuss contemporary Aboriginal issues with Aboriginal parents. The proportion who did so 'frequently', although quite small, increased from 8% in 2007 to 12% in 2008. At the same time there was a drop in the sizeable majority who reported that they 'never or rarely' had the opportunity to discuss contemporary Aboriginal issues with Aboriginal parents, falling from 69% in 2007 to 57% in 2008. And the proportion doing so 'occasionally' also dropped from 43% to 32%.

## **Summary**

In summary we have highlighted a number of key insights from the survey data.

### **Professional learning**

- **involvement in professional learning** – the survey data showed that the project had made a significant impact on staff, involving a high proportion of school staff in recent professional learning about Aboriginal education.
- **previous study in Aboriginal education** – just over a third of participants reported having had previous formal university or college based training in Aboriginal education.

### **Teaching practices**

- **need to improve teaching practices** – when asked about the need to improve their teaching practices, almost all respondents agreed they needed to improve.
- **adjusting teaching practices** – the proportion who then noted they 'frequently' adjusted their teaching strategies to better meet the needs of Aboriginal students increased from 37% to 50% between the two surveys, leaving only a small proportion who 'rarely' or 'never' did.
- **impact of teacher engagement with local Aboriginal community on teaching practices** – there was a noticeable increase in the proportion of teachers who felt there had been a 'substantial' increase in the impact of engaging with the local Aboriginal community on their teaching practices.
- **use of resources** – the main resources teachers used to inform their own understanding of Aboriginal education were resource guides, information from the local Aboriginal community, Aboriginal education policy documents, reports and reviews. The least used were resources accessed through the Internet. Traditional text based and media forms were most frequently used to inform their teaching of Aboriginal cultural knowledge.
- **culture of expectations** – a significant proportion said that their school had a culture of high expectations for the achievement of Aboriginal children, with only a small proportion saying it had 'very little' respect or answered 'not at all' to this question.
- **including Aboriginal cultural knowledge** – a majority said their teaching strategies were somewhat inclusive of Aboriginal cultural knowledge. Only a small proportion said they discussed contemporary Aboriginal issues in class 'often'.

- **assessing student learning** – teachers reported that the most frequently used methods to assess student learning included artwork, story-telling and oral assessments.

#### **Engagement with the Aboriginal community**

- **having a culture of respect for Aboriginal families** – most respondents felt that their school did have a culture of respect for Aboriginal families at the school.
- **understanding educational issues facing the community** – most felt they ‘somewhat’ understood the educational issues facing the school’s Aboriginal community
- **professional learning involved engagement with Aboriginal people** – almost all respondents said that their professional learning activities did involve engagement with Aboriginal people.
- **discussing contemporary issues with Aboriginal parents** – only a small but increasing proportion said they ‘frequently’ discussed contemporary Aboriginal issues with Aboriginal parents, and there were noticeable falls in the proportions who did this ‘occasionally’, ‘never’ or ‘rarely’.



## Chapter 4. Case Studies

### Background

The research team decided to profile seven schools as case studies for this study. Five were selected from the eleven Phase One schools and a further two schools were selected from the additional nine Phase Two schools. The schools discussed in the case studies have been allocated a pseudonym, and participants are referred to by their roles rather than their names. All efforts have been made to maintain the anonymity of participants. The case study schools included:

- four primary schools (Blue, Cobalt, Crimson, Dolomite) and
- two high schools (Cadmium and Magenta) and a special needs school (Red).

### Case studies

The case studies have been analysed in terms of the following key areas: the school context; an overview of the project; outcomes of teacher professional learning; key factors enhancing and constraining professional learning; challenges and opportunities; role of school leadership, the project team, academic partner/mentor and sustaining the project.

#### Blue Public School

##### 1. Context

This school is a large primary school located in a regional centre in Western New South Wales. It had a significant proportion of Aboriginal children ranging between 15% and 20% of the student population during the period from 2006 to 2009. The majority of Aboriginal children were members of the local community while a smaller number of students have moved in and out of the school area during the period of the project. The total student population ranged between 350 and 400 during the project. There were usually fourteen mainstream classes and one special needs class each year. Among the teaching staff were two Aboriginal staff, one was an Aboriginal Education Officer and the other a Student Learning Support Officer. An Aboriginal Tuition Aide was also involved during the evaluation phase.

While the main body of teaching staff has been quite stable over the period of the project the school has had three changes to the principalship. The current principal was replaced in 2007 and has recently returned to the school. The principals have been supportive of the initiative and the two assistant principals have been project team members. The principal during the period 2007 - 2008 identified Aboriginal education as “core business” in the school and actively supported the project activities.

The project team was comprised of two assistant principals, two classroom teachers, two Aboriginal staff and local Aboriginal community representatives. The project provided the school with support from three different groups during the project. An academic partner was appointed and the two members of the University of Technology Sydney team assigned to the school communicated with the school-based project team and the local Aboriginal community members through a range of means, including: site visits, email, phone conversations and an arts-based inquiry where the school’s Aboriginal staff members engaged the perspectives of some local Aboriginal community members through their contribution to a collaborative large canvas painting.

During the site visits, the two University of Technology, Sydney staff observed classes, participated in project team meetings, conducted focus groups and interviews with the project team members, spoke with Aboriginal community members, and provided advice on the project including suggesting a range of ways in which evaluation data could be gathered.

## **2. Overview**

The project team members, academic partners and members of the local Aboriginal Community, as well as the evaluation team's own assessment of the project all concurred that the project has, to varying extents, been successful in developing community relationships and improving teaching and learning for Aboriginal students in the school. We have framed this overview in terms of the school, students and the community.

The most significant outcome for the school, and by this we are referring to the development of its collective capacity to engage with the community and improve teaching, has been the establishment and strengthening of collaboration, communication and shared understanding between the school and the local Aboriginal community. As a direct consequence of these relationships, there has been significant professional learning among the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff on the project team. The professional learning of staff not on the project team, according to members of the project team, has been less substantial. Another outcome for the school has been the development of resources relevant to the teaching program of the school. These resources are now in high demand by classroom teachers.

The initial focus of the project was on improving literacy among all students with a particular focus on Aboriginal students. The teachers on the project team engaged in collaborative professional learning and shared strategies and resources to improve the literacy outcomes of the Aboriginal students. There was anecdotal evidence that Aboriginal students have become more engaged in learning but data supporting this outcome was not available to the evaluation team. A further outcome for students in the school has been an increased presence of Aboriginal staff and Aboriginal community members in the school, resulting in the Aboriginal students feeling more at home at the school, and non-Aboriginal students being more aware of local Aboriginal culture. This was clearly evident in the various activities that occurred during *National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee* (NAIDOC) week in 2008.

Aboriginal community members have had an increasing presence in the school during the period of the project. The project team established communication with the community as an important part of the project. There were many forms of communication, including visits to family homes by Aboriginal staff, attendance of staff at meetings, visits by community members to the school, and the regular publication of the *Indig Brag* newsletter. An arts-based approach to acquiring Aboriginal community members' insights about their relationship with the school and its projects was suggested by the evaluation team. The aim was to provide alternate and culturally relevant opportunities for communication that complemented conventional means of academic enquiry (Evans and Skuthorpe 2009). Images from the finished canvas are presented in the body of this case study,

## **3. Outcomes**

This section provides detailed information about the outcomes that were achieved in the project over the period 2006 – 2009. There is clear evidence of the success of the project as well as of ongoing review, modification and adjustment of activities and priorities during the project. There were three distinct phases to the project: initiation, development, and consolidation and dissemination.

### *Project initiation*

The initial action plan focused on student literacy and involved staff sharing and staff development, within the project team, of strategies to improve the literacy outcomes of all

students with an emphasis on Aboriginal students. Funds were used to provide release time for the project team to meet and engage in what became a long-term, action-learning group. The identification of literacy outcomes as a focus for the project was an obvious choice owing to the Aboriginal literacy outcomes reported in the September 2006 Progress Report and also the expertise of their academic mentor.

There was evidence of some frustration during this period as staff in the school felt that they were unaware of the expectations of the project and felt some level of professional embarrassment at the first project conference when they became aware of what the Department had intended for the project. Both the school project team and the Department project team were able to resolve these initial problems when the team visited the school. Following the first Australian Government Quality Teaching Indigenous Project Conference and subsequent communication with the Department project managers, the school action learning team decided that in addition to the focus on literacy outcomes, the team would also try and develop better communication and collaboration with the Aboriginal community and develop resources that would introduce new Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom and better connect the school and Aboriginal communities.

The project funds were used to provide release time for the project team to plan and implement the project and to engage in ongoing collaborative professional learning. The release time enabled staff to observe each other's lessons and to engage in some team teaching. "Release time was essential" we were told by the project team leader. She explained that 1.5 to 2 hours were spent twice a term in team collaborations. The academic mentor noted that "organising teaching relief in a school like [this] can be very disruptive but the regular pattern of the release days and the fact that each of the teachers is teaching their own class for part of the day while being observed by a colleague reduces some of that disruption". Team members quickly established considerable professional trust within the group allowing for critical reflection and dialogue. Team members shared resources and units of work, as well as their experience with different teaching strategies such as *Jolly Phonics*.

The professional learning of the project team was further supported through attendance at regional conferences, eg, the *What Works Conference* and also through the insights that non-Aboriginal staff developed through their close collaboration with the two Aboriginal staff members. At each of the site visits, the enthusiasm of the team for the project and their new-found confidence in dealing with and talking about Aboriginal issues was clearly evident. The non-Aboriginal staff openly acknowledged the culturally educative role of the Aboriginal members of the project team. Similarly, the Aboriginal team members spoke openly about how they had grown in confidence working with non-Aboriginal staff in the school. One participant in her visual communication (see Figure 1) explained that we were "all coming together, the non-Indigenous and Indigenous people through projects like this and other programs that run in the school".



Figure 10: Symbolic representation of the Australian flag inside a representation of the Aboriginal flag by an Aboriginal staff member of the school.

Toward the end of this first phase of the project, the project team concluded that it was important to create an Aboriginal teaching, learning and community space within the school and to use project funds to purchase a flag pole - an initiative that was agreed prior to the project - so that the Aboriginal flag could be flown in the school. These minor works projects were crucial in terms of making the school more inclusive and welcoming for Aboriginal communities and students and also in terms of signalling to non-Aboriginal staff and students the respect and place of Aboriginal people and culture in the school.

#### *Project development*

During this phase the Koori Room became operational and, with support from the Aboriginal Education Officer, attracted one community member to work with reading groups. The significance of the creation of a culturally safe environment that Aboriginal parents and community members are attracted to is noteworthy as evidence of project activity being progressed successfully in itself but also, in its potential to contribute to capacity-building within membership of the local Aboriginal community in literacy and numeracy as well as experience in school-based teaching/learning practices.

Closely related to this development was the establishment of effective liaison with the local Aboriginal community. This liaison took a number of forms. As commented earlier, the Aboriginal staff reported that they were increasingly being asked by teachers across the school to advise them on issues regarding particular Aboriginal students. Aboriginal staff members were busy visiting families and making inquiries in the community to gather information and to pass on news from teachers. This communication was further enhanced through the regular publication of newsletters. Non-Aboriginal staff from the school also became more involved in and gained an understanding of the Aboriginal community. Members of the Aboriginal community were coming to the school more frequently, largely as a result of the opening of the Koori room, and were establishing contacts with a wider range of staff.

During this phase of the project the depth of professional sharing and learning among the project team continued to develop. New insights were gained into teaching and learning strategies that were effective with Aboriginal and other students and teachers showed increased commitment to their own professional learning through their reflections in their professional journals. The team also focused on purchasing and developing resources that could be used in classes. The development of personal learning plans for each student, which were required of all teachers, became a focus for the expansion of resources.

### *Consolidation and broader dissemination*

By the time of the final evaluation team visit in late August 2008 it was clear that the project team had grown in terms of their confidence and capabilities in leading the project in the school. The recent success of National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee week and the level of activity in and around the Koori Room were examples of the success that had led to increasing confidence among the team.

The team reported that the Aboriginal staff and teaching resources were in high demand across the school. It was clear that there was broader dissemination of the professional learning that the team had experienced to the wider teaching staff. The project had achieved a critical momentum and the other teachers were being caught up in the enthusiasm and success of the project. There was clearly more frequent, meaningful and respectful involvement of the Aboriginal Community in the life of the school. This was further evidenced by the Aboriginal community members' reflections communicated through their involvement through the art project.

### *Survey data*

The survey data showed that the project had resulted in a number of significant changes. Among the 21 staff taking part in the 2007 school survey and the 22 staff in 2008, the proportion who were 'substantially' including Aboriginal cultural knowledge in their teaching increased from 15% to 22% and the proportion where engagement with the Aboriginal community was 'substantially' impacting on their teaching also increased from none to 27% in 2008.

In reporting on their engagement with Aboriginal people, staff said this grew from 77% to 82%, as did the proportion who felt they had a 'substantial' understanding of local educational issues, up from 21% to 30%. Staff also showed that the resources they were using changed, with accessing the internet increasing from 28% to 65%, drawing on the Department's Aboriginal Education Review increased from 21% to 34%, and using other relevant literature was up from 25% to 41%

## **4. Key factors**

The development of understanding, the establishment of relationships and the refinement of effective communication approaches have been the most significant achievements of the project. The involvement of the community and the role of the two Aboriginal staff on the project team and the work of the school team as a whole have been exemplary. The impact on student learning outcomes and engagement was not as clear as the impact on staff and the community. This was the obvious next phase of the program for the school.

Professional learning among the project team was significant but it was not until the final phase of the project that this was more broadly disseminated among the wider community in the school and in the community generally. As the literature on collaborative professional learning shows, considerable time is needed to develop sufficient professional trust among teachers to enable shared professional learning. While the project provided release time for staff, due to the distance between the universities and the school, it was difficult for either the academic partners or the evaluation team to have a more sustained involvement over the life of the action learning project.

### *Consultation and collaboration with Aboriginal community*

Through the agency of the project team members, communication between the school and the community was gradually established. This occurred, in part, through routine visits by Aboriginal education workers to students' homes as well as the establishment of the *Indig Brag* newsletter. An increase in community members' participation at school-based events has resulted from the focus of the project team. This has been supported by Aboriginal education workers' alertness to issues of transportation of community members, the use of a

culturally welcoming environment (eg the Koori Room) and other means of encouraging community members to feel comfortable to share their expertise within the school environment.

The 2008 National Aboriginal and Islanders Day Observance Committee week school celebration attracted an increased number of Aboriginal community members, male and female, actively participating in a range of initiatives such as food preparation. One such participant conveyed his experience of the day in his contribution to the canvas (see Figure 2). He explained that the central symbol represented the food and barbeque and, in regard to the brushstrokes, "the long ones are the parents and the small ones are the children, so it's the people who came to eat it". He indicated that he added "lots of small white dots to indicate a happy occasion".



Figure 11: Visual communication by community member about his perception of the 2008 National Aboriginal and Islanders Day Observance Committee event at School

Early in the project it was noted by a project team member that an invitation was always extended to Aboriginal community representatives to attend project meetings but they were not always able to participate. A project team member explained that the team had only recently become aware that non-Aboriginal teachers and parents could attend local New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group meetings to discuss with community members issues about teaching and learning. Unfortunately, the local New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group had, for a period of time, not held meetings as regularly as usual and teachers were therefore unable to attend.

By the second phase of the evaluation the school based project team membership was modified slightly. With experience of school operations, the new Aboriginal community representative was able to forge a productive alliance with the school Aboriginal Education Officer to maximise opportunities for the project goals to progress. The communication of projects to Elders and community members via informal socialising in community-based settings out of school hours became recognised as an important component of consultation.

Some local Aboriginal community members and school staff confirmed their satisfaction with partnership initiatives between the school and the community, along with other project activity, through visual communication (See Figure 3). One community Elder explained that she was encouraged by the presence of a number of young Aboriginal men at one school-

based occasion. Aboriginal community meetings in her experience, she explained, usually consisted of women. She was encouraged to see men taking an active role in the community.



Figure 12: Collaborative visual communication about the progress of project activity by local Aboriginal community representatives and school staff (acrylic on canvas, 200cm x200cm).

#### *Understandings of Aboriginal cultural knowledge*

All team members reported that their understanding of Aboriginal cultural knowledge had been expanded as a result of the project. The availability, expertise and collegiality of the Aboriginal staff in both project and whole-school forums were noted as a positive factor. Much authentic learning took place triggered by teachers' identification of perplexing teaching and learning incidents. The provision, by the project, of regular teacher-release time provided opportunities for teachers to talk about teaching and learning experiences and receive culturally grounded feedback from Aboriginal staff.

An early example of this was one teachers' learning about strategies for connecting with carers. It was explained that conventional, formal meetings about student progress held within the school grounds in school hours did not result in high attendance by some Aboriginal carers. Being available before or after school and in playground locations for more informal access was newly recognised as a means of commencing connections. The Aboriginal staff members were able to provide contextual factors affecting this situation.

This process saw teachers review assumptions about teaching and learning in supported, collaborative forums. It was also dependent upon the professionalism and commitment of teachers in their receptiveness to new knowledge and capacity to incorporate changes to practice. One school-based participant noted that Aboriginal education had become a "whole school priority". As such there was a sense of pride for Aboriginal team members that "Aboriginal education issues are on the agenda". There was a greater input from Aboriginal staff in all aspects of school planning. Other accounts of the learning of teachers about Aboriginal cultural knowledge occurred through professional development days. The concept of 'shame' and communication through body language were presented at a conference that school staff and parents attended.

By the end of the evaluation objectives to enhance communication with carers were met. Project members explained that the home visits by Aboriginal staff were becoming so

successful that some carers, when a school-based issue arose, sent messages through their children to request the Aboriginal Education Officer make a home visit. An Aboriginal project team member explained the regular journey of herself and the school's Aboriginal Education Officer from the school to community members' homes and back in Figure 4.



Figure 13. Aboriginal community representative's visual communication about her regular visits to and from the homes of the parents and carers of students at Blue school.

As noted earlier the University of Technology, Sydney's evaluation team suggested a visual representation of the Aboriginal community's involvement and relationship with the school. Participation in the project was an empowering experience for members of the Aboriginal community and the non-Aboriginal teachers who took part.

The visual communication inquiry represented learning for the project team, if not solely in the making but in the impact the work had as a community informed, cultural object in the school setting and in reflections about what it could trigger that other methods of inquiry might not have (Evans and Skuthorpe 2009). As an exhibited object, one team member representing the school executive noted that an Aboriginal student confidently announced to her that a family member had painted a section of the work. In an example like this, the status the school attaches to the expertise and the contribution of local Aboriginal community members can reduce discontinuity between the home lives of Aboriginal learners and that of their school lives.

The team learned, in this process, of alternate means of generating community-based communication for school "business". According to an Aboriginal community representative, everyone was relaxed after the painting. It became a project that participants "were really involved in" where contributors left "a piece of themselves" in the visual communication. The canvas permitted "a deeper connection" for contributors.

## 5. Challenges and opportunities

Challenges to partnering the local Aboriginal community/ies in this setting include the ability of schools to understand and accommodate the capacities of the local Aboriginal community. Project staff, during the period of evaluation, increasingly did this by being flexible in practice, privileging Aboriginal knowledge and enabling infrastructure and resources where deficiencies were identified, such as transportation where families living remotely do not own a car and liaison where access to school is not possible.



The next challenge facing the school was to translate the success in community engagement and teacher professional learning into positive and demonstrable learning outcomes for Aboriginal students. Both the external academic partners and the evaluation team recognised that this was the next challenge for the school. The external academic partners had offered to assist with suggestions in this regard, but the infrequent contact between the school and the academics and the evaluation team did not lend itself to the development of professional trust necessary to allow us 'entry' to this aspect of their work. This is not a criticism of the team, or of the external partners, it is simply an observation of the constraints of distance and time, particularly in remote locations and how these limit the development of external partnerships in professional learning.

## **6. Leadership**

The principal's leadership approach to project initiation and maintenance supported team members to manage the scope and direction of the project with autonomy and increasing confidence. The unfolding of the school's project occurred at a fortuitous time under the leadership of a principal who saw Aboriginal education as core business in the school. His expertise in the field greatly enhanced project activity through his progressive approach to teacher professional development and his invigoration of whole school planning.

The school team found the state-based project management team very approachable and supportive when required. The team did require an early intervention from them in order to clarify the expectations of the project. One participant noted that "if this had been done initially it would have been of greater benefit". The project had few precedents and set professionally rigorous standards attached to funding.

The initial academic partner infused the project, in part, with practice-based strategies that he had considerable expertise in (ie peer observation and reflective practice). Team members appreciated this contribution. The second pair of academic partners had expertise in community engagement. They were able to support the latter stages of the project. Several sources within the school and the academic partners agreed that the impact of their role was constrained by the change to the partners mid-way through the project and the lack of regular contact, due to the distance of the school from the university.

## **7. Sustaining the project**

Given the significant success of the project, it is critical that the professional learning and the network of relationships that have been achieved is sustained and shared with a wider range of people in and around the school. The school was encouraged to support and increase the presence of Aboriginal staff and community members in the school. The evaluation team also encouraged the school to continue with its plans to focus more explicitly on the learning outcomes of Aboriginal students. The team has created a positive and safe environment in which Aboriginal students now feel more connected to the school and their community. This is a necessary pre-condition for deeper engagement in learning.

# **Cobalt school**

## **1. Context**

Cobalt Public School is a K-6 school located in a Western New South Wales rural town with a population of approximately 10 000 people. The town has experienced some population drift to the city but the town and school maintain a fairly stable population. Approximately 16% of the school's students are Aboriginal. The staff, of about 20 teachers, includes many experienced teachers, a significant proportion of whom has been at the school for many years. There is a strong sense of community within the school, as well as a strong sense of belonging

to the broader community. During the project there were significant personal difficulties and challenges faced by some teachers at the school. It would be inappropriate to detail these in this report. It is worth noting here that the school community is close knit and that the difficulties for some affected all the others. These events slowed and hindered the project.

## **2. Overview**

The prime focus of the project was the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program's priority area, numeracy/mathematics. The school sought to focus on the Quality Teaching domain of 'intellectual quality' in numeracy teaching and learning. The project was informed by consultation with local Aboriginal communities to ensure that innovation in pedagogical practices for numeracy and literacy were aligned with and acknowledged local Aboriginal culture. It was self-evident that the implementation of a culturally appropriate pedagogy would need to be underpinned by teacher professional learning that integrated community consultations and teacher pedagogical knowledge. The central outcome sought was increased engagement of and achievement by Aboriginal students in learning in the school.

Actions implemented included collaborative planning establishing stage-based teams that operated as action learning sets. Each team focused on developing a chosen numeracy topic. Workshops for all staff provided opportunities for professional learning in mathematics pedagogy. These were provided by external experts, in particular the school's academic partner, with specialist expertise in teaching and learning of mathematics. An important resource for professional learning was the Maths 300 teaching package. Aboriginal members of the community and Elders visited the school and shared, among other things, their perceptions and experiences of school education. This had a profound influence on some staff with their regarding it as a watershed. It provided insights underpinning the development of strategies to enhance learning among Aboriginal students.

## **3. Outcomes**

Teachers in the school commented to the University of Technology, Sydney evaluation team, in school reports and in personal reflections on the inherent value of collaborative planning, shared reflection and the exchange of ideas. In particular, they valued stage-based teams with similar needs, curriculum, concerns and goals as a forum for professional conversation. It was not merely time to talk, although this was essential. The shared responsibility and commitment to address a significant need to enhance learning and engagement among Indigenous students provided a focus and central theme of purposeful interaction.

The sharing among, and to a lesser extent between, teams was important but not sufficient. Critical to the purposeful engagement was the community engagement which highlighted the experiences and perceptions of local Aboriginal communities. These meetings did not in themselves offer solutions to complex problems. They did however enable teachers to develop plans that took into account local Aboriginal culture and to identify potential learning preferences important to some Aboriginal students. Significantly they enhanced the existing dialogue between teachers and members of the Indigenous community with many teachers remarking on growing interactions between staff and parents. They commented on the increased frequency of visits by parents and the sense that the school was becoming a more welcoming place. They believed that in the past the school had been perceived as less welcoming. It was argued that this richer interaction between teachers, parents and Elders in turn contributed to a greater willingness among students to engage more fully in the school. A large majority of teachers listed their increased awareness or knowledge of the needs of Aboriginal students as the most important outcome of the project.

There has been greater acknowledgment of the students' cultural heritage and activities have been used to specifically enrich the curriculum with deeper reference to this cultural heritage. Notwithstanding this, both teachers and parents, at meetings, have emphasised the importance of achieving better outcomes in student numeracy as a consequence of the action learning

project. Cultural sensitivity and understanding are now more highly valued among staff and this is appreciated by parents in the community. At the same time, more members of the community may have become more supportive of the school and this action learning, numeracy project.

Teachers commented on the influence of the Quality Teaching model in their teaching and planning. The intellectual quality dimension was of particular influence in the collaborative planning and in guiding reflection on teaching and learning experiences. Many teachers also commented favourably on the growing expertise in their use of *Smart Boards* and their motivational effects. Nevertheless, many also noted that they were still learning and had not yet been able to exploit its full potential.

The changes in mathematics teaching that were commented on almost universally by teachers were the use of hands on activities and the manipulation of concrete objects in learning activities developed for their students. Many elaborated on the positive outcomes the approach seemed to generate among their Aboriginal students. However, they also remarked very favourably on the contribution these same approaches made to all students' learning. Interestingly the pedagogical developments arising from the engagement with Aboriginal communities and mathematics professional learning workshops could arguably be simply described as 'good teaching' practices'. Thus they might be expected to make positive contribution to the learning of all students.

#### *Survey data*

Two surveys of staff, exploring their professional learning and 'knowledge of Aboriginal cultural knowledge', were conducted at the school in 2007 and 2008. The results provided compelling evidence of developments in the school. Twenty two staff took part in both surveys. Notably, the percentage of staff in the school who participated in professional development sessions in the school increased from 56% to 100% during the project and 94% in 2008 indicated that the professional learning had included "engagement with Aboriginal people".

Engagement with the local community had increased. This was particularly indicated by teachers identifying the local community as the dominant source of information about Aboriginal issues pertinent to the students in their classes, increasing from 77% in the pre-survey to 91% in the post intervention survey. There was also an increase in the number of teachers seeking out relevant information on the Internet (increasing from 36% to 43%). Greater engagement with literature in the field was further evident by an increase from 27% to 43% in those reading the "Review of Aboriginal Education". Only 13 % of teachers considered their understanding of local issues to be substantial when surveyed in 2007. However, one year later 37% considered their knowledge of local issues substantial. This outcome was particularly interesting because it suggested that when viewed with other data, although many recognised that they had learnt a great deal about relevant local Aboriginal issues of significance to the education of students in their classes, they accepted that there was much still to know.

In the project many opportunities were provided for teachers to meet with members of the community and to increase their local Aboriginal cultural knowledge. The percentage of teachers identifying that their knowledge of Aboriginal culture had an impact on their teaching increased from 63% to 96% during the project. The impact included the use of culturally appropriate teaching strategies (increasing from 47 to 85%). Importantly, while 43% at the start of the project indicated that their teaching practices were not culturally inclusive, by 2008 no teachers indicated that their practices lacked inclusivity. There was also an increase in expectations of Aboriginal students. Interestingly, while awareness was raised about some difficulties experienced by some students, teachers' expectations of learning among students increased. In short, the teachers were more likely to recognise disadvantage

but also recognised the importance of having high expectations in promoting high achievement among Aboriginal students.

There was also an increase in the number of teachers who accessed courses for professional learning in literacy (from 41% to 52 %) and numeracy (from 20% to 38%). Perhaps more notably, in 2008, about twice as many teachers considered the impact of this professional learning on their classes to be significant.

#### **4. Key factors**

Very early in the action learning plan staff invited local Aboriginal parents and leaders to the school for discussions. During these discussions, members of the Aboriginal community shared knowledge of their school experiences. They provided teachers with insights into the lives, motivations, interests and school perceptions of young Indigenous children at the school. This had a profound influence on some while for others it confirmed current views. One teacher explained:

*... the biggest impact meeting with Elders and Aboriginal Elders who told their stories. I've never experience anything like that and I was shocked that I had lived in this community and didn't know what it was like for them. We don't feel like that.... It went on for over an hour and it could have gone on for a long time - I was surprised by the impact it had. Now they have talked to us. We will probably never know how difficult [it was] for them to talk to us. Our biggest challenge has been to find ways to bring them into this environment. We go to them sometimes too but it doesn't feel natural either way.*

For many teachers it was difficult to determine or at least measure the direct outcomes of their meeting with Elders or to identify specific outcomes for students. Nevertheless, there was little doubt in the recounts of some teachers that having the Elders telling their stories and the stories themselves were very influential in the project. A teacher elaborated on the essential yet intangible nature of the experience:

*I feel it influenced my teaching and learning. Hearing those stories changes the person I am. ... When I come to what I'm doing with the Indigenous students it makes a difference – I have deeper knowledge and understanding. It has changed me in indefinable ways that make me different. I wish it had happened to me 30 years ago I wish it had changed my teaching years ago.*

The mathematics professional development workshop session was cited by many teachers as influential in helping them to find ways to put principles outlined in the Quality Teaching model into practice in ways that addressed their concerns for Aboriginal students. There were few teachers who did not comment on the importance of using “hands-on” activities for learning in their mathematics classes. While many acknowledged the importance of this for all students, it was typically emphasised that Aboriginal students, particularly boys, responded positively to hands-on experiences. *A few people were challenged by it (the shift to hands on maths), a teacher explained, a lot of teachers have been here a long time – pretty much pencil and paper stuff. It was easier for me to get this bridge between hands on and other work.*

All teachers were much influenced by the mathematics workshop. They worked extensively in their action learning stage groups to develop and implement strategies that would make the school and the learning of numeracy more attractive to Indigenous students. It seemed that “hands-on” was not merely associated with a teaching strategy that better conveyed mathematics principles to students, but rather that it was associated with learning through inquiry and exploring deeper understandings of mathematics:

*Some of the (Aboriginal) kids in the class need a lot more hands on stuff, mystery boxes and pentometers. I thought it might be too babyish. [But] it's opened up more discussion in the classroom. Kids have become more interactive and kids are asking more why questions. Some activities are designed better to cater for all the kids in class with students going into greater depth.*

A common theme in discussions with staff was the sense that there had long been an awareness that teaching had been less inclusive than they desired but that the project had facilitated a professional dialogue and input of ideas from external experts in workshops that allowed teachers to better address this problem. The marriage of ongoing action learning with the "one off" workshop sessions appeared to prove a neat balance for professional learning between the introduction of new ideas and ongoing, improvement oriented, collaborative reflection.

Teachers reported higher levels of engagement, more on-time attendance and lower levels of truancy when they employed these strategies. Some teachers attributed this to literacy and mathematics lessons that were more enjoyable and relevant. Others attributed it to the richer relationships being engendered between school and community. Still others pointed to particular students in their classes whom they valued or viewed differently, having come to understand better the life challenges each faced. In particular one teacher elaborated on how she had come to understand the life circumstance of one of her students much better. Where in the past she had tended to react negatively to his late arrival at school, now she reacted positively being delighted that (under the circumstances) he had managed to get to school.

Teachers' reflective accounts were consistent with students showing greater interest in their work, being more highly motivated as well as improved numeracy learning. Although it was difficult to provide precise evidence or measures of motivation and interest, few teachers doubted that there had been an improvement. Often it was the expressive, emotive responses of students in classes that made it most apparent to teachers that some of the otherwise disengaged Aboriginal students had become more interested and motivated to learn. One teacher spoke enthusiastically about learning outside the classroom and how positively students had responded to taking mathematics classes outdoors:

*I took photos. It's difficult to write a number or score on interest or what they got out of it. But their faces. Their faces! You would have to see the photos.*

Indicators of parent participation in the school have improved. Attendances at school for school events and for planned or ad hoc meetings with teachers indicate that local parents have increased participation in the school. Many have demonstrated greater willingness to come to the school and collaborate with teachers in enhancing the school experiences of their children.

The involvement of local Aboriginal communities has been varied. It has included Elders leading a dance group, collaboration in teaching classes, advice to teachers, and ad hoc conversations. The interactions between the Aboriginal communities and the school have become richer and more frequent. By contrast, in the past there had been greater reluctance to be involved. These interactions often extend beyond the school and some parents still prefer to meet and have conversations away from the school site:

*We need to keep getting them (parents) back. I've spoken to a number of parents who seem quite excited about what their kids are doing now. I see them at the supermarket. They still won't come to the classroom but they tell me, (son's name) is really good, really good, he's going really good.*

Nevertheless, while significant steps have been made there remains some mutual discomfort for some teachers:

*I felt as foreign moving into their (Aboriginal) community as they do coming here (to the school). The amount of people and size of recent school meetings is huge. (Participation at the school has become) consistent, constant and hasn't dropped off and that is impactful for the school – it's regular and strong. We expect and do see Aboriginal people in our school now. ... to put their ideas and a place to talk about their ideas ... It's a hidden – It means that we place importance on involving and engaging – place high value on them and they know we place high value on them. The message is there. This is a place where we value their ideas. ... It helps people to see this place, the school as worthwhile.*

## **5. Challenges and opportunities**

There was an interaction among opportunities and challenges. The teachers at the school were aware that they faced particular, significant challenges in educating Aboriginal students. Many were dissatisfied with the extent to which they had addressed the problem and they themselves identified that they were falling short of achieving what they wanted to achieve as teachers. Others were suggesting that the opportunity to work closely with others; to engage in professional conversations stimulated by workshops; to meet with Elders and to consider various strategies provided an invaluable stimulus allowing teachers to address problems in innovative ways. For many teachers, this provided a reward in terms of the sense of professionalism arising from their professional learning. However, it was impossible not to be struck by the teachers' renewed enthusiasm for working with their Aboriginal students, and the power of seeing students engaging with learning in their classes – where once these same students had been ambivalent.

A significant challenge that had to be addressed in the community engagement was the so called 'factions' that existed in the school's Aboriginal local communities. It was unclear the extent to which this created ongoing difficulties. It was noteworthy that it was identified as a potential problem, by the school's Aboriginal liaison staff, in establishing the framework for meetings between Aboriginal people and school staff:

*Elders were only too happy to come into the school, after we told them what it was about and our reasons to come. They thought this is a great opportunity to talk to the teachers what's going on at home. But it wasn't easy for them to do. ... I hand picked Elders because of factions. 'I'm not going in there if she's going to be there'.*

It was apparent that bringing together the various Aboriginal communities required intimate knowledge of relationships among them in order to ensure that all felt included and respected. This knowledge had been drawn upon to establish a successful Aboriginal reference group which had operated at the school in recent years.

## **6. Leadership**

The school principal took prime responsibility for collecting data to inform the project. It was difficult to imagine how this whole school project might have begun and been sustained without the support of the well respected principal at the school. The Aboriginal Education Officer at the school explained the important role played by the principal:

*The big thing is having a principal who wants to do things. She has that understanding of Aboriginal culture. Before [the project] they (Elders and Aboriginal parents) would never come in or maybe just to see me but now they will go to the principal. ... Cultural knowledge has to come from the community not from a book.*

Teachers were also unanimous in recognising the leadership provided by the principal at the school and a number commented that the initiative would not have been possible without her.

The main contribution to the school from the academic partner was in the provision of workshops for teachers that gave teachers opportunities to try out and discuss innovative ideas and practices in numeracy and the literacy associated with numeracy. Significantly all teachers claimed that they had adopted or adapted practices from the workshops in planning lessons to address the needs of Aboriginal students. Thus the role sought from and adopted by the academic partner, at least at first, was that of mathematics or literacy consultant rather than action learning critical friend.

It is noteworthy that the face-to-face interaction with the academic partner changed during the later stages of the project. While she maintained some involvement in the project at the evaluation and re-planning phase, the school's principal took on a more consistent advisory role with the project teams. This was advantageous because the principal was universally well respected and had intimate knowledge of both the school and the project. This change was also helpful as the project moved from a phase of gathering and discussing ideas and new ways of going about the teaching and learning of literacy to an emphasis on implementation and collecting evidence about what had been achieved.

## **7. Sustaining the project**

It is clear that teachers and executive are thinking about the progress and achievement of the project and pondering how best to proceed; how things might be improved; and how to extend the relationship between school and Aboriginal communities. Importantly, they recognise the need to clarify what the Aboriginal communities want from the school if the school is to deliver and not disappoint.

*The project is about building the relationship. It's part of a broader push by the school to make engagement better and influential. Building relationship is our way of saying to people that we are on about doing something for your children. It's a message rather than product. Today we had three Aboriginal people in, working or sitting in the classroom. I'd like to see more but whether it's what the community wants or not - maybe it's not a good indicator or there are other indicators I need to suss out. We need to have more Aboriginal input of indicators of success. I'd like to have the community more confident in saying what they want by way of a good education but we need to know what they mean. When people talk about it, it's more than a desire it's a plea for a good education for our children. We want them to be happy, safe and engaged at school but I suspect that they want more. They want them to succeed and they can often see that they are not doing it. Our lowest literacy and maths classes are over-weighted, over represented with Aboriginal students... They don't measure us by whether their children get into trouble. Above all they want to know that we have been fair and that others have been treated equally. It's a desire for absolute equity.*

Two of the key challenges to sustainability included being able to continue the funding and ensuring that time was available for continued professional discussion of experiences in the action learning sets. The professional exchanges and collaborative planning that characterised much of the action learning in this school required more than goodwill. Similarly the engagement with local communities was rewarding but it was also time consuming and demanding for both teachers and the community.

The sustainability of taking an action learning approach to change clearly requires that such activity becomes a mainstream part of the teachers' day to day experiences. At the completion of the project it was yet to be seen whether this was the case at this school. However seeking such mechanistic systems for sustainability would miss the essential issues and concerns raised. Above all, it seemed paramount that the school was sure that the

education offered was the education people really needed. This required local communities to have a far greater say in the very fundamental nature of their children's curriculum.

## **Crimson school**

### **1. Context**

Crimson School is a local primary school situated in the western suburbs of Sydney, a region with the largest population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. Surrounding suburbs include public housing estates and extensive industrial development. The socio-economic status of students' families regularly qualifies Crimson School for the *Priority Schools Program*, a New South Wales government program to promote social inclusion. The *Priority Schools Program* provides resources to improve the literacy and numeracy achievements and engagement of students, considered to be the most critical requirements for student achievement across the full range of education and training outcomes (New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2009). The Quality Teaching Indigenous Project has provided additional resources to support improved literacy outcomes in the school.

The introduction of the *Targeting Aboriginal Students Strategy* in 2009 significantly increased the Aboriginal education resources available, further responding to the educational and other needs of the school's Aboriginal students and their families. Teachers interviewed in June 2009 noted that in their school the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project, which involved four teachers working within an action learning model, had to some extent relied for its success on their willingness to work in their own time. It had not always been possible to take up the release time opportunities available due to the disruption caused to students, in particular those with high support needs. Teachers reported that they had taken a "where there's a will, there's a way" approach to their work on the project, making it a very successful project in terms of teacher professional learning and student outcomes.

At the start of the project in 2006 there were approximately 680 students at the school. In 2009 there were 630 enrolments, and of these, sixty-eight were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Some of the 2009 Year Four students had participated in the entire project since 2006 when they were in Year One. The school reported a high level of involvement in the school by the local community including in programs such as the *In Class Tuition* (ICT), *Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme* (ITAS) and *Parents and Community Tutors* (PACT) programs. The current Aboriginal Education Officer had been involved with Crimson School for twenty years, including as a parent, a former Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness committee member, an Aboriginal Education Assistant and the current regional representative of the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group.

Achievements of Aboriginal students included their success in the New South Wales section of the first Vibe Alive Festival at Coonamble in 2008 and in the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project Literacy Program 2006 - 2009. The school celebrates Aboriginal culture in Aboriginal art programs, including in murals and exhibitions organised by the Aboriginal Arts and Craft Club. The 2008 project information day featured an exhibition of student achievements including their digital storytelling projects.

### **2. Overview**

Evaluation Team members visited the school three times in 2008 and again in June 2009. Here we provide an overview of the changing nature of the project in Crimson School as it evolved over time, an account of the 'backward mapping' technique which is a feature of the project in this school and the role of the project team in the change process and in implementing the backward mapping technique with their students.



The focus of the project changed from one which initially sought to build children's background knowledge and literacy skills in Year One to a project which was later embedded within the school's broader accelerated literacy program, and was implemented in Stage One, Stage Two and Stage Three classes taught by project team members. Changes of this kind reflected the changing composition of the project team and strategic decisions taken by new team members (including early career teachers) to address their professional learning needs and the literacy needs of their students by building explicit connections with the accelerated literacy program. An observation made by the academic partner during the evaluation emphasised this point. He noted that the project was started at the school in 2006 by a team which was almost completely different to the 2009 team. The new team's decision to link the project with the accelerated literacy program was seen as integral to their successful work within the school community, including with the Aboriginal Education Officer.

Other changes impacting on the project at the school included the departure of a principal with nine years' experience at the school early in the project. The relieving principal took a key leadership role in initiating the project in its early stage, and further staffing changes resulted in new members being recruited to the team. There was also a change in academic partners in 2007. The project team drew upon the resources of a very active and highly valued Aboriginal Education Officer throughout the project. The second academic partner had a significant role in supporting the project team as they shifted the project's focus and adjusted to the staffing and other changes outlined here.

As noted earlier, Year One was initially chosen to be the focus of the project at the school. Programs available to all Year One students included Reading Recovery, a one-to-one reading program to help students better understand the strategies of reading and to support them to achieve to the reading level of their peers. The 2006 Year One class of ninety-nine students comprised fifty-two girls and forty-seven boys, including eleven Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Analysis of Basic Skills Test results and other school data revealed that one of these eleven students was achieving in the top thirty per cent of all Year One students in terms of literacy results, with one in the middle thirty per cent and nine in the bottom fifteen per cent. Teachers had observed that numeracy questions which students were having difficulty with were worded or sentenced problems. Working on literacy skills was thought to be an important first step in addressing numeracy challenges being faced by students. Project progress reports indicated that this strategy was believed to make a difference early in the schooling of Aboriginal students.

Initial project planning involved Year One teachers and their supervisor, the Aboriginal Education Officer, an Aboriginal parent representative, the academic partner and the relieving principal (project team leader) in preparing a draft school action learning plan. The aim of the plan was to change the literacy results for all Year One students, with a major focus on increasing the literacy levels of Aboriginal students. School reports indicate that the action learning plan was informed by some discussion between project team representatives (the Aboriginal Education Officer and an Aboriginal parent representative) and Aboriginal parents of students across the school. This is reported to have resulted in insights into the perceptions of Aboriginal parents of the teaching process at Crimson School. As the work of the evaluation team did not include contacting Aboriginal parents who were involved in the project planning stage, it was not possible to evaluate this aspect of the project. Challenges in obtaining the input of Aboriginal parents at the school throughout the project are considered to be a limitation in this evaluation, although the participation of the Aboriginal Education Officer has enabled the perspective of an Aboriginal staff member to be included. No information was available to the evaluation team on the success of some strategies reportedly used to access information about the Aboriginal families of students early in the project. The school reports that a letter of communication was sent to all Year One families explaining that there would be a focus on quality teaching and Aboriginal education. The outcome of

requests made for families to tell the school about their ancestry and the makeup of their family is not known.

'Backward mapping' involved project teachers working with students to identify the outcomes which the teachers themselves were striving to achieve and planning the steps which children would take to reach them. The expertise of their academic partner in implementing backward mapping techniques in school settings was drawn upon throughout this process. The implementation of the action learning plan in Crimson School with Stage One students involved embedding the project in one unit of work for Year One. Teachers aimed to support students to gain the background knowledge required in this unit by introducing them to the use of backward mapping techniques. First their level of knowledge and skills were assessed and further developed to enable students to use backward mapping to construct narratives with symbols and artwork. Technology was integrated into project activities, with one team member (the Release from face to face teacher) being available to develop *Smart Board* (interactive white board) lessons with other project teachers and to provide individual support to students for one hour per week.

The academic partner reported that the backward mapping skills of the project team teachers developed over the life of the project, with a very sophisticated approach to the technique observable by 2009. Teacher reflections on students' work indicated that their focus was in experimenting with backward mapping techniques in order "to make their learning a little bit more hands on". This focus was found to work particularly well with students who struggled with writing. For these students, the use of symbols assisted in building skills, including reading and writing skills, and increased children's confidence as they came to realise that they could use symbols and technology to tell stories:

*The kids could tell us what the story was from the symbols.*

As anything labelled as a test or perceived to be a test by students appeared to create anxiety for some students, the team experimented with different ways of working with their classes. They began to refer to feedback sheets as "self-reflections" and made changes to the physical space and classroom environment so that a less formal and less intimidating mood was created. Using the children's ideas as prompts, teachers developed posters which were displayed in classrooms. Classrooms were changed to move the focus from individual students to group settings. This was found to enhance group activities. The increased levels of comfort and security which these group settings provided for students were also found to work well for silent writing and other individual tasks. Teachers reported that they became more adventurous in their approach to lesson planning, encouraged by the success of their earlier strategies.

The school team refined their approach as a result of what was learned in 2008. They applied this learning in their 2009 action learning cycle, in which planning tasks established what the children knew about narrative. This information helped to inform program development. As their project progressed, the team was able to evaluate the student learning which took place against their own baseline data. Writing programs were developed which utilised Smart Board technology to build on students' knowledge of narrative. In implementing their writing programs teachers incorporated self and group evaluation of their practice and were able to establish the ways in which students' knowledge and understanding of narrative had developed as a result of their participation in the project. Their mapping of learning outcomes over time suggested that students who were hands-on learners and those who were fearful of putting their ideas in writing had been able to engage with learning at different levels through project activities.

The 2008 project conference provided further opportunities for teacher learning and reflection, and enabled teachers to think about and plan for the future. Teacher reflection was

ongoing, but time out for this element of the cycle was incorporated in timetabled activities early in Term 2 prior to teachers engaging with students again:

*We drew on our own knowledge and from our own personal stories as well as from the personal stories of the students.*

The team credited a lot of the work done by their previous principal in opening up a dialogue and taking action to form community partnerships, including those with Aboriginal parents. They believe that the current principal has also demonstrated a commitment to seeing this initiative continue and progress. They stressed that this type of support was crucial in organising funding and space for the project and other successful activities in their school. As a result, members of the team considered themselves to have a very good relationship with Aboriginal parents who volunteered their time at the school. These parents were very involved in the school and gave the teachers a lot of support. The high level of involvement of Aboriginal parents was largely influenced by the work done in this area by the school's Aboriginal Education Officer, who has very strong family and Aboriginal community connections in the local area.

The Aboriginal Education Officer facilitated regular meetings with parents and teachers as part of the school's Aboriginal Education Program. In 2008 these meetings took place each term, with all Aboriginal parents invited. This was seen as an important initiative as it managed to bring in parents who were not previously as involved with the school. In 2008, the school also continued the fortnightly *Community Morning Tea* meetings, where parents would take part in informal talks with teachers, executive staff and other parents. Team members suggested that these regular monthly meetings for Aboriginal parents were important ways to get parents to think and talk about what they wanted out of their child's education, to hear different views and to enable parents to consider goals for themselves and for their children. Attendance at these meetings was reported to have always been good. The success of individual meetings between parents and teachers was also linked with the work done by the Aboriginal Education Officer.

#### *Reflections on project implementation*

'New' team members reported that they were initially somewhat overwhelmed by the staffing and project focus changes at the beginning of 2008. They felt that there was a lot of confusion at the time and that they did not really have a strong enough understanding of what the project involved. The team's reflections on the early stages of their involvement in the project further suggested the need to increase their focus on assessing the Quality Teaching aspects of the project as it progressed. They felt that the project conferences had been one of their greatest resources and essential in helping them to define the purpose of the project in their own minds. Disappointment was expressed that the conference, considered to be a valuable resource, was not held in 2009.

One team member was also a member of the teaching team for the accelerated learning program. It was this teacher's role to use *Smart Board* to introduce students to the background knowledge which is required for a deeper understanding of particular texts. Background knowledge covered included the author and major themes in the text. *Smart Board* techniques, including the use of different colours, were used to highlight grammatical elements in the text. The use of technology, in particular the *Smart Board*, was popular with students. The team found the strengths of this technology to include its interactive nature: "*it doesn't single people out*". The way in which students are able to experiment more freely with words and language has also been found to enhance student learning outcomes by enabling them to make and correct their mistakes without "failure" being documented in a permanent way: "*it's not permanent like on paper – it can be changed*".

Team members presented information to colleagues at regular ongoing project and staff meetings about what had been happening and where they were up to. The Aboriginal Education Officer also participated in local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group meetings to keep them informed of the school's activities.

### **3. Outcomes**

During 2008 there was an increased use of technology-based storytelling media. *Marvin, Claymation* and *Movie Maker* digital storytelling software were used in classroom projects. Gaining the level of skills required to teach the children how to use these programs required considerable time commitments by teachers in their own time. As a result, units of work incorporating music and storytelling were implemented with the Year 4-5 group. In this phase of the project, the team's focus was building on the needs of their students, the concerns of the school's learning community and 2007 results in writing in the Basic Skills Test. Analysis of Basic Skills Test results revealed areas in which students needed the most support. Findings were used to develop writing programs to link with existing school programs, including the accelerated literacy program.

Writing programs which incorporated technology and creative arts were implemented with Year Three and Year Two students. Aboriginal students were assisted to create a narrative – to tell their own story – through film. Teachers reported that this approach was particularly successful with students who had previously found it difficult to engage in writing-based storytelling activities. Students engaged in writing tasks which enabled them to take stories from their own lives and which incorporate their Aboriginal heritage. Their Aboriginal Education Officer participated in some of these activities.

While improved literacy outcomes have been achieved for students, the academic partner recounted his observations that some of the eight and nine year old students who have participated in the program display an extremely high level of knowledge and understanding of narrative and are able to discuss orientation, complication and resolution confidently and competently. The academic partner's analysis of National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy results provides evidence that some of the students in the group are able to perform better in narrative based elements of the test than they have in other areas. This was found to provide "*an indication that specific teaching in certain areas has had an impact*".

#### *Survey data*

The school surveys, with the number of staff surveyed increasing from 22 in 2007 to 31 in 2008, showed an improved impact on teaching practices from involvement with the local Aboriginal community. The percentage of staff who felt it had impacted 'somewhat' on their teaching grew from 33% to 42%. The proportion of staff who were involved with Aboriginal people increased from 42% to 57%. And those who felt they had a 'somewhat' better understanding of local educational issues rose from 47% to 61%.

Staff who were 'frequently' adjusting their teaching strategies to better meet the needs of Aboriginal students increased from 29% to 48%. The proportion whose teaching strategies were 'somewhat' inclusive of Aboriginal cultural knowledge rose from 67% to 73%. There was also a significant change in the role of the local community as a source of information, increasing from 48% to 81%. On the other hand there was not a lot of change in other kinds of resources which staff used, with the use of the Internet up from 38% to 40%.

#### *Teacher insights*

It is significant that by 2008 the project team comprised mainly early career teachers. For these and other teachers, the project was believed to have provided valuable professional learning experiences. One team member made the point that:

*You would expect ... after four years of teacher training to know what's going on. It doesn't always happen. The project team has helped me to connect with teaching at a completely different level. ... I understood the Quality Teaching dimensions before, but now I'm using them. That's the big difference. [Now] we can understand how these things work.*

Teachers described attending the 2008 project conference as a turning point, including in their professional development and their understanding of Quality Teaching and the project. The conference was highly valued:

*I'd never presented at a conference in my life and it's given me the opportunity to find the confidence to do that.*

Evaluation team members observed a sense of cohesion and purpose among team members in December 2008. This was not as clearly evident during visits to the school before the 2008 project conference. Furthermore, the academic partner noted that:

*... part-way through the program they changed direction to ensure they were more clearly linked with things that were happening within the school. This was a sensible way to go, so it wasn't something that was an add-on. It was tied in to the accelerated literacy program of the school.*

Teachers reported that reflection on their own practice and on ways in which they could focus on their new understanding of Quality Teaching had led to improved student outcomes. These improvements were observable through improvements in marking and reports for individual students. For some students, whose learning ability was still assessed as being in the lower range, increased levels of engagement in lessons had been noted. These students were among those who were now attempting tasks which they would not have attempted before:

*Before, they would give up. Now they realise they have skills. They can use the technology to tell stories.*

Students learning new skills and gaining confidence in their own abilities were considered to be among the most valuable outcomes of the teacher professional learning which has been evident in team members. The nomination of students in the Year 4-5 group as finalists in the Centre for Learning Innovation's (CLI) Connected Learning Short Film Awards, and the announcement of this achievement at the school assembly, were memorable occasions for the students involved:

*They [were] so proud of themselves to hear in front of the school that they're finalists.*

The academic partner, whose role included supporting the team to reflect and think about their planning and the outcomes they are trying to achieve, observed that the team went through cycles of acting, observing, describing, recording, discussing and reflecting on their action. He believed that:

*They have been a real action learning team together*

He considered the team's achievements to include their success in "picking out specific Quality Teaching elements and winding/wending them into their programs".

#### **4. Key Factors**

Team members reported that, for some, their work on accelerated literacy had built confidence in teaching in this area. The development of a writing program had also benefited other teachers in the school. As a result, the project was considered to have facilitated a more

focused approach to teaching literacy in the school. The practice of breaking elements down into smaller steps also contributed to professional learning among the teachers involved, resulting in a more confident and detailed approach to teaching.

Through their involvement in the project the team reported a better understanding of, and discovery of a practical use for, Quality Teaching. They valued having time to plan and prepare units of work together, and this was believed to have contributed to their ability to achieve the results they did in their very busy work environment. The original decision to implement the project with one class made it easier to identify who had excelled and to focus on the individual learning needs of students. Students are reported to have benefited by the exposure to new technologies which were made possible through this project. The use of different approaches to learning about the elements and techniques of story and narrative included the use of writing, technology, film, story, dance and oral traditions. The use of resources such as Dreamtime stories and *Indij Readers* were also seen as factors contributing to the project's successful outcomes.

#### *Consultation with Aboriginal community*

An issue that came up in relation to Aboriginal community consultation occurred when the project team wanted to include a smoking ceremony with the Welcome to Country at a school event. Conflicting advice was received from different Aboriginal parents, Aboriginal education staff (some for, some against). This led to teachers being unsure about who they should be consulting. In these circumstances it was felt it would be better not to risk offending anyone by the inclusion of a Smoking Ceremony. This experience, together with the recognition that the Aboriginal Education Officer could only advise and could not be expected to be an expert on all things Aboriginal, was informative. It led the team to identify the need to develop resources and information on the local area and the Aboriginal custodians for that area to assist teachers and provide guidance in such questions as:

*Who should we be consulting with? ... Who is our Indigenous community?*

The Aboriginal Education Officer confirmed that parents had indicated their belief that their views and input were valued by the teachers who attended their meetings. Parents found these teachers to be very open and approachable. The Aboriginal Education Officer observed that she felt valued, respected and acknowledged for her input by the school community. Feedback by team members indicated that they considered her to be a very valuable resource and that they felt lucky that she had been connected with the school for such a long time. This was believed to be the main reason for the positive relationship between the school and the Aboriginal community, and the willingness of staff to include Aboriginal perspectives in their classes and the school. Project team teachers reported that the Aboriginal Education Officer was very approachable and made all staff feel safe in asking for assistance.

Teachers noted that their involvement in the project had also included a highly successful and rewarding collaboration with local Aboriginal high school students. A representative of the local high school work experience team arranged for a small group of students to visit Stage Three classes, who had shown leadership and commitment to the project. Visiting students were able to demonstrate their achievements in high school and assisted in laying the groundwork to support the transition to high school for other Aboriginal students.

#### *Understanding of Aboriginal cultural knowledge*

There had been no formal Aboriginal studies and perspectives training for the team. Instead they relied heavily on the Aboriginal Education Officer for advice, also drawing on their own experiences, together with information and input from parent meetings. As a consequence, the team felt that their knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture had increased, enabling them to include some perspectives in their classes. They were passionate about being able to include these perspectives and took it upon themselves to find and share research on

relevant issues. By the third time that they had taught lessons which included an Aboriginal perspective they report feeling a lot more confident in their approach. The Aboriginal Education Officer's contribution to these sessions often included telling her story to students, while the project teachers introduced students to different artefacts and their uses. Most teachers reported that they gained confidence by team teaching in this way, adding to their enjoyment of the project.

### **5. Challenges and opportunities**

The access which the project provided to technology for teachers and their students was seen as a positive. But their limited access to resources, including computers with enough memory to run some programs and the time which was realistically available to teachers to learn how to use the technology, was a significant barrier in the project. Teachers and students were constantly frustrated when computers froze as they attempted to use sophisticated software on machines with only limited capabilities. A further barrier reported by some teachers was their concern over the cost of the resources they wanted to use in their classroom for projects with students. This is often an issue in schools in less affluent areas, which are relatively under-resourced in terms of the support available for the purchase of classroom materials to support projects.

### **6. Leadership**

Team members considered the original team leader, who left the school in the first year of the project, to be a driving force in the early stages of the project. The arrival of a new principal and other staffing changes resulted in a change in direction for the project in 2008, its third year. New members also joined the project teaching team at this time. When interviewed towards the end of 2008, teachers believed that these and other changes had resulted in some confusion about the project. Some reported that initially they had not really understood the project. There was a feeling that the original action learning plan did not include a lot of thought about how the work being done would be evaluated or assessed. Teachers believed that good work came out of the initial stages of the project, but there was limited evidence of the value of this work as it had not been documented. As noted earlier, the academic partner observed that "... overcoming that new beginning and forging new directions helped in the forming of the team".

The project team developed strategies for Quality Teaching and a proforma so that they (and interested colleagues) could consciously look at required elements and plan for their implementation across all Key Learning Areas. This proforma and approach has filtered through to the work of different teachers and different grades across the school.

The participation and advice from the Department's Project Manager and from the academic partner was highly valued by the 'new' project team. After some intensive debate and reflection they became a lot clearer on what the project was about, and what Quality Teaching is and how to implement it in practical ways. They developed an approach that worked really well for them as a team, sharing ideas and strategies, and working on reporting as a group. They believe that for them a team approach to the project was a better process than having an individual lead the project. This was said to create a better communication flow.

### **7. Sustaining the project**

In the view of the team, their school benefited from the positive flow-on effect of the success of previous activities and collaborations with the local Aboriginal community. The school has positioned itself well to be considered for new initiatives and pilot programs such as this project. Among the benefits to the school were the resources it had provided to support an additional component of the accelerated literacy program and to further develop Quality Teaching activities which provided an Aboriginal perspective and focus. These results were highly valued and appreciated by teachers. Other successful initiatives and programs within the school were believed to provide a solid basis on which the project had been able to build.

The project complemented a number of other school initiatives, helping to ensure that the work of the team continues when the project ends.

Specific plans for sustaining the project included a plan to bring the long-held dream of the Aboriginal Education Officer for building a community garden in the school grounds into reality. Teachers envisaged that their 2009 programming would involve students in developing a narrative on which the procedures for planning the garden beds would be based. Students would write a narrative of their future plans for the garden, developing a number of options. It was expected that this project would provide a significant opportunity for the wider Aboriginal community to become directly involved in constructing the garden with students. It was hoped that this would also provide a place for the local Aboriginal community to interpret the country in which the school stands for the benefit of the whole school community.

## **Dolomite School**

### **1. Context**

Dolomite School is situated in a small rural community in the Riverina District of New South Wales. The town has a population of around 944 people with 15.4% of these identifying as Aboriginal (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001). The school had around 96 students and 33 of these are Aboriginal. There are five fulltime teachers. One of these is also the school principal. The school is located in a lower socio-economic area and was the site for one of the first church based Missions in New South Wales. In 1882, the New South Wales Department of Public Instruction recognised the role and achievements of the Mission school and raised its profile as a recognised *public school*, affording it the same benefits as non-Aboriginal public schools (Gribble 1884). A lot of the Aboriginal families who still live in the local area were residents or descendants who refused to be moved from their homelands when the Mission was closed and they set up a campsite on the local Sand Hills. The school was relocated a short distance from the Mission site to its current location.

### **2. Overview**

The main focus of all stages of the project within the school was to address improving students' writing performance. Their project title 'Wrapped in Writing' became a solid foundation throughout the project, engaging and developing students' skills and understandings in Literacy (English), Indigenous Perspectives and Identities, Science and Technology, and Interactive Communication Technologies. Members of the project team participated in regular professional development sessions focusing on Quality Teaching where they could discuss and get feedback on their current classroom practice in order to gain a better understanding and build confidence in their approach to the Quality Teaching model.

The team also received training in audiovisual technologies such as pod-casting, *My Story Telling IT*, *MovieMaker*, *Front Page* and *Comic Life* in order to equip them better with the skills needed to engage with students in the first stage of the project. These skills were further advanced during the second stage of the project that involved all year groups in the creation of a bush garden. This project engaged students in different aspects of the project across all the Key Learning Areas, creating links between all their class activities and between the different student year groups.

Stage one of the project was for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students to research and produce a visual presentation showing their own family history. These projects engaged students with a variety of media for different age groups including creating *My-Space* pages and researching on the Internet, constructing *PowerPoint* presentations and producing posters. This project was also supported by, and in turn helped to support, the 'Accelerated Literacy



Program' that students were undertaking. An additional consideration for the project was to have students involve family members by sending home information sheets that asked parents and other family members to assist students in finding relevant information. The project also aimed to engage students with a history of their local area and this included initial visits to the old Mission site and Sand Hills for Year 5/6 students, who were accompanied by local Aboriginal Elders and the Aboriginal Mentor. These visits were later extended to include other student groups and these and other relevant visits were videoed with the view of creating a cultural video record of the area for use by teachers and the community.

The school principal, Aboriginal Mentor and project team members also saw the need to showcase a physical Aboriginal community presence within the school. They now fly the Aboriginal flag, have included a Welcome to Country as part of their National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee week activities, and have revitalised a weathered Aboriginal mural on one of the school's original buildings by contacting the original artist and having them work with the school to ensure this was restored properly.



Figure 14: School murals

The community involvement in the first (and subsequent) stages of the project had been very positive. This build up of trust with the community influenced the emergence of new additions and directions for the project including an approach from an Aboriginal community member to create a traditional dance space in the school grounds and another Aboriginal man offering to come in and teach dance to the boys. These school dancers were the first ever Aboriginal dancers to be invited to perform at a local community festival that is a regular event in a nearby, much larger town. This invitation was extended to include a Welcome to Country by a local Aboriginal Elder. The dancers also performed at the local National Aboriginal and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) week community celebration.

The school and project team have practised a philosophy of making community members who offer assistance to the school feel valued, by prioritising a space within their busy timetables and curricula for this participation to occur. The approach taken with the dance group was also one of inclusion while respecting the special connection that Aboriginal students have to their culture. The initial dance group was for the Aboriginal boys, with a vision of later extending this opportunity to all students where the Aboriginal students could also take on an empowered role of being in a position to help teach/share these dances (a transition that has successfully taken place over the course of the project). The project has also extended to include a dance group for Aboriginal girls in the second stage with the intent of this evolving to include all other interested students in these groups in the future.

The leader of the school action learning team organised for an Aboriginal (Wiradjuri) language program to be run for all students. This has been extremely popular with all students and staff resulting in a situation where all members of the school are now able to understand and greet each other in the local Aboriginal language. The Elder who works with the school

commented on what a positive initiative this was and how she remembers not being allowed to speak her language as a child. The language program has embraced the inclusive philosophy espoused within the school and works closely with the project, Accelerated Literacy and other school initiatives, in particular, reference to a second stage initiative where students in all grades (except Kindergarten) worked on a project to create a bush garden in the school grounds. Each student (or student group for the younger years) was given a plant to research and write about. They used the internet and local print resources to research the plant's botanical name and how it was traditionally used by Aboriginal peoples in the area.



Figure 15: Bush garden featuring gunyahs

A large number of students approached the language teacher to find out the Wiradjuri name of their plant and this addition became a student led inclusion into the assignment work they were doing. The older students took on the additional role of designing the garden space. This involved measuring the space and drawing up plans and designs to scale, which were subsequently voted on by all student groups to choose a final design. This project involved all student years and created much discussion and collaboration between the students, where the project became a major focus for playground discussion. It also became a focus across all the Key Learning Areas and engaged students and staff in what has been viewed by all involved as having had some very positive outcomes in a number of areas.

#### *Development process*

In the early stages of the project the team members had done a lot of staff development work using basic cultural awareness training and information sessions at the project conference and other available teaching resources. They felt that it would also be useful to look at including some practical information about local protocols. They recognised that it was important to acknowledge that there are some relevant, specific and localised protocols and that it would be valuable for teachers to have access to this information. In the first year of the project the school's Aboriginal Mentor and principal organised cultural training sessions for all staff which included a visit to the local Mission site that was facilitated by a local Aboriginal Elder. Staff also commented on the valuable role that their academic partner had played throughout the projects. She had provided some clear explanations and practical examples of Quality Teaching and was a major source of inspiration and assistance with her research background and writings on native bush plants.

The team felt that it was important not only to create a space for community members to work with students but to ensure that the community felt that they had retained some control and ownership of the knowledge and skills they were sharing. They identified their ultimate aims as improving writing, student engagement and cultural knowledge. The priority for this approach was to ensure that it was inclusive. It was seen as an important aspect of the local area that different cultural groups worked well with each other.

The school principal held a meeting for all parents before committing the school to the project. This meeting was attended by a parent or family member for every child at the school. A lot of support was received for proceeding with the project. Parents and family members have also been continually updated about the projects and progress through information sheets sent home with students and through projects that have been aimed at engaging parents with their children's learning.

### *Implementation*

The team was enthusiastic and very committed to this initiative. This small but resourceful team was committed to advancing the project – and 'safe' enough with each other to openly debate issues and approaches. An issue that the team and school all agreed upon was that they have a very strong sense of local Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community identity. At a meeting in the early stages of the project, one team member shared an example where he had asked his students what the capital of Australia was and they replied with the name of the closest large town to their community. He reinforced his belief that younger students needed an opportunity to be able to learn about and understand their own world so that they can develop a base for comparison when being introduced to information about other cultures and places. This approach was continually reinforced through a philosophy of creating 'safe' ways to include all students in the project and to develop a strong sense of community pride and a connection for all students with their local Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community identity.



Figure 16: Bush garden plant groups

### **3. Outcomes**

The project produced a number of valuable teaching resources for the school. These included information on the diversity and cultural heritage of students and video footage and interviews with local Aboriginal Elders on significant sites within the local area. Updated information packs were produced for the school's library through staff development workshops.

Through participation in the creation of a school bush garden, students learnt to use Internet resources and family and community knowledge to research plants, create information booklets and design and develop scale drawings. They developed a better understanding and use of meta-language and practical applications in the areas of Human Society and its Environment and Science and Technology. Students also developed skills and gained confidence in writing and presenting summaries of their research information on their allocated plants – not just copying down what they had found.

Projects including the Aboriginal dance groups, language classes and the bush garden have been recognised by the project team and other staff as having engaged all students in their learning, improving the quality of their work and their willingness to participate in all Key

Learning Areas. These have created opportunities for different student groups to work with each other, for increased collaboration between all staff members and for increased participation in the school by parents, family and community members.

Team members have developed their skills and confidence in using an array of Information and Communication Technologies, and have developed a stronger understanding and engagement with Quality Teaching practices through developing, facilitating, reviewing and coding each other's lesson plans and approaches. They have developed skills in designing and successfully facilitating the use of personal learning programs for students and have a better understanding of the processes of engaging students through accelerated literacy initiatives.

#### *Survey data*

As a small school a total of seven staff participated in the two school surveys. Taking part in professional development activities focused on Aboriginal education was valued by the staff so that by the end of 2008 all of the staff were taking part in professional development activities and were involved with Aboriginal people. The increase was from 67% in 2007 to 100% in 2008.

Reflecting on the impact of engagement with Aboriginal communities on their teaching, while 67% of staff said there was somewhat of an impact, in 2008 all staff said it was having 'somewhat' of an impact. Staff who were 'frequently' adjusting their teaching strategies to better cater for their Aboriginal students, increased from 17% to 33%. The extent to which their teaching practices were 'somewhat' inclusive of Aboriginal cultural knowledge also increased from 50% to 67%.

#### **4. Key factors**

Team members reflected that earlier projects had positive outcomes, but had not always realised the full extent of what was initially envisaged. Some team members described this as them trying to do way too much within limited timeframes and underestimating the time needed to plan. While the intention to involve family members in the earlier family history projects had overall been a positive experience, there were some students who could not get the required support and information. Others needed extra follow up from the teachers involved, or creative alternatives to ensure all could complete the project assignments. Trying to tackle two separate projects at the same time was also seen on reflection as overly ambitious. It was impossible to achieve the desired outcome of creating a completed film. However, the project did engage students in writing and developing a storyboard that included structuring their script in a format used by *Dreaming Stories*. They created a story that had a localised physical connection, included important lessons and used some words from the local Aboriginal language.

As this is a small school it was often difficult, especially at the early stages of the project, for team members to meet or even speak about the project on a regular basis. Although the themes in the early stages were consistent, the projects for different year groups were very different from producing posters, *PowerPoint* presentations and Internet pages on *FrontPage*. Often team members felt that they were working in isolation from each other. Other practical issues included limited time on library computers with most students not having any Internet access at home. Finding substitute teachers to allow team meetings and staff development activities without creating too much disruption to classes was also difficult in this remote area.

The second stage of the project was to create a bush garden within the school grounds. This project meant that all team members were working with their classes to produce a shared physical outcome. The participation and support of the academic partner was highly valued throughout this project. She worked closely with team members to plan class exercises, activities and worksheets, creating an atmosphere where the team members felt far more

confident and better prepared. The team felt that having this shared project created a lot of input and ideas from the students who would have playground discussions of their work with students in the other year groups and share ideas. Their ideas would then be brought back into classroom discussions across all the year groups and Key Learning Areas. There was also a feeling that this shared initiative had created far better communication between the team members, other teaching staff, and the students' parents, family and community members.

#### *Consultation and collaboration with Aboriginal community*

An Elder from the local community commented that this was now *the best school in the world*. She said she was surprised at how much support the school had encouraged from all members of the local community and her hope now was that none of the current teaching staff would ever leave the school. The Aboriginal language teacher told us that this was a school where all the teachers took an interest and really cared about all their students. He told us that this was a school where the principal and teachers were making an impact in including Aboriginal perspectives and working with the local community.

The school had regular meetings with Aboriginal community members and extended the school's language program to provide evening classes for community members. There was a small but consistent attendance at these regular meetings. There has been very strong support and attendance at special meetings and school events, in particular for National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee events, the Bush Garden Opening and the project logo meeting. There was also a significant increase in the number of parents and family members dropping in at the school and getting involved with school projects.

#### *Understanding of Aboriginal cultural knowledge*

Team members visited local sites with Aboriginal Elders and Mentors and developed far more confidence in including Aboriginal perspectives in their own teaching and engaging with each other, students and the community in relation to Aboriginal projects and issues. Communication across all teaching areas increased within the school. This interaction, referred to by one Aboriginal staff member as *talking across school and curriculums*, has increased the confidence and willingness of staff to try different approaches and find a shared connection with their local Aboriginal identity. One team member talked about getting some general information through an Aboriginal Studies subject at university, but that until the school's principal initiated staff development and a local Aboriginal connection through the project, she had been unable to understand its importance. She described this process as "*showing respect for their culture, and their showing a respect for us*".

### **5. Challenges and opportunities**

The Aboriginal language teacher talked about how other school staff were helping to drive the language program by including discussions with students through their class time. Sometimes, without realising it, they were helping to raise its profile and use with students. Other staff spoke about how the language teacher was including words from the students' spelling list in the language classes, creating connections between the classes and learning areas. A team member also spoke about how students had approached the language teacher to include the Wiradjuri name alongside the common and botanical names for their bush garden plants. She also spoke about how this had led to a class session. Some of the students were asked to share the three names of plants with their classmates, and then asked to stand up if their plants were in a set grouping, or family, such as eucalypts. These connections were expanded on to teach the students about Aboriginal kinship systems and to reaffirm that like the plants, they all also had connections.

The dance groups built pride and self-esteem amongst the increasing number of students who participated. Within the logistical limitations of the number of performers who could appear on stage, a number of stagehand positions were created to ensure that all interested students

could still be involved. The school participated for the first time ever at last year's *Croc Fest*. The dance group has become a source of pride for the school and for the local community.

There is a real sense of respect for Aboriginal and other cultures within the school. There is a strong connection between the school and its local Aboriginal history and its relevance to all students. The Aboriginal language teacher spoke to us about the importance for Aboriginal and all students of knowing their Aboriginal community identity as a way of creating inclusive and relevant learning spaces. He feels that *Aboriginal education needs to look backwards to go forward*. The school has made some positive strides in building connections, confidence and understandings within the school and the community. This is, however, a school located within an economically challenged community where funding will always have an impact on the work they can do and sustain.

## **6. Leadership**

The school had very strong leadership through its principal, who has been a driving force in initiating programs and creating opportunities for collaborations and interactions with the local Aboriginal community and local community events. The team also had a very supportive and approachable Aboriginal Mentor and had two very strong and capable team leaders through different stages of the project (in stage one being the school's principal; in stage two the assistant principal). The current team leader had helped to create strong communications across the team and school. The team was very supportive, open and enthusiastic and had given a lot of their out of work time to ensure the success of the project.

The academic partner was also acknowledged as an important member of the school team and was identified as an invaluable resource throughout the project.

## **7. Sustaining the project**

The project has embraced a philosophy of inclusion that has seen Aboriginal perspectives and knowledges included for all students and staff in all Key Learning Areas in significant and relevant ways. This inclusion has been, in most instances, directly linked to the project initiatives and shared project goals. The project has been driven by a very motivated and dedicated school staff team. Throughout the process all staff have developed skills and greater understandings about Quality Teaching and have successfully integrated these skills into their teaching practice. There have also been some very strong and sustainable connections made with the local Aboriginal community.

While it would be a reasonable expectation that the strengths gained will continue to be built upon by the current staff, it is also reasonable to acknowledge the importance of adequately funding the continuation of these and other initiatives in a school that is situated in a small and financially constrained community.

# **Cadmium High School**

## **1. Context**

Cadmium High School is a comprehensive school situated in a semi-rural setting on the south western border of the greater Sydney region. It is a centre of excellence in the performing arts and its student body was comprised of students from the local area and others who enrolled via an audition. There were over 1000 students, of whom approximately 7% were Aboriginal. The teaching staff involved in the project ranged in experience from those with less than 5 years teaching experience to others with experience spanning between 10 and 20 years.

## 2. Overview

Cadmium School has been part of the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project since 2006. An initial motivation for the project direction came from analysis of English Language and Literacy Assessment tests that noted some Aboriginal students required additional support and from an audit of teaching and learning indicating ‘that Aboriginal perspectives and issues were not being consistently addressed in an authentic way’.

In the initial phase of the project in 2006, Year 7 English units were a starting point for inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives. The school’s first action learning team included five English teachers and the School Principal. They wanted this initiative to have a positive focus and decided on writing a unit that looked at the shared values of Aboriginal and Western cultures. The aim was to change the focus from looking at difference to looking for similarities and commonalities. They started off by identifying some key values such as family, social boundaries and environment. Then they moved to how meanings are constructed and information conveyed. They decided to utilise Aboriginal texts, especially artworks and Aboriginal cultural practices, alongside Western art and narrative that focused on the values that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures share.

The team also looked at what resources they could have students develop in consultation with the local Aboriginal community. They felt that while there were a lot of other available and valuable resources, they also wanted to develop some that were specifically relevant to their local community. They decided to work with their Aboriginal students from Years 7 to 10 and Aboriginal parents to develop teaching resources.

In addition, as part of this development process Aboriginal students undertook three Information and Communication Technologies based ‘mini-projects’ that focused on the local Aboriginal community and developed their technology skills base. These projects included an oral history project, an arts project and a project involving *Claymation* (filming animation using clay figures). These projects produced ‘learning objects’, the purpose of which was to link local cultural knowledge with the core concept of the English unit, which were then embedded into the unit as teaching resources. The aim of both these approaches was to develop greater understanding of and engagement with Aboriginal cultural knowledge through the use of the creative arts, history and Information Communication Technology with support and involvement from Aboriginal students, parents and the local Aboriginal community.

Aboriginal student involvement in the development stages of these projects gave them a sense of ownership and identity. The approach taken was to empower students by recognising and acknowledging in a substantial way their important personal connection with their culture and to ensure they had a voice in how this was going to be represented within their school. The team also felt strongly that it was important to make connections with their local Aboriginal community and to establish dialogues and partnerships, and create a more authentic and focused access to community resources. Some of these initiatives included connecting and working with the local arts centre, the establishment of an Aboriginal parents and community group at the school, and contact with the local Aboriginal community members and organisations.

Teacher professional learning was also an integral part of this process so that teachers could gain the knowledge required both in terms of engaging with Aboriginal cultural perspectives (knowledge) and developing Information and Communication Technologies skills to support student learning in (overseeing) these projects. Since its inception at the school, the project has evolved into an integrated cross-Key Learning Areas unit of work with year 7 and 8 students.

*This has been important in showing that subjects are not discrete, but all connect with one another and have a 'real world' application.*

The process has highlighted that Aboriginal issues can be successfully included across the curriculum and are relevant to the learning experience of all students. This began with a Year 8 unit focusing on *Contact* as the primary theme. The Key Learning Areas involved were English, Music, Creative Arts (Visual Arts) and Human Society and its Environment (History).

Information and Communication Technologies were the skills base the students were working from. Some examples of this included students working on a film about a local massacre in 1816, and creating audio and digital recordings of oral histories and performances. Students were also creating wikis, podcasts and blogs on issues related to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal approaches to the land.

The school was very proactive in establishing and continually developing the skills and work of their action learning team, as well as a 'co-ordinating team' that comprised members of the Aboriginal community, the academic partner and two teachers including the deputy principal as project leader. The larger action learning team included two English, two Human Society and its Environment, two Music and three Visual arts teachers. The teams participated in a number of staff development programs, the project conferences, and worked together in a number of team teaching collaborations and classroom activities.

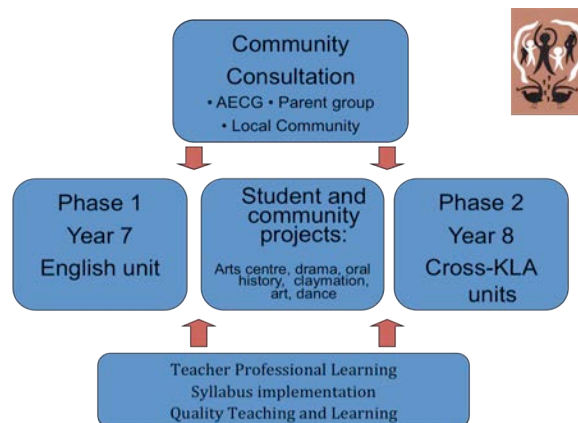


Figure 17: Diagrammatic representation (Cadmium DET presentation Dec 2008)

### 3. Outcomes

The school collected an impressive body of data from various sources including student and teacher surveys; one survey of the Aboriginal parent community; pre and post-test Information and Communication Technology skills audits for both teachers and students; assessment tasks and student work samples. The matrix of questions for the student survey was based on the REAL framework of learning (Munns & Woodward, 2006) with its focus on student engagement and self-assessment. Teachers were also asked to keep a record of their own learning through a learning journal.

These school reports and the English Language and Literacy Assessment and National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy data indicated an improvement of learning outcomes for Aboriginal students during this period. Though it is beyond the scope of this report to comment on whether this improvement was attributed solely to the project, there was certainly a belief amongst the team and parents that the project had been a contributing



factor. The school also notes an increase in Aboriginal student enrolments as the school's reputation in the local Aboriginal community grows.

#### *Survey data*

The comments below have been generated from surveys conducted at the school. The school conducted surveys of both teachers and students at the commencement of the teaching units and again at the completion of each unit. In addition, the professional learning workshops on Information and Communication Technologies and Teaching Indigenous Studies were evaluated by the participants. In the school survey teachers were asked to rate their knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal issues and perspectives. Results indicated that amongst the teachers who participated (approximately 9 teachers) there was an increase in understanding of 'Aboriginal culture/and or perspectives' in the 'excellent' category from nil to 35% and a reduction in the 'poor' category from 68% to 16%. Students (in a sample class) also reported a similar improvement of their understanding from 12% to 35% in the 'excellent' category and from 35% to 53% in the 'good' category.

The survey results indicated that the majority of teachers had formal tertiary qualifications in Aboriginal education or had attended professional development sessions in the last two years. It appears that the level of participation in professional development in Aboriginal education was much higher than in other priority teaching areas such as literacy and numeracy. All teachers felt that there were areas of their teaching practice in Aboriginal education that needed to be improved. Support for this improvement was provided by the project, as all teachers commented on an increased appreciation of Aboriginal knowledge and culture during their final interviews.

The majority of teachers indicated that engaging with Aboriginal parents was a key aspect of whole school policy in teaching Aboriginal perspectives. However, while this had improved at the school level, not all teachers were actively engaged with parents in gathering their views about school programs or individual student progress. Despite improvements in some parents' connection with the school, this was still seen as a challenge for the school and for individual teachers.

The school did survey Aboriginal parents, seeking their views on the level of parental involvement in the school and the types of learning experiences their children were undertaking. Respondents (less than 10) noted that they were 'almost always' or 'usually' satisfied with the school's performance in such areas as parent involvement in 'decisions about programs and initiatives for Aboriginal students'; the school's efforts to improve what it does; in fostering pride in Aboriginal culture and in catering for the learning needs of students.

#### *Evidence of teacher professional learning*

In all phases of the project and at each interview the staff expressed their enthusiasm for the project in providing them with the opportunity to extend their skills in Information and Communication Technologies and in their understanding of Aboriginal cultural knowledge within the context of Quality Teaching. For example, the teachers specifically noted their improved understanding of Quality Teaching elements of cultural knowledge, connectedness and knowledge integration. According to the project leader the teachers have:

*an increased understanding of how to address Aboriginal perspectives and culture in a accurate and authentic manner... they feel more confident ... and a greater safety in taking risks ... they have a changed view of what community is.*

Increased collaboration between teachers and across Key Learning Areas has been a clear outcome. Teachers are reflecting on their practice both individually and in a collaborative

way. Essentially, according to the project leader, the Quality Teaching Program has also made participant teachers into:

*reflective practitioners, both on a macro and micro level – classroom and whole school ... the team now understands the necessity of baseline data to evaluate improvements and determine direction.*

The use of a thematic approach as a pedagogical tool across four Key Learning Areas provided an entry into a more holistic approach to learning and increased understanding of the “landscape of learning” for students as they “moved between subjects at high school”. Although “time consuming and resource heavy” this “rich task approach” enabled a more in-depth approach to addressing issues and allowed teachers to “become more creative with my programming”.

#### *Improved understanding of action learning*

The action learning process was implemented through collegial meetings between the teaching staff across the Key Learning Areas involved in the design and delivery of the units of work to be taught in each discipline. These meetings provided opportunities for team members to work with the school’s academic partner and to develop a stronger understanding and practical application of the Quality Teaching model.

Teachers demonstrated an increased ‘repertoire of literacy and Information and Communication Technologies teaching strategies’. For example, they were excited about the skills they gained in Information and Communication Technologies and animation projects such as *Marvin*:

*A fantastic learning experience. I am really excited about the potential MARVIN has to engage learners in this project. Thank you ... this is really going to support our film projects.*

Other professional learning experiences mentioned by several of the team included the collegiality created by having time to reflect and share with colleagues. Watching others interact with students and their general teaching style was beneficial for new teachers. To quote one of these teachers:

*Collegiality is, without a doubt, the highlight of this program as we are usually struggling to meet students’ needs in isolation.*

In terms of improved understanding of Aboriginal cultural knowledge teachers noted that despite a steep learning curve for some all now reported that the program had been a positive learning experience:

*My cultural knowledge and understanding are further increased, and this is rubbing off on the students. Previously, I have found this topic dry and boring to teach, and difficult to engage the students in, however, I now find that the students are more engaged because the learning is relevant to them, and this makes the topic exciting and interesting to teach.*

The importance of connecting with the local Aboriginal community was one key learning experience:

*....working with the community has been the greatest learning experience for me, as through making connections with the Dharawal organisation in [Cadmium], I have learnt a lot about the histories of Aboriginal people in the [Cadmium] region.*

### *Impact on student learning*

Teachers reported that students were more actively engaged in learning about Aboriginal cultures and histories and that point was also affirmed by the academic partner. Students have come to appreciate aspects of the Aboriginal experience and the relevance of including Aboriginal perspectives for all students.

*Students have a greater appreciation of the impact contact has had on both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Students have been able to recognise that contact has had long-term impact on these peoples with far reaching implications.*

The project coordinator wanted to get Aboriginal education embedded in all programs as part of the curriculum. She felt that progress has been made and that the program also enhanced understanding of pedagogical practices – particularly in terms of the intellectual quality of student work, knowledge integration and engagement and the use of technology. It was clear from teacher comments that a benefit to student learning was the collaboration between teachers from the different Key Learning Areas which eliminated overlap in the subjects and allowed students to see that knowledge was not compartmentalised and subject specific.

*By writing programs in collaboration with teachers from other Key Learning Areas, the students are no longer learning the same content four times over, rather they are using the same content from all four classes to complete their tasks. This has made the learning more relevant to the students, and they are remembering what they have been taught.*

## **4. Key factors**

### *Understandings of Aboriginal cultural knowledge*

Project team members expressed concern in the early stages of the project about how to include Aboriginal perspectives in their teaching in an ‘authentic’ way. Some were concerned that they did not know enough, did not want to do the wrong thing, and were uncomfortable with representing another culture. The school leadership organised a number of workshops, guest speakers and Aboriginal community organisation visits to address these concerns. They also agreed to approach their Aboriginal students and parents to take on a partnership role in developing approaches and resources. In this way, they worked with their Aboriginal community to find shared perspectives and histories. One teacher commented that the journey to discover a local Aboriginal identity had highlighted issues and practices (with a particular reference to a massacre that had occurred locally), where she had come to realise that this was part of ‘everyone’s history’.

Action learning team members overwhelmingly agreed that the project conferences had been invaluable in developing their knowledge. These had been opportunities to showcase work and share information. They were seen as insightful and had engaged and challenged ideas, and impacted on project directions. These had been an opportunity for respectful learning exchanges in formal and informal settings between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants.

Having the project evolve from the development of resources and ideas into working across different Key Learning Areas had increased opportunities for all teachers involved in the project to discuss and share ideas with each other, the students, and visitors from their Aboriginal communities. It had provided an opportunity for all teachers to interact with local Aboriginal and other organisations to build on the perspectives within the school about who made up their local Aboriginal community and the diversity of Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge within their own community. It has created a greater awareness for teachers and students of shared histories and resulted in an enthusiasm and pride in incorporating this knowledge respectfully into all areas of their teaching.

*Through discussions with students about issues facing Indigenous people in Australia, students have increased cultural knowledge, and subject matter has increased the scope for these discussions.*

#### *Consultation and collaboration with Aboriginal community*

The team had some concerns initially about Aboriginal parents not feeling comfortable coming into the school. They considered that getting Aboriginal parents to come along and participate was a necessity for opening up a dialogue to better understand some of the anxieties and issues. Aboriginal parents were invited to become part of the project action team. Two parents agreed, and they were utilised to encourage other Aboriginal parents to attend meetings and school events. Parent meetings were kept as informal as possible, where they can chat to staff over a cup of tea or coffee, with food provided. Parents attending were also encouraged to invite other parents and community members to come along. This practice has proven a very positive and successful one for the school and team.

The school purchased some Aboriginal artworks from a local artist – who they subsequently engaged to work as an Aboriginal arts instructor for the male student group. A separate Aboriginal art class was organised for female students – with a female Aboriginal instructor. Both instructors made contact with the Aboriginal local community including a local Aboriginal corporation for feedback and advice on their approach. A challenge for the school in this project was the need for them to become a little more flexible in how they conducted their administrative and other arrangements. These classes have received a lot of positive feedback from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and parents.

A member of the school's Aboriginal parents group acknowledged the positive and respectful approach being taken by the school and just how far removed this was from her experiences as an Aboriginal child growing up in a less than positive school environment. She noted the impact that this project had on the self-esteem of her child and for other Aboriginal students at the school. She gave an example of how in the past some students had been reluctant to openly identify as Aboriginal for fear of being questioned about having fairer skin and how this has now dramatically changed. She also included a wish that she had gone to a school like this.

*...the project and Quality Teaching approach has made a difference for Aboriginal students, they have gained knowledge and a better understanding about their own identities, it has helped greatly in building the confidence of Aboriginal students at the school. The Aboriginal students are really proud of who they are.*

The Aboriginal parents' group felt that the school listened to and valued their input. An example given was that the school had taken up and acted on a suggestion raised at the Aboriginal parents' meeting for the inclusion of a dance group. The school arranged for an Aboriginal dance teacher from the renowned Bangarra Dance Group to work with the children to create their own dance. This was based on the project logo previously designed by students (spirit figure, the lyrebird and two rivers) as a way to make this dance their own. It was performed for the school and parents at a public performance.

The school also participated in an oral history storytelling project called 'Tell me my Mother'. Students worked with a number of local organisations to transform the story of local Elders into a public performance using original songs, dance and drama. The project involved visits to the school by local Elders and students were able to go out and visit a number of different local community organisations. For the public performance:

*The [Cadmium] Arts Centre was completely full for the performance – lots of community support.*

This performance was filmed. A book was also produced and launched at a public gathering at the local art gallery, receiving a great deal of community support.

The Aboriginal parents' group grew over the course of the project and included regular participation from the local Aboriginal community and other organisations. Its focus expanded with different organisations attending these meetings and offering information on related support services, opportunities and advice for Aboriginal parents and students.

### **5. Challenges and opportunities**

One of the important rewards for the school has been the focus on local versions of Aboriginal culture and the impetus given to the school through the project to make contact with the local Aboriginal community and other bodies such as the local arts and cultural centres. The development of oral histories and the connection to country generated by such projects as *Tell me my Mother* and the involvement in commemoration activities for a local massacre raised the profile of Aboriginal history and culture in the school. This has been positive for the identity formation of Aboriginal students. The involvement of students in creative art projects and the design of an Aboriginal logo for the school has also been important to improving students' self concept. The school has been rewarded with local and national awards such as the *Dare to Lead National Achievement Award* and a *Regional Award for Excellence in Aboriginal Education*.

In terms of challenges in implementing the project the project coordinator noted the excellent work undertaken by one of two key Aboriginal parents in getting increased participation from the community in the school, but she commented that it is still a challenge to ensure that parents are kept informed and connected to the school. The other challenge related to the pressure of time to sustain the project given the many pressures teachers and the executive have on any school day.

### **6. Leadership**

A key area of strength in this project has been the support offered by all stakeholders in the school to the project. Teachers and parents commented on the support given to the project by the principal and the deputy principal who is also the project coordinator. The experience and commitment of the academic partner employed since 2007 was also commented on by the project team. He was seen as very supportive and assisted in putting in place evaluation regimes related to teacher learning and student progress. He also provided extensive professional learning and resources to the teachers involved. He was seen as very knowledgeable in "taking teachers to the next level".

The support of the Department of Education and Training Project Manager was also noted as invaluable, particularly in relation to site visits, attendance at parent meetings and in the organisation of the conferences that "*provided an important springboard to the work action learning team does at the school. ...[They] have provided us with invaluable knowledge, ideas, contacts, resources and opportunities to share the work with other project schools*". The school's project team was also very enthusiastic and each member brought in different skills and knowledges. They were trusted and supported to take on leadership roles in their specific sections of the project initiatives.

### **7. Sustaining the project**

In addressing how the project can be sustained in the future, one key factor was the importance placed on continued financial support for the project. While the project coordinator saw realistic ways to maintain regular links with the community and sustain the cyclic approach to cross-curriculum pedagogy with cross faculty collaboration in programming and assessment and connections with the outside community, she noted that all

of the above require time and money in order that teachers could be released and resourced for teacher professional learning and planning, implementation, reflection and evaluation.

The Aboriginal community also made comments regarding the need to sustain the project. A member of the Aboriginal parents' group expressed a hope from the group to see a dedicated space within the school to house/showcase the work already done through the project and other projects with an Aboriginal focus – *“to make this information visible and accessible to the whole school, to keep this knowledge and journey alive”*. This could maybe take the form of a resource room for Aboriginal studies (housing resources like the *Claymation* films, jigsaw painting etc) which could also be used for the Aboriginal parents' meetings and would show the impressive range of work already done. The Aboriginal parents' group would really like to see an Aboriginal Education Officer appointed at the school. They can see the school project continuing to grow. This position would benefit teachers and students by providing someone at the school to advise and listen. It could be of interest to local Aboriginal Technical and Further Education graduates who were completing their teacher aide courses. An Aboriginal Education Officer could help build on the positive work already done by helping to breakdown assumptions and build connections between the school and community – *“balance is supporting each other”*.

If the school could obtain further funding, Aboriginal parents thought it would be good to see a continuation of the oral history book project to include stories about the youth. Also to expand on the work already done by bringing in Elders from other communities, not just as a day or having informal talk, but as a project that involved children and Elders from very different and diverse Aboriginal communities. This would enable sharing Aboriginal knowledge, meeting people outside of their own community or maybe taking children to visit other communities. In addition, parents noted that they would like students to be given the opportunity to meet Aboriginal students from other project schools, to see what those schools were doing and how other children had been finding their project. It was important for this exchange to become a 'sharing project' at the end of the year, with all project schools sending children to a student conference (like the project conference for parents and teachers). It could be a venue for students to showcase their work, share experiences, culture and knowledge with each other, in that way helping to create a 'buddy program' across schools.

## **Magenta school**

### **1. Context**

Magenta school is a high school located in Sydney's northern shores, with a very small but significant enrolment of Aboriginal students, most of whom come from different parts of New South Wales to attend the school. For the past thirty years the school has accommodated a group of Aboriginal students from many parts of New South Wales and other states who attend the school for various periods of time, ranging from less than a term to several years. The school has received awards for excellence in education and offered a wide curriculum to respond to student choice.

The percentage of Aboriginal students enrolled at the school in 2009 was just over 1%, although during the evaluation phase at some times it increased to over 3%. For example, in 2008, while there were 34 students enrolled at the start of the year, by November only 14 students remained. Aboriginal 'house parents' oversaw the operations of the hostel where the students resided and kept in contact with the high school and its activities and communicated with the students' parents or carers in their home community. The school also had links with a new Aboriginal Learning Centre, which was a purpose-built facility at the local Technical and Further Education college. This centre provided a space for the local Aboriginal community to gather, hold meetings, and display Aboriginal cultural resources and artworks. The school was

situated in a broadly networked, interconnected and active local Aboriginal community that included traditional custodians, a local Aboriginal education organisation, service providers who worked and/or resided in the area, as well as a number of individuals and families.

## 2. Overview

Magenta high school commenced project activities collaboratively with two other nearby primary schools in 2006. The three schools had in common the fact that a majority of their Aboriginal students resided for short or longer periods in hostel or alternate accommodation away from their communities of origin. One Aboriginal academic partner worked with all three school sites. At the start of this evaluation two of the three school sites were identified as one potential case study for this evaluation. Their collaboration lasted for the first stages of the project during 2006 and part of 2007. During this period the two schools participating in the evaluation worked with the same academic partner to develop a collection of teaching and learning activities with the overarching title of *Narrative Identity and Place*.

One aspect of the cross school collaboration involved some of the Aboriginal students undertaking work experience placements at the partner primary school to enhance their leadership, esteem and qualification for future further education pathways in early childhood education. Representatives of a local Aboriginal education organisation provided their observations on the progress of those students with one noting that they became 'so much more confident'. Other creative arts initiatives were instigated in the initial phase with those Magenta school students residing at the hostel. These included student 'rap' performance and art-making. This aspect continued throughout the stages and culminated in an exhibition of student works for the school and broader community.

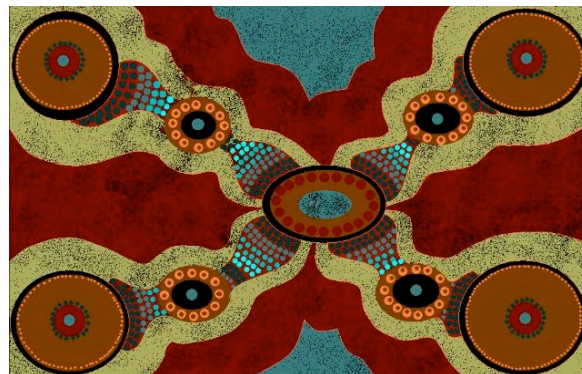


Figure 18: Example of a Magenta school student's artwork depicting her strength, in her journey from community to community

During 2007 the two case study schools separated their project activity into independent projects. Reasons noted by a participant from Magenta high school for this included the incompatible demands of primary and secondary school organisational requirements, such as staff release patterns and curriculum structures. The differing approaches within the broader project were also considered to be a contributing factor.

While all project teams were provided with project directions and resources, Magenta school identified some initial difficulties in establishing the direction of the project and in establishing what was required under the Board of Studies syllabus requirements. One participant said "it did need a stronger framework to begin with – because it was a little bit like self-discovery learning – and we went off into directions that the project officers didn't perceive as important". After the team's initial uncertainty, the Department's Project Manager provided prompt, on-site support and the project team gained confidence in their direction.

### *Project development*

For the school in 2006 and 2007 the focus of the project had been to apply the principles of action learning and Quality Teaching with two key questions in mind:

- what do teachers need to know to improve Aboriginal students' educational outcomes?
- how might the inclusion of cultural knowledge improve Aboriginal students' educational outcomes?

Throughout 2007 the primary focus of the school's work had been on the second question, though the two are very much interrelated. It had focused on developing the student's self-identity through research into family histories and personal narratives using Information and Communication Technologies. This involved a focus on personal stories as e-narratives using power point presentations that utilise *In Design*, *Photoshop*, *Marvin* and other programs to build interactive stories of their country and family. The development in students' cultural heritage knowledge through their portfolios informed their personal learning plans and could be further engendered through dialogue with family and community members at home. In terms of students' extra curricula activity, a small group of Aboriginal students were initially involved in the production of the school magazine. One student sustained that involvement. Her experience is reported to have been very positive and she is able to now mentor others.

The employment of a local Aboriginal community member as a casual teacher at the school impacted favorably on the development of the project. She fulfilled important roles as 'Aunty' and teacher to the cohort of female Aboriginal secondary students at the school. Her education qualifications and Aboriginal cultural knowledge made her welcome and sought after professionally by the project team and other teachers at the high school. Through communication with students, she was able to identify a range of supplementary teaching and learning activities incorporating Aboriginal cultural knowledge. These were developmentally appropriate and gender sensitive, complementing the syllabus requirements. At the invitation of this teacher, a number of her own ex-students, now Aboriginal identities successful in a range of fields such as the literary arts and law, visited the students providing positive mentorship and motivation.

The teacher's relationship with the school staff saw her position elevated. After negotiation by Departmental project staff and with the local Aboriginal community, she assumed the role of academic partner for the project team in 2008. In this new capacity many positive changes occurred in the project for teachers and the library staff. With her appointment as academic partner came increased opportunities to work with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and teachers on raising awareness of Aboriginal cultures and histories in the school.

Having an experienced Aboriginal teacher and librarian on staff, the project at the school was able to concentrate on embedding Aboriginal perspectives into Key Learning Areas such as Technology and Applied Studies and Human Society and Its Environment in the junior secondary curriculum. A Year 8 Technology Unit was based on the contemporary batik works produced by women from the Ernabella community where the Technology and Applied Studies teacher had previously worked. The unit, which included a *Smart Board* presentation linked with worksheets for students to complete, was designed so that it could be used by all teachers. This approach was used across the school. It was described as being based on the need to "bolt in" tasks so that all teachers could feel comfortable in using them even if they had limited knowledge of Aboriginal cultures. Units of work foregrounding Aboriginal cultural knowledge were introduced into Science (Year 8), Geography (Year 9), English (Years 7 and 8), Creative Arts (Year 8) and Languages (Year 8). By the close of the evaluation, the take-up rate of subject areas incorporating Aboriginal perspectives had increased and teachers from across various Key Learning Areas were approaching the Aboriginal teacher to collaborate on curriculum change.



### 3. Outcomes

The implementation of the project in the school has enhanced teacher professional learning in a number of ways.

#### *Survey data*

As a large high school, the number of staff taking part in the school surveys at Magenta increased from 35 in 2007 to 41 in 2008. Over the period of the two surveys staff participation in professional development on Aboriginal education grew from 60% to 75%. There was an increase in the extent to which staff engagement with the Aboriginal community was impacting on their teaching. Among staff who felt it had made a 'substantial' impact, the proportion increased from 6% to 15%.

There was also a change in staff who were adjusting their teaching strategies for their Aboriginal students. Those doing so 'occasionally' rose from 35% to 56%. The proportion who said their teaching practices were 'substantially' inclusive of Aboriginal cultural knowledge rose from 11% to 17%. The role of the local Aboriginal community, as a resource being used by staff, also increased from 30% in 2007 to 44% in 2008.

#### *Teacher insights*

Bearing in mind the different levels of experience and confidence in working with Aboriginal communities, the project did develop the teachers' understanding of the Quality Teaching model and it appeared that working with the need to embed Aboriginal cultural knowledge within their specific Key Learning Areas through the Quality Teaching elements had reassured them that Aboriginal cultural knowledge could form part of the mainstream curriculum. The project team leader explained how:

*including Aboriginal cultural knowledge fulfils many of the dimensions of Quality Teaching – and this fact is very reassuring to teachers who are hesitant about focusing on Aboriginal cultural knowledge and understanding its place in the mainstream curricula.*

Another example of one teacher's experience of change in practice is described below:

*Amongst the many mistakes I've made is I used to write a letter to the girls' parents. ...It didn't occur to me that they would open the letter with the letterhead and an envelope and immediately assume that it was bad news so they didn't read it. So, we've been frantically getting letters of commendation home and two grandmas have rung, well they've rung the hostel manager, to say that they are so happy to see these non-threatening [comments].*

The opportunities created by the regular presence of an Aboriginal teacher, unattached to a specific Key Learning Area, supported a range of positive outcomes. While the development of Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum at this school site had been an aspiration of the project team manager for several years, and had been promoted as desirous to whole school audiences over time, only a few teachers before the project had developed these perspectives.

The teachers involved in including Aboriginal perspectives in their Key Learning Areas noted that their focus on contemporary issues – even simple things like the need to acknowledge country – helped all students to become more confident with Aboriginal cultures. The role of the current principal in encouraging the Student Representative Council to get the Aboriginal flag flying at the school, in being approachable and taking an interest in Aboriginal students and engaging them in discussions about their projects or Aboriginal issues helped to reinforce this approach. To the Technological and Applied Studies teacher the capacity to use interactive whiteboard technology really brought the material to life. Again the teacher noted

the role of the academic partner in the success of the Technological and Applied Studies program “...my personal knowledge was enhanced... [she] willingly shared resources and knowledge to enrich the delivery of units to all students”.

Through the Aboriginal teacher’s appointment as academic partner, she was able to act almost as an internal consultant for non-Aboriginal teaching staff. Her expertise and communication skills were welcomed by several teachers, representing a range of discipline areas, in their incorporation of Aboriginal cultural knowledge in their teaching and learning activities. The academic partner’s agency enabled a degree of authenticity of Aboriginal representation to infuse the various streams within the project.

The librarian noted that the impact of the inclusion of units of work in Key Learning Areas was an increase in interest in curriculum resources in areas such as Technological and Applied Studies, English and Personal Development, Health and Physical Education. Others were also planning to include Aboriginal perspectives. The English teachers worked on using the *Kanyini* project resources with Stage 6 students, as well as working on poetry, fiction and non-fiction with other stages, the Personal Development, Health and Physical Education teacher looked at various Aboriginal health issues.

Another positive outcome of the project was the updating of library teaching resources in Aboriginal studies. The librarian noted an improvement in the access of teacher resources. Just as importantly, an audit of the resources available was undertaken to ensure that they were culturally appropriate. The academic partner was an integral part of this process and, according to the librarian, assisted in establishing a “*really meaningful and relevant Aboriginal collection. Working with the academic [partner] has been ‘invaluable in that she has shared her expertise of Aboriginal [resources]... she has evaluated our collection from a unique perspective as an Aboriginal woman, academic and librarian’.*”

#### *Greater level of student engagement*

Teachers noted a higher level of student engagement and that they themselves felt more confident and motivated to learn about Aboriginal culture. They also felt that it allowed them a greater focus on contemporary Aboriginal cultures and reported that they were now working towards including local cultural knowledge into assessment.

There was a great display of Aboriginal student confidence about the fact that their culture was being highlighted. This was reinforced by the Aboriginal officer at the hostel who had the role of overseeing the students while they were at the school. She noted that there was clear evidence of improved engagement and the “*girls seem to be enthusiastic about their work at school – they don’t complain about staying at school.*” Her view was that “... *we really have produced a good year – hardworking year – but I feel that everybody has achieved something positive.*”

Teachers also noted an increase in interest in engaging with the Aboriginal students:

*...there is more interest and a whole lot more talking about it – and more interest in the background [of the] girls – people know that it is going on.*

In addition to the above, one non-Aboriginal teacher interviewed noted the work done by two Aboriginal students on the school journal raised awareness of the contribution Aboriginal students were making to the school. It also helped the Aboriginal students to expand their activities beyond their ‘Aboriginal group’ from the hostel.

In summary, through the project activities a number of general incremental changes occurred for and about the students in a range of areas. Changes were noted in their approach to school and in their level of exposure to and awareness of future vocational opportunities. For the

Aboriginal students, their sense of cultural and social affirmation was evident as a result of their non-Aboriginal peers' learning about Aboriginal cultural knowledge and having Aboriginal cultural content become part of their everyday classroom experience. While the students always had access to the high quality cultural and learning support from the Aboriginal Education Officers at the school, having an Aboriginal teacher as a casual member of staff was a new experience that the project offered.

#### **4. Key factors**

A supportive principal and good executive leadership in the school were considered to be very important factors in the success of the program. The project also received the strong and continued support of both of the principals at Magenta school, seeing it as a key policy for the school. The project team leader showed great commitment to the project, used her team management skills effectively and was responsive to the team's needs by involving an Aboriginal teacher/ librarian in the project. She also demonstrated leadership and negotiation capacities in supporting that teacher's transition into the role of academic partner.

Project funding provided support for the time needed to address the challenges along the way and the steep learning curve needed in adapting old curricula and in changing work patterns. The project developed a greater sense of professionalism and a growing capacity to reflect on pedagogical practices. Teachers reported that they have valued the time they were able to devote to reflection on their pedagogical practices.

There was evidence of enhanced engagement in discussions about Aboriginal cultural knowledge by project members, as well as a willingness to learn and talk about what cultural knowledge was. Issues of protocols and 'ownership' of knowledge were other real issues that the evaluation team believed would take time for school staff to address and try to reconcile. Another feature of the project was the increased communication between the school and the students' home communities. The project leader commented in November 2008 that "*we had some grandmas ring up and say 'we have never had the girls so settled'.*"

#### *Consultation and collaboration with Aboriginal community*

As noted earlier, schools are busy places, and the capacities and opportunities for the project team to engage with and partner with the local Aboriginal community appeared to be shaped by their views of who made up the local Aboriginal community, how they saw the community, and the processes they put in place to link and support involvement with the community. At this case study site, some complexities arose from the fact that most of the Aboriginal students' home communities were outside of the school's area. The team members' definition of 'the local Aboriginal community' was important in regard to both the direction and the extent to which the school consulted with the local Aboriginal community.

Early in the evaluation, a teacher identified the 'local Aboriginal community' as 'the students themselves' and 'what the students bring with them'. Another identified the hostel house parent as a significant local community representative in their capacity as a substitute parent/carer and legal guardian for the students during their stay in the region. The school regarded the substitute parent/carer from the hostel as the key community member for the purposes of consultation and liaison with the project. This situation was well known within the school and local community and the Department and other local Aboriginal community members were also well aware of this issue. It enabled teachers to support student research about their own local countries as settings for their digital narratives.

One team member mentioned the practical challenges of meetings between school staff and local Aboriginal community organisation members. Staff from the school worked during school hours, while many community representatives attended their monthly meetings in the evenings. During the evaluation phases, representatives from the local Aboriginal education

group did, when invited, visit the school. But these visits were largely for presentations and not for project or other school planning.

The team members also contributed to the achievement of many goals by collaborating with the Aboriginal academic partner, who was a local Aboriginal community member. They enlisted the assistance of the appropriate regional Departmental Aboriginal Education Consultant to respond to the professional enquiries of the team and the school staff generally. More positive feedback from some parent stakeholders, as a result of the project, was also reported by the team members.

Several members of the local community, including from the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group were critical of the lack of active consultation on the part of the school during the life of the project. One representative explained later that this rendered ‘the local Aboriginal community’ a “wasted resource”. It only contributed to, as one participant described, the inaccurate perception of the “*profile of this [Aboriginal] community’ as being ‘invisible’*”. It was stated that, in fact, “*Aboriginal people come from other homelands and reside here for different reasons. There is a building of a community over many generations*”.

Representations from a local Aboriginal community organisation indicated that the communication by the school project team members about planning and progress of the project was inadequate over the life of the project. Some Aboriginal community participants identified the need for regular project team meetings to be arranged with greater notice. Similarly, the development of a project advisory group with community members would have provided more opportunities for the academic partner, team members and community representatives to collaborate in project planning.

#### *Understandings of Aboriginal cultural knowledge*

The team members at the school did report that they had enhanced their understandings of Aboriginal cultural knowledge. However at this case study site there were some complexities that arose from the residential nature of Aboriginal students attending the school. These complexities related to the direction of consultation and questions of whose knowledge was accessed to inform the perspectives on Aboriginal cultural knowledge which were being constructed through the work of teachers in the school.

While the various ‘home’ cultures of the students were acknowledged, and efforts made to access that knowledge, the team found it difficult to access them at a distance. Most found that replies were not received to their early written correspondence to the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups in the students’ home communities.

Something of the nature of teachers’ learning about Aboriginal cultural knowledge was encapsulated in one teachers’ statement that “*we didn’t know we could put in a [Google] search for Barkindji and have lots of hits...we are learning*”. Also the project team leader explained that she now felt much more confident in that her own teaching had improved as a result of the project. She said:

*My personal knowledge now influences my ability to communicate my knowledge, my experience, my respect for traditional cultural knowledge to other colleagues. I now consider that I am able to communicate with non-Aboriginal students in a more creative and sensitive way – and am able to act as their bridge between the dominant non-Aboriginal curriculum and Aboriginal cultural knowledge. ... I have become more confident, and in fact, assertive in the inclusion of Aboriginal cultural knowledge resources in the classroom.*

As suggested earlier in this case study, when a member of the local Aboriginal community assumed the role of academic partner for this site, the project activity launched into a more

strategic, cohesive phase. Concurrently, a resource audit took place resulting in the development of a dedicated library location for books on Aboriginal cultural knowledge. This complemented the gradual ‘take up’ of opportunities for enhanced Aboriginal perspectives by school teaching staff offered by the Aboriginal cultural mentor. And teachers on the whole said they felt more confident in introducing Aboriginal perspectives in their units of work within their Key Learning Areas. According to the academic partner “*changes have occurred in the ethos of the staff... [there has been] a growing comprehension of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and Quality Teaching*”.

## **5. Challenges and opportunities**

Time constraints were acknowledged as a universal challenge when new and innovative programs are introduced – this project was no exception.

Implementing the project required a higher workload, but this was not seen as a deterrent to undertaking the project. As one member of the executive commented “*I don’t know if any of us would have been involved ... well I probably would have I guess... had we realised the amount of work ... it’s seen as an enormous amount of work.*” The willingness of staff to be involved was supported by the fact that there were adequate resources to allocate for staff relief and meetings. Comments were made that without the funding the project could not be sustained indefinitely.

The challenge for teachers to connect the project to syllabus outcomes was identified, and the Aboriginal academic partner played a key role in guiding teachers to find ways of addressing these needs. For example, there was a need for resources of sufficient academic rigour for various Stage 6 syllabi, and the advisor was able to help with some subject areas, such as Dance. The advisor was able to locate a former National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association dancer who was able to provide appropriate cultural support and guidance to the teachers.

However it was also a challenge to find publications that contained locally generated, Aboriginal community endorsed and academically rigorous treatment of Aboriginal cultural knowledge. The Aboriginal academic partner also noted that sample units of work foregrounding Aboriginal cultural knowledge were not yet available to teachers from the Board of Studies New South Wales website, along with other syllabus support material. At this site and among many other sites the limited availability of these kinds of resources provided challenges for project teams. The need to develop locally based Aboriginal teaching and learning resources represents a key challenge for future efforts to support teachers accessing and drawing on local Aboriginal cultural knowledge.

The connections the school could make with the parents and the home communities of their Aboriginal students were very important to the ongoing efforts to improve student learning. The ability to connect effectively with the Aboriginal students’ home communities was an ongoing challenge, even though the project did make a positive start in helping the development of more effective contacts. A further related challenge was how to sustain the program once the students who were part of this project returned to their home communities.

The challenges relating to interpretations of who constituted the Aboriginal community have been alluded to earlier and will not be expanded on in detail here. However, negotiating appropriate collaboration and consultation between the school and the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group was a constraint on the capacity for the project to be truly collaborative.

The team leader noted the need for further professional development of teachers across Key Learning Areas to ensure that Aboriginal cultural knowledge becomes part of the curriculum.

*There is still resistance to include Aboriginal cultural knowledge in some areas, but I think that will be overcome when we do the cultural workshops through the new Aboriginal Education Policy.*

For the school and its future development within the local community, it was important for it to continue to develop and maintain connections with active members of the local Aboriginal community to ensure maintenance of current programs and develop opportunities for expanding understanding of local Aboriginal knowledge.

## **6. Leadership**

The support of the principal was seen as important to the project, even though she was not directly involved in the day to day running of the project. In 2006/7 the deputy-principal led the team, and in 2008 the role was handed over to the head teacher (Administration). The project team leader demonstrated her organisational capacity by bringing in the expertise of the Aboriginal teacher to contribute to the work of the team. In negotiating that same person's appointment to the position of academic partner she demonstrated her capacity to synthesize the multiple and concurrent demands on the operations of the team, and to make the necessary structural changes, based upon her own evaluation of the situation.

### *Role of academic partners and other stakeholders*

The project had two different academic partners. The first Aboriginal academic partner was affiliated with a regional university some distance from the school. Her research expertise in Aboriginal English and Aboriginal cultural communications supported various aspects of the initial project collaboration among the three then two schools involved. The project team leader at the school noted the "wonderful idea" of this partner was to have the students "work with their communities". The quality of the students' Personal Learning Programs digital narratives indicated the success of this suggestion, which generated quality outcomes for both students and staff. It led to early learning for teachers in carrying out Google searches using the name of Aboriginal countries, which for some proved to be transforming.

In relation to working with the second academic partner, one teacher noted "*the project has given us the opportunity to work with community and work with an academic partner who has been able to guide us and make suggestions ... her contribution has been invaluable and has given us the confidence to find our own resources*". Her vast teaching experience in a range of settings and librarianship skills brought necessary expertise to the next stage of the project. The teacher also noted, additionally, the advantages of having an academic partner who resided close to the school. This helped with networking and with a more informed awareness of the local community. Her experience as a teacher meant that she also recognised how busy teachers at the school were. Across the 20 schools in the overall project there were few Aboriginal teachers employed at these schools. At this site, having an Aboriginal teacher involved, who was able to make many key contributions, was highly valued. She stated that "*we, Aboriginal people, coming in on a project, are your equals and we wish to work with equal, mutual respect*".

Another agent and stakeholder was the Departmental Project Manager who made visits to the school for the purpose of clarifying the intentions of the project. The school team leader reported that Magenta school found the unprecedented nature of the project somewhat difficult to adjust to initially, and it took time before the project developed the momentum achieved in the final phase of the evaluation. The role of the Departmental Project Manager was seen as very important and she was instrumental in progressing the project beyond its early phases, providing the guidance to continue it to completion. One participant noted "*we would be where we were 5 years ago if not for the project – a huge part of that is the personal commitment for the project team members from DET*".

## **7. Sustaining the project**

One way of sustaining the project was for the school to work with a regional Aboriginal Education consultant to organise staff development days, to expand the range of resource sites for teachers to access, and to assist individual teachers to place Aboriginal cultural knowledge perspectives into their units of work. A continuing emphasis on the importance of contemporary cultural knowledge and the new Aboriginal Education policy will support this process. Also important was the need to continue the increased connection with students' families in their home communities to build on the good work carried out by the team.

For enhanced partnership with local Aboriginal organisations and some service providers it may be worthwhile for each of the team members and/or other staff to share the extra curricula commitment of attending evening meetings and for a workload adjustment to be made to support teachers' community meeting attendance and meeting preparation. Greater exposure to a range of models of consultative practices for working with Aboriginal communities would also be of value.

The Department now has a greater emphasis on Information and Communications Technology and connected classrooms and this has already allowed the project to be further revitalized by using technologies such of video conferencing. It was noted by the evaluators, that by using this technology, students from Magenta school were confidently teaching other students in other schools about Aboriginal cultural knowledge.

It is important to emphasise again the significant degree of curriculum change that occurred as a result of the fractional, casual employment of one Aboriginal teacher during the project. If further progress was to be made in the development of Aboriginal perspectives, one way to support that would be for the school to continue to fund the position (in its current state) when the project funding ceased.

## **Red school**

### **1. Context**

Red school is a K-12 school that caters for students with special medical needs from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is situated in Sydney's northern region. In excess of 2,000 students study at the school in a typical year. Students attend the school for short periods of time, sometimes as short as three to four days. They may return at intervals during the year depending on their special needs. At any one time a significant proportion of students on site were of Aboriginal descent. Classes were generally small and grouped into Stages (rather than years) as defined by New South Wales Department of Education and Training. The school environment contained many murals and resources produced by Aboriginal students, their parents and local Aboriginal community members. The school was situated in a broadly networked, interconnected and active local Aboriginal community comprised of traditional custodians, a local Aboriginal education organisation, service providers who worked and/or resided in the area, as well as individuals and families.

### **2. Overview**

The project activities that were initiated at the school focused on the themes of *Narrative, Identity and Place*. The speech development of Aboriginal students was an integral part of this. With the support of the academic partner and a speech pathologist, the project team chose to investigate practices for distinguishing between language differences (eg Aboriginal Standard English) and language difficulties (eg Otitis Media) in Aboriginal students. Aboriginal students in schools had been 'diagnosed, correctly or incorrectly, with Otitis Media' the academic partner noted. The outcomes of this investigation proved valuable.

From these early conceptions of a literacy project emerged a new program devised in 2007 called 'Sounds Words and Yarning' (SWAY). SWAY was designed to enhance student literacy and comprehension levels from the earliest stages of learning. The project utilised the expertise of teachers, including special needs teachers, Aboriginal education workers and health professionals such as speech pathologists. SWAY was developed through classroom modules using Aboriginal resources and Information and Communication Technologies that specifically target speech and language development. Units of work using interactive whiteboards have been developed on oral language skills that embed Aboriginal cultural knowledge. The academic partner explained that 'in the stage one program, [the teachers] use things like clapping sticks to help mitre the way sounds/words are segmented'. For a later stage, Aboriginal games (Indij games) become the basis for the collaborative and enthusiastic production by students of digital 'documentaries'. Students have been gaining skills in digital media through the use of programs such as Windows Movie Maker to make their own movies.

The school hosted Aboriginal students from a nearby secondary school for their Year 10 work experience over a two-year period. Secondary students from other years became classroom mentors to the younger students at the school. The students, residing at a local Aboriginal hostel, participated in these initiatives as part of the *Narrative, Identity and Place* program.

Students at Red school are accompanied by a parent/carer for the duration of their stay hence there is some capacity for parent input into school programs. Lessening the communication gap between the school and parents/carers has always been core business in the school according to the team's Aboriginal Education Officer. Before the project, teachers liaised with parents/carers inviting them into teaching/learning environments and also used Information and Communication Technologies to maintain continuity with students' home schools. With the project came an opportunity for parents and carers to witness teachers' professional changes as they embraced Aboriginal cultural knowledge into their practice. Team members explained that parents/carers must have felt culturally safe and valued enough in the classroom to contribute in this way.

#### *Project development and evolution*

The project team leader explained that the first year of the project was challenging as there was a lack of direction and a lack of clear understanding of both the project model and what constituted Aboriginal cultural knowledge. This was resolved by the expertise of the Department's project managers during a site visit. In the early stages of the project (2006) Red school was one of a group of three schools forming one large project in this locality. The underlying logic for such collaboration centred on the fact that most of the Aboriginal students in each of the schools were living away from their home communities and attending schools in this locality for medical or educational reasons.

For the purpose of this evaluation, only Red school and the partnering secondary school participated. In the first year the two schools worked with the one academic partner to develop a collection of projects that focused on literacy skills and an improved understanding of Aboriginal cultural knowledge. The Quality Teaching dimensions that were targeted were deep knowledge and deep understanding in the Intellectual Quality domain, student engagement in the Quality Learning Environment domain, and cultural knowledge in the Significance domain.

In the second year of the project, the two case study schools separated their project activity into independent, school site-specific projects. Reasons noted for this division included the incompatible demands of primary and secondary school curricula and organisational structures. The same academic partner continued to work with Red school.



At its height, the program secured progress in the areas of teacher's enhanced understandings about Aboriginal cultural knowledge, increased student engagement, quality of resource production featuring Aboriginal cultural knowledge, parent participation in the learning environment and partnership with the local Aboriginal community. In the final phase the academic partner working with the project team was replaced by a community partner. This community member was a recognised artist and had contributed to the school project activity previously.

### **3. Outcomes**

#### *Survey data*

As a smaller special needs school the numbers taking part in the school survey increased from eight in 2007 to twelve in 2008. Staff showed that they valued professional development in Aboriginal education highly and reported that consistently high participation in professional development, with 86% taking part in 2007 and 90% in 2009. In both years all of the staff said their involvement included engagement with Aboriginal people. Considering the impact of their engagement with the Aboriginal community on their teaching, over half the staff said the impact had been 'substantial'. A high proportion said they looked to the local community for informing their understanding of Aboriginal education, with over 80% in both surveys emphasising the community was a valuable resource.

The proportion of staff whose teaching practices were 'substantially' inclusive of Aboriginal cultural knowledge rose from 57% to 64% and almost 60% in both years were adjusting their teaching strategies for their Aboriginal students.

#### *Projects*

One of the achievements was the school's SWAY project. Developed at the school, it was being made available to other schools and was to be trialed with partner schools in rural New South Wales. The teaching and learning outcomes achieved through this project investigation have also been presented at education conferences throughout Australia and represent a significant contribution to a broader learning community. It is hoped that resources will be found to develop a full resource package for distribution to other schools.

The project program at the school made some high quality achievements in terms of deeper knowledge by non-Aboriginal project team members about characteristics of Aboriginal English in Aboriginal learners. The Aboriginal staff members also deepened their understanding of local Aboriginal knowledge as well their knowledge of how language learning occurs. This was of particular significance in allowing accurate assessment of Aboriginal students both developmentally and academically.

The opportunity to evaluate the school's bank of Aboriginal resources and to extend and centralise the collection was seen as a major advantage. This allowed teachers easier access and led to better utilisation of them in classrooms. In turn this should ensure better practices in the purchasing of culturally appropriate resources in the future. Another very significant early achievement for the school was the literacy based, digital media innovation (interactive whiteboard technology - Wiradjuri culture activity) based upon conventionally published resources within the school collection. The teamwork of an Aboriginal teacher and a local Aboriginal community member produced an engaging and innovative teaching and learning resource that could be utilised by teachers using digital media. This resource was showcased at an interstate learning conference.

Indeed, digital media featured as a continual stream of project activity throughout the duration of the project at the school with teachers and Aboriginal community members confirming an increase in student engagement as a result. In the final phase of the project it was evident that classroom based projects (eg small group videos) facilitated by Aboriginal teachers dealing

with Aboriginal cultural knowledge (eg Aboriginal games in Physical Education Health and Personal Development) led to enhanced student awareness of (and participation in learning about) Aboriginal cultural knowledge and digital media.

Greater collegial support amongst staff was another important achievement. The sharing of project staff learning about Aboriginal cultural knowledge with non-project staff members through whole school activities (staff meetings) was evident. This often led to improved self confidence and expertise of the young Aboriginal staff members as well as greater acknowledgement of senior Aboriginal mentors in the school. Another positive outcome was the strong support for school-based project/s and guidance by a range of Aboriginal stakeholders external to the school (such as representatives of the local and regional Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, New South Wales Department of Education and Training regional Aboriginal education staff, traditional owners, parents of learners). Authentic partnerships were formed to collaboratively ensure that, to the best of everyone's ability, cultural protocols were observed whenever the project extended to new expressive forms.

One important observation was the supportive and stable leadership by the project team manager who has had extensive experience working with Aboriginal learners, Aboriginal staff and the local Aboriginal community. This was demonstrated in the person's existing knowledge about some Aboriginal ways of communicating and interacting. Some examples included the support of community "business" for Aboriginal staff, routine attendance as a non-Aboriginal person at local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group meetings for the purpose of consulting about the project and its development and the hosting of meetings of Aboriginal stakeholders on the school site to gain feedback on project activities.

In addition providing a safe place for Aboriginal students to express themselves was another important outcome. Teachers at the school commented on the increased level of engagement by the students in classroom work, noting with particular interest the engagement of students who normally do not want to work. *"everything is much steadier, more consistent... kids relax more with the Aboriginal books.... Just the discussions that we were having... they weren't afraid to ask questions."*

The use of still and video cameras to record sessions which are then used creatively with students in re-constructing stories which are more culturally appropriate or learning how to operate with western protocols are two examples of this *"... in these instances learning becomes more authentic and students feel safe to speak"*.

#### *Evidence of teacher professional learning*

Teachers in their focus groups identified a greater awareness of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and a greater level of professional dialogue between teachers as key outcomes. Teachers noted their willingness to be flexible and to work collaboratively. In answer to a question on how their professional learning had been enhanced, one teacher exclaimed *"in millions of ways ... it is hard to put them into words."* Another said *"one of the main things is ... to have a go ... to try and change the way I teach"*.

Midway through the project activities, at a formal presentation to a range of Aboriginal education stakeholders, the project Aboriginal community representative on the project advisory team asked one of the Aboriginal teachers "what did you learn about this?" Her answer was "so much about protocols and about how school can be engaging". The same representative asked the speech therapist on the team "what did you learn about this?" and her answer was that:

*... most of our texts are so Australian Standard English...they're boring. This whole project has changed my understanding of how speech therapists' recommendations [to schools] of materials need to be changed.*

During the early stages, teachers were able to review their assumptions about culture and language when a student located the 'where' icon (in a literacy-based interactive whiteboard activity) to the dreaming story rather than to the road map where the teacher/s assumed it would go. The teacher's assumption that the dreaming story icon was a time-based cue ('when') was unpacked during the school's routine, full-staff debrief. The incident demonstrated the nuances and complexities of cultural knowledge as well as its management in teaching and learning contexts.

Another observation from the academic partner was that staff:

*...work well as a team at [Red] school...debrief each day, very collaborative.*

The intimacy and uniqueness of this site did work favorably towards the practice of daily debriefing, but the commitment to maintain this in a nonetheless demanding context was noteworthy as a means of managing collaborative learning about emerging knowledge domains. As the project drew to a close, another Aboriginal teacher expressed his enthusiasm about the high levels of engagement he observed from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners in his classes, when an intersection of developmentally appropriate Aboriginal cultural knowledge and digital media occurred in learning experiences. One example was the primary school students' collaborative making of an instructional video clip on the topic of Aboriginal sports where students become the cast and crew of the productions. Another was the use of interactive whiteboard technology that drew on Horton's *Map of Aboriginal Australia*.

#### **4. Key factors**

It was very evident that two factors enhancing teacher professional development were collegiality and the ability to work as a team. Despite initial organisational difficulties, the project experience had been rewarding. "The ownership that I have with my own work has been very rewarding". School has been very supportive particularly in the availability of resources. One young teacher commented that he had completed two units of Aboriginal studies at university "but just one term at school made me realise I knew nothing". Another "realised how easy it was to incorporate an Aboriginal perspective in our classes".

One central point stressed by all teachers was availability of funding to release staff to engage in professional development activities. The fact that this was over a three-year period was another very significant point. Access to Aboriginal resources was seen as very important in this process, as they needed to be culturally appropriate. Access to an Aboriginal person also enabled better understandings. Having an Aboriginal Education Officer in the room enabled her "to give me the thumbs upon things for example, the way I am speaking, makes it a bit easier".

One other point to note was the heavy pressure on Aboriginal staff at the school - whether they were the Aboriginal Education Assistant or the Aboriginal Liaison Officer - to be in all places at all times. Often these staff members were taking on roles within the school and with other Aboriginal organisations outside of the school. A participant explained that "the most powerful learning experiences have been to hear the different stories from Aboriginal people of their lives and experiences. This has given me an enhanced and informed perception of Aboriginal history and culture".

Factors constraining teacher professional learning related mostly to time constraints and the everyday processes in schools that impact on teachers being able to reflect on their practice

and implement their programs with optimal planning and resources. Educational institutions seeking to implement Aboriginal programs need to appropriately resource and remunerate staff in schools taking on these roles to ensure that they train more staff in these important areas so that they are available as advisers on Aboriginal cultural knowledge. The mode of operation in this school, with students attending for only short periods, posed some difficulties for teachers in planning teaching units that were coherent and continuous and suited to the students' abilities. One further constraint was the lack of availability of local Aboriginal resources to incorporate in teaching materials.

#### *Consultation and collaboration with Aboriginal community*

The project team at the school was in an advantageous position from an early phase of the project given the strong model of consultative practice that emerged from the commitment of the team leader and the Aboriginal Education Officer. A local community member representing a local Aboriginal organisation confirmed this in a 2007 community situated focus group, by saying that the relationship with the school and the organisation "has developed as a result of project".

From interviews in 2007, it was clear that the project team leader's understanding of the diversity and complexity of the local Aboriginal community (as that term might apply to the school site) was insightful and demonstrated extensive involvement with a range of stakeholders in Aboriginal education over a sustained period of time. Similarly, the locally active and culturally well-connected Aboriginal Education Officer was a significant asset and driving force within the project in planning and agency.

The project team routinely held (and participated in) presentations for local and regional Aboriginal community organisations and community members on the school site as well as ensuring that project progress was communicated offsite, at regular community organisation meetings. One local Aboriginal community member noted, in a focus group in 2007, that at the school 'we really love to go inside and share it all. Open days, meetings and AGM's open the school up to the community in all sorts of ways'. The project budget allocation took into account the need to make a space for the hosting of school-based consultative activities.

One other important feature observed on site was the involvement of parents in sessions to enhance their understanding of their children's learning in the classroom so that they were in a better position to be of assistance in their home school when the students returned home. The school website contained a Koori Room, providing a cultural interface for students, parents and carers, both before they physically arrived at the school and to support learning after they left the school. In this way the project enhanced the content of this means of communication. Some Aboriginal parents were interviewed for their feedback on the project. One commended the project and explained that upon her son's return home from the school he would, in his room, repeatedly play a copy of the video clip he helped produce at the school. She noted that it reminded him of the positive experiences he took from the school.

#### *Understandings of Aboriginal cultural knowledge*

In early interviews about the definitions of 'the Aboriginal community', team members communicated a significant range of understandings. The experienced, non-Aboriginal team leader demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the term describing, in the first instance, as the primary significance of the traditional country that the school was located in and the importance of the local Aboriginal community that lived and worked in that setting. She was able to name individuals and organisations. She then noted, given the high percentage of Aboriginal students from other regions, the importance of obligations to and connections with the students' own community (and/or 'country'). The non-Aboriginal team leader attended local Aboriginal organisation meetings as necessary. Accompanied by the school's Aboriginal Education Officer, both school representatives engaged in meaningful, considered

dialogue about the progress of the project with local Aboriginal community organisation members.

Another teaching staff member identified the school's Aboriginal Education Officer as the community, though she noted that her knowledge was expanding rapidly as the project unfolded. She was able to cite several examples of how her practice and understandings had been positively challenged in the early phase of project at the school. The school was very mindful of its protocol obligations and informed local and regional New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group members about the progress of the project. The community representative of the project team had asked permission, in advance, from a local Elder, about the intention to use an Aboriginal language from another Aboriginal country on the school site. To verify this to the audience, the Aboriginal teacher, using an interactive whiteboard, presented a video clip that documented this request for permission from the local Elder to use the language of another Aboriginal country on his country. The video clip included the Elder's reply of endorsement.

In addition, at the same presentation to local and regional New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group members, an Aboriginal teacher in the project team demonstrated professional robustness to receive and incorporate into their work the critical feedback of four different community members about the cultural accuracy of an aspect of one resource that the school had designed. The resource itself, using interactive whiteboard technology, was a major success within the project in terms of its capacity to engage learners and extend their awareness of Aboriginal cultural knowledge. It had been co-designed by the teacher with an Aboriginal community member, based upon an existing popular resource. The feedback, once adopted, would have given the resource greater cultural integrity. The teacher demonstrated a healthy preparedness to accept and incorporate changes from community advice.

A local Aboriginal community representative spoke positively about the targeted use of Aboriginal language to support students to feel welcome at school. She noted that "language words are known to be used in assembly based upon the students each week (eg Wiradjuri, Gamilaroi, Gumbangirr)". Aboriginal cultural protocols such as acknowledging Country at the commencement of assemblies and meetings and inviting participants to introduce themselves, has become, through the respectful example of the Aboriginal Education Officer in particular, a standard practice at the school.

### **5. Challenges and opportunities**

While the project's start was problematic the academic partner said that in the final phase, "the staff have acknowledged wholeheartedly that without the project they couldn't have ... directed the things the way they have and this is because the project has given them a direction to follow in terms of their staff development, in terms of how they put together programs". Having three sites collaborate on one theme was ambitious and unsustainable.

As noted earlier, one challenge was to gather together a team of teachers and support staff who would work collegially, support each other and share resources and have a sense of shared commitment to the success of whole project. As the project team leader noted:

*choosing the right people to work on the project - I think you need to pick people who have an innate enthusiasm. The teachers [currently working on the program] are passionate about it. Their passion and 'can do' attitude has sparked other things happening whereas if you have someone who doesn't want to do it they will undermine it in some way. I think you will have to accept the fact that there are some staff who won't change.*

Another challenge was the desire by teachers and the local Aboriginal community to incorporate local Aboriginal knowledge into teaching materials and units of work. This proved difficult because few resources were available. Therefore one consideration emerging from this report is the need for the Department and the New South Wales Board of Studies to assist teachers in this locality to develop locally specific Aboriginal resources through a small grants program or similar initiative.

One further concern expressed by the team leader was the time pressures on the local Aboriginal community members and the challenge of negotiating the need to consult with the local Aboriginal community and their availability because of their own heavy work commitments and the many roles they have in this community, which means that they are often needing to attend multiple meetings. Often local Aboriginal people are called on to take on many roles and it is important that the Department allows adequate funding for the employment of more Aboriginal people within its departments to undertake roles that are important to the incorporation of Aboriginal perspectives or Aboriginal knowledge into curriculum documents.

One major challenge was negotiating the unique nature of this school and its student population. While teachers were able to structure their curriculum to cater for the short bursts of time they had with their students, termed 'microwave teaching' by the Aboriginal consultant, it would be educationally beneficial if contact could be fostered and maintained with the student's home school in between their visits to the school. In addition, if parental contact could be initiated between the student's home school and supported by the school it would be possible to gain some continuity in the teaching program for the students. This would be of great educational benefit to student progress.

## **6. Leadership**

There was clear evidence in this school that good collaborative and integrated leadership had played a key role in the success of the project. The principal was not only supportive but heavily involved in the project. A local community member noted that at the school:

*there is evidence of the principal's leadership. I can walk into that building and everyone knows me and says "hello". It's a welcoming environment.*

This was emphasised by the academic partner who noted that a really important part of teamwork was leadership. Particularly it had been the principal's role in "*recognising and organising all the expertise of the team ... creating the dynamics that go together in a school with the access to resources that the school has*". The commitment of the whole team had been observed as "one team one direction".

The academic partner noted the courage of teachers to allow the academic partner to visit classrooms. She said:

*it was quite an honour to watch the things grow. Despite the disadvantage the school has of rotation of students the advantages were seized upon of putting together the group's eclectic skills and mastering them in short sharp modules.*

### *Role of academic partners and other stakeholders*

The academic partner of this school played an active role informing and supporting the project, particularly in its initial stages. She conducted professional development seminars with staff and assisted teachers with programs most specifically in the Aboriginal languages and literacy areas. The team leader did explain that a future broader project might be improved with planning for a 'pool of academic mentors', rather than just having one academic partner allocated to a school, in order to provide a range of expertise to match the

changing emphases of the school based project. Academic partners could then collaborate according to their expertise for the different phases of the project.

Other stakeholders including the Departmental Project Manager were invaluable in maintaining the momentum of the project. Staff commented on how useful the project conferences were in exploring Aboriginal issues and sharing knowledge and how accessible the Department's Project Manager had been in the project.

### **7. Sustaining the project**

At this school the team members selected existing Aboriginal authored or endorsed publications as the basis for innovative teaching and learning activity. While this accorded appropriately with notions of Aboriginal self-determination, the Aboriginal country featured in the resource may not have been the Aboriginal country where the school was located. Funding for the production of *local* Aboriginal community endorsed, published resources incorporating Aboriginal cultural knowledge was necessary to make the engagement levels of staff sustainable.

According to the team leader there appeared to be an expectation that the project should be sustained but there was no clear direction how this would happen. She noted:

*it has been one of the most exciting things I have been involved in and I think it's based on really good principles. What they expect at the other end is interesting. You want teachers to embed [Aboriginal] cultural knowledge into what they do, but you want a multiplier effect surely.*

Another important point highlighted was the need to provide resources to connect the school to the student's local home school to ensure that the gains they made during their short visits were continued in the student's home environment. A team member said:

*We will continue to do what we are doing but I think what we are producing should go further than that. We are developing a take home kit. I would like the Department...to help us package some of this.*

## **Chapter 5. Key findings**

The project enabled staff at a total of twenty schools to be involved, over a sustained period of time, in working on a variety of Aboriginal education professional learning activities. They included working on strategies for engaging and supporting learners, ways of drawing on and including local Aboriginal/Aboriginal knowledge into their teaching, and ways of developing the involvement of teachers, other staff and students with their local Aboriginal community.

In outlining our findings we first report briefly on a number of key aspects of the teacher professional learning that we found from our analysis of the case study schools. We highlight findings from the two school surveys carried out in 2007 and 2008 and provide a more detailed outline of insights from our analysis of the case studies.

### **Professional learning and teaching practices**

The study has highlighted the importance of school education departments providing support for the professional development of teachers and other school staff about Aboriginal histories and cultures and particularly in further developing their knowledge of, and contact with, local Aboriginal communities and the cultures they represent.

The main professional learning outcomes for the staff involved that were identified in our study included:

- professional collaboration around a particular teaching/learning purpose – the value of collaboration, of a forum for professional conversations;
- learning about action learning and Quality Teaching – there was a great deal of learning about the action learning change process, about action learning teams, working together as a team, and the Quality Teaching model;
- time to reflect on practice – teachers valued the opportunity and time to discuss and reflect on their teaching practice;
- renewal and revitalisation of teaching practices – teachers reported a sense of renewal and revitalisation of their teaching practices across a number of key areas;
- gaining greater confidence in drawing on and embedding aspects of Aboriginal culture and knowledge(s) into their teaching and into particular subject areas;
- better understanding of particular teaching strategies and key resource packages;
- greater proficiency as a result of training and experience in using a number of different interactive technologies, and
- better engagement with Aboriginal communities, building more sustainable connections within the community, visits with Elders to local Aboriginal sites, greater confidence in including Aboriginal perspectives in teaching.

There was also evidence of notable attitudinal change among many of the participants in the schools taking part and an indication that for some participants the changes were transformational.



## School survey data

### Professional learning

The survey findings show that among the project participants surveyed the level of participation in professional development in Aboriginal education was quite high and that the level was much higher than in other priority teaching areas such as literacy and numeracy. It was also likely that the survey group had a much higher level of participation in professional development in Aboriginal education than would be found among staff in other government schools in New South Wales who were not involved in the project.

### Teaching practices

Almost all respondents, when asked about the need to improve their teaching practices, agreed they needed to improve their practices.

The proportion who noted they ‘frequently’ **adjusted their teaching strategies** to better meet the needs of Aboriginal students increased from 37% to 50% between the two surveys, leaving only a small proportion who ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ did.

There was a noticeable increase in the proportion of teachers who felt there had been a ‘substantial’ increase in the **impact of engaging with the local Aboriginal community** on their teaching practices.

The main **resources teachers used** to inform their own understanding of Aboriginal education were resource guides, information from the local Aboriginal community, Aboriginal education policy documents, reports and reviews. The least used were resources accessed through the Internet. Traditional text based and media forms were most frequently used to inform their teaching of Aboriginal cultural knowledge.

A significant proportion said that their school had a **culture of high expectations** for the achievement of Aboriginal children, with only a small proportion saying it had ‘very little’ or ‘not at all’.

A majority said their teaching strategies were somewhat **inclusive of Aboriginal cultural knowledge**, although only a small proportion said they discussed contemporary Aboriginal issues ‘often’ in class.

Generally **the assessment methods** teachers used most frequently to assess student learning included using artwork, story-telling and oral assessments.

### Engagement with the Aboriginal community

Most respondents felt the school did have a **culture of respect** for Aboriginal families at the school.

Most felt they ‘somewhat’ **understood the educational issues** facing the school’s educational community

Almost all respondents said that their professional learning activities did involve **engagement with Aboriginal people**.

Only a small but increasing proportion said they frequently **discussed contemporary Aboriginal issues** with Aboriginal parents, although there were noticeable drops in the proportions who did this ‘occasionally’, ‘never’ or ‘rarely’.

## Detailed case study findings

The case studies showed that the schools involved responded to the opportunities provided by the project in a range of different ways. Their responses were shaped by the particular school and local Aboriginal community contexts. The five Phase One case study schools were involved for up to four years, while the two Phase Two case study schools took part for up to three years.

### School contexts

The contexts of the case study schools varied considerably in terms of the kind of school, their location, enrolments and proportion of Aboriginal students at the school. In reporting on these aspects we have drawn on the Department's 2009 enrolment data for these schools (see Appendix 1).

#### *School location and enrolments*

Among the four primary schools the settings ranged from:

- a small primary school in a rural community in the Riverina (Dolomite – 96 enrolments);
- a medium sized primary school in a remote regional centre (Blue – 356 enrolments);
- a similar sized primary school in a smaller rural town in western New South Wales (Cobalt – 393 enrolments), and
- a larger primary school in western Sydney (Crimson – 630 enrolments).

The two high schools and a special needs school included:

- a comprehensive school in a semi-rural setting in south western Sydney (Cadmium – 1020 enrolments);
- a high school on Sydney's northern beaches (Magenta – 990 enrolments), and
- a special needs K- 12 school in Sydney's northern region (Red – 2,000 enrolments a year) catering for children with special medical needs from across New South Wales.

#### *Aboriginal student enrolments (2009 and 2008 figures)*

As mentioned earlier here we have highlighted the Aboriginal student enrolment figures for the case study schools, drawing on available 2009 and 2008 data. We need to note that the proportions differ from the enrolments in 2006 at the start of the project. Among the primary schools the proportion of Aboriginal students ranged from 10% at Crimson, 15% at Blue, 17% at Cobalt to 34% at Dolomite. At the two high schools and the special needs school the proportions were lower, with 1% at Magenta, 6% at Cadmium and 14% at Red\* (\*2008 data).

### Overview of the project

A feature of all the case study schools was that, as required by the project guidelines, each school did set up an action learning team to guide their project. As reported by the schools to the Department, the size and composition of their teams varied. Among the four case study primary schools:

- Blue school was led by the assistant principal with five team members and the Aboriginal Education Officer;
- Cobalt school was led by the principal and included the deputy principal, an Aboriginal Education Officer and a total of seven members;
- Crimson school was initially led by an assistant principal, included an Aboriginal Education Officer and a parent/community member. It started with nine members and dropped to six, losing the parent member, and
- Dolomite school was led by the principal with five team members, and handed over to an assistant principal in the second phase of the project.

In the action learning teams at the two high schools and special needs school:

- Cadmium school was led by a deputy principal, started with five members and increased to nine including one parent/community member;
- Magenta school started being led by a deputy principal and in 2008 was handed over to a head teacher (Administration). It had six team members, including an Aboriginal Education Officer, and
- Red school team was led by the principal with six members including an Aboriginal Education Officer.

### **Departmental role and time for release**

All the schools involved in the project were supported by Departmental staff, especially the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project Manager, who played a key role in setting up each school project, providing teams with an orientation program, monitoring their progress, and helping to address issues as the projects evolved.

Time for the release of staff was provided by the project to support the involvement of staff at each school. Each school's leadership allocated the time so that staff could regularly attend team meetings.

### **Professional learning focus**

A feature of the project was that it was left up to each school team to decide the particular focus of the school's project activities. As a result the focus of each school's professional learning activities varied from school to school. They included among the primary schools a focus on:

- improving literacy among all students, with a particular emphasis on Aboriginal students and a collaborative community based visual arts-based project (Blue);
- accelerated literacy for Stage One students, extending into a writing program utilising *Smart Board* technology for Stage One to Stage Four students (Crimson);
- improving student writing performance, drawing on a range of audiovisual technologies, as well as links with a bush garden project, the formation of an Aboriginal dance group at the school, and the teaching of a Wiradjuri language program (Dolomite), and
- numeracy topics and mathematics pedagogy (Cobalt).

The high schools and special needs school focused on:

- writing units and developing resources - a group of English teachers wrote an English unit on the shared values of Indigenous and western cultures, teaching resources were developed in consultation with the local Aboriginal community, and Year 7 and 8 students worked on a number of Information and Communication Technologies mini-projects focused on the local Aboriginal community (Cadmium);
- involving Aboriginal students - by developing students' self-identity through research into family histories personal narratives using Information and Communication Technologies, and employing an Aboriginal teacher to work on a range of activities. The project also expanded to incorporate the development of an Aboriginal perspective in a range of Key Learning Areas and raised awareness of Aboriginal cultures and histories across the school (Magenta), and
- language and identity - teachers focused on developing student speech and literacy skills, by including a speech pathologist in the project, incorporating digital media into teaching and learning, developing a new literacy program (*Sounds, Words and Yarning* - SWAY) and gaining an improved understanding of Aboriginal cultural knowledge (Red).

## **Outcomes**

An important finding was that across all the case study schools, despite any concerns and challenges experienced by schools in starting off their projects, the schools demonstrated a range of positive outcomes as a result of their involvement in the project.

### *Supporting teacher learning and a collaborative approach*

A major finding is that the project did result, across most of the schools, in the development of the capacity of teachers and staff to work collaboratively, taking an action learning based approach within a Quality Teaching model, to address issues of professional learning, support student learning and learn more about local Aboriginal communities.

There were a range of advantages for both staff and students from having a regular opportunity to take part in a collaborative, action learning based strategic professional learning activity with a common purpose, focusing on Aboriginal culture, history and knowledge. The schools, staff, students and local communities benefited from having staff released for the project during school time. Generally the project funding enabled staff to meet during school teaching hours, although at one school team members were sometimes only able to meet after school.

### *New learning*

Teachers reported gaining new insights into their teaching and being involved in their own new learning, especially about different learning strategies they could apply in their classrooms. This was achieved, in part, by being able to work together with other teachers and Aboriginal education workers and consultants to focus on specific learning issues. Among the case study schools teachers were able to specifically focus on literacy, numeracy, creating particular teaching modules, resource development and a creative arts project. There were also a number of cases where teachers were able to work across a number of Key Learning Areas.

### *Quality Teaching model*

Teachers indicated they developed a better understanding of the Quality Teaching model as a result of working on the project, and for some staff the model worked as an organising concept that helped them to find their way in better addressing specific learning issues. Their capacity to reflect on the pedagogical practices entailed in the model assisted them to focus their teaching strategies more directly on student learning.

### *Building capacity*

Over the life of the project it was evident that building school and teacher capacity in addressing Aboriginal education issues took time. At the start, despite the project orientation provided, there was a great deal of confusion about what the project involved. A number of teachers reported not being sure 'if they had the capacity to do this', and if they would be able to make a connection with the local community.

While the Quality Teaching model was better known at the start, it appeared that most schools found it hard at the beginning of the project to understand what was required of them, what to focus on, and what a participatory action learning change model involved. This initial confusion was resolved with the assistance of the Department's staff and to varying degrees by academic partners. By the end of the project teachers reported that they had understood what the process involved and teams had been able to work through and better understand the issues.

### *Developing expertise in action learning*

Members of the school teams did develop expertise in applying an action learning approach. The use of an action learning approach, with the teams as the main drivers of the project,

generally proved to be effective in enabling teachers and staff to work together, to focus on a particular set of learning issues, to explore their attitudes and classroom practices, to learn new things and to deal with their uncertainties and discomfort in mostly positive and supported environments.

#### *Process of change*

The case studies showed that by adopting an action learning change model, together with the kind of support provided by the teams, most teachers were able to make positive changes in how they approached their teaching, in particular in their awareness and understanding of Aboriginal cultures. In this way the project contributed to achieving at least some incremental progress and positive change, in the sense that schools and school educators were acknowledging and valuing local Aboriginal culture, history and knowledge.

**Notable change events** - Some of the events that were often seen as first steps, but were identified as bringing about notable change at a school, included the raising of an Aboriginal flag at one school for the first time and setting up a Koori room as a teaching and learning environment that was also a welcoming space for the community. There were also learning projects that resulted in units of student work including a mural project, establishing a bush garden that drew on local Aboriginal history and knowledge, starting up an Aboriginal dance group and the process of creating a large canvas artwork that was produced through a creative arts project involving the local Aboriginal community. The Sounds Words and Yarning (SWAY) literacy program was also an important learning project.

Overall across the schools staff reported that a major change was their improved links and connections to the local Aboriginal community, including drawing on the community knowledge(s), and increased consultation in relation to their teaching.

**Notable changes in attitudes** – Among some of the notable changes in attitudes were that a number of teachers reported they had developed a new found respect for the Aboriginal staff (including support staff and teachers) at their school. In some cases this involved teachers realising for the first time the positive contributions these staff members could make to learning at the school - especially through the cultural knowledge that they bring to teachers' relationships with students, parents and carers and the ability of the Aboriginal staff to engage with the local Aboriginal community.

While for some participants the change that occurred was incremental and partial, for others the change was seen as transformative (Mezirow 2000). For these participants it meant that they were able to move through a number of distinct stages – from initial discomfort, uncertainty and confusion, through to a deeper level of knowledge and understanding about their local Aboriginal community. Hopefully this meant that they had moved to a more sustained and ongoing, culturally engaged and inclusive approach to their teaching.

It was also evident that the project was contributing towards the goal of carrying out the restorative work with Aboriginal communities that a number of studies have pointed to (Board of Studies 2001; Bin-Sallik & Smallacombe 2003). It achieved this by supporting the strengthening of connections between schools and local Aboriginal communities (including both Aboriginal parents and local community agencies).

#### *Applying technologies*

A feature of a number of the schools was that teachers were able to apply a number of different Interactive and Communication Technologies to address particular learning needs. These included such things as *Smart Board*, digital technologies and video conferencing.

The capacity for students to engage in the use of the latest digital technologies was seen as one of the key features of the project. Most case studies schools showed great progress in this

area. The outcomes were greater student engagement and an improvement in their skills base, aspects which are likely to prove beneficial to them in the future.

### *Student learning*

The data on student learning outcomes was largely anecdotal with the notable exception of Crimson school, whose academic partner assisted in the analysis of National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy results for the school, providing an indication that specific teaching in certain areas had had an impact. However, it was agreed during the study that it would not be possible to gather sufficient data across all case study schools to assess the impact of the program on student learning outcomes. Instead we have highlighted a number of qualitative findings from a few of the case studies.

In one school, Cobalt, the teachers reported higher levels of student engagement, more on-time attendance and lower levels of truancy. They also suggested that students had become more motivated to learn and showed more interest in their work, valuing their lessons and their school education more. Given the focus on numeracy, it was notable that teachers reported that a feature valued by students was the teaching approach that took their learning of mathematics outside of the classroom. The teachers also felt that their adoption of a hands-on approach, introducing activities and the manipulation of concrete objects, also helped to make learning more authentic. It was a key outcome of all of the teachers taking part in the mathematics workshops at the school, to support learners to achieve equitable outcomes in mathematics for their year and stage levels.

In all case studies schools students gained opportunities to work with new technologies, to experiment with new projects, such as being part of the school's editorial committee for the school journal and showcase their work both at the school and in the wider community. This was done through community based creative arts projects and cultural heritage displays as well as video conferencing with other schools. The result for many was an enhancement of the students' self concept and greater pride in their cultural roots.

### **Understanding Aboriginal cultural knowledge**

A feature of the project was the different ways in which Aboriginal cultural knowledge was understood. While materials were prepared to help staff understand what it involved, the term was not defined for the teams and it remained for each team to explore the concept and arrive at their own interpretation of its meaning. Over the course of the project school staff indicated they had taken a number of different views of what constituted Aboriginal cultural knowledge.

One perspective was that cultural knowledge was about making an attitudinal change, where teachers developed a stronger empathy towards Aboriginal people and an appreciation that despite the challenges, teachers were able to make contact with local communities and through their engagement start to make some positive differences in their teaching. By making contact with the local Aboriginal community they and their students accessed new cultural knowledge about their community.

Another perspective was the recognition of the existence of a distinctive Aboriginal perspective – one that acknowledged Aboriginal histories, cultures and knowledge. This meant that teachers saw they could draw on this knowledge to improve their students' engagement and learning. Also teachers came to realise that each community had its own distinct local histories, cultures and knowledge – especially of the land. Local Elders were recognised as some of the most important people carrying and being able to provide access to that knowledge.

A further aspect that emerged was that some staff recognised the importance of the Aboriginal staff at the school – in some cases they were viewed more as key resources, with

knowledge of the local community. In others they were recognised in another important role - as brokers who had access to knowledge and could assist teachers to learn about local Aboriginal cultural knowledge. One teacher indicated that because they had an Aboriginal teacher/adviser as a member of their project team they were able to learn a great deal more about Aboriginal cultural knowledge than if the teacher had not been there. Here the Aboriginal staff member was seen as a broker – who could both access knowledge and make contact with key people in the local community. In this way a number of staff mentioned how they also developed a new found respect for Aboriginal staff – both teachers and support staff.

### **Engagement with the local Aboriginal community**

As we noted earlier, it was important to acknowledge that the nature of each of the local Aboriginal communities connected to a school varied considerably in their size, connections to the school, and in their capacity to be engaged in making connections with school staff and students to share local cultural knowledge with the school. In many cases the communities were relatively disadvantaged in terms of educational attainment, employment and income levels, health and housing. Community members continue to experience the impact of dispossession of their land, obstacles to connections with their own cultural pathways and ongoing racism.

Acknowledging these factors did not mean schools were taking a ‘deficit view’ of the community. Rather it pointed to the need for schools to recognise their role in reaching out to positively engage with local communities. It meant that despite disadvantages, as our study shows, where schools did reach out and look for connections and contributions, taking a ‘strengths view’ of the community, there were a number of Aboriginal Elders, groups and parents who were interested and wanted to be positively involved with schools around learning.

#### *Who makes up the community?*

It should be acknowledged that it was important for each school and their team to explore who the team and the school saw as their local Aboriginal community or communities – who should be included? – who represented the community on education, cultural issues? – how best to make contact? - and how should they be approached? While efforts were made to assist teams in this process, it appeared that there was a need among a number of teams to better understand how relationships could be developed and strengthened over time.

#### *Community representatives*

Our study showed that in some school communities a number of Aboriginal community representatives were already actively involved with their local schools and their involvement was deepened as a result of the project. Where some schools reached out to the local Elders in the community and to representatives from the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, these groups did become involved with their school.

In other schools this kind of involvement was limited. In these schools the emphasis was often limited to arranging involvement with and through Aboriginal staff at the school – seeing those staff as the key brokers of knowledge about the community. Also important was that in some communities, with only a few people active on education issues, it was difficult for schools to make the connections with Aboriginal community representatives. Often the people were over stretched or for other reasons found it very difficult to respond to requests from schools.

### **Engagement with Aboriginal community and parents**

The case studies showed that the project did enable schools to improve their engagement with the local Aboriginal community, including to a lesser extent with parents. Our study showed

that generally local Elders and community representatives, including those from local community agencies were involved with schools around learning. Some schools noted that their links with Aboriginal parents and their participation at school had improved, and that efforts were made to organise meetings with parents, set up an Aboriginal parents group and start a regular newsletter to regularly inform and involve parents more in their children's learning.

Overall this study found that where school staff did make an effort to change their attitudes and behaviour, staff were able to move beyond involvement with mostly negative issues related to attendance, discipline and disengagement from learning, to a more positive focus. This involved developing improved relationships with the local community focussed on learning – in some cases on joint learning and exchange.

### **Factors enhancing professional learning**

Among the main factors enhancing professional learning at the primary schools were:

- providing staff development opportunities;
- allowing a team based approach to professional development;
- having a purposeful engagement;
- projects being supported by all Key Learning Areas, with staff interactions and staff enthusiasm and commitment;
- having a supportive/resourceful school principal;
- a very dedicated team leader;
- having an academic partner or cultural mentor;
- being able to attend the project conferences;
- increased parent and community involvement in the school, and
- access to Departmental support and information about the project.

Among the high schools and special needs schools the main factors noted were:

- having a supportive principal and good executive leadership;
- having at least one Aboriginal person represented in the action learning team, and
- working in teams.

### **Challenges and constraints**

Among the important challenges and constraints identified by the case study schools were:

- **understanding the action learning approach** – schools found it difficult at the start to understand the action learning approach and what the process involved.
- **team building and maintenance** - the ability of a school to gather together a team who were willing and able to work together and have a shared sense of responsibility and commitment to the success of the project.
- **constraints of time and work commitments** – for teachers, Aboriginal education workers and members of Aboriginal communities.
- **difficulties in accessing teacher relief** - in some cases the school staff involved in the project participated despite not being able to access adequate teaching relief due to constraints including the remoteness of the school and the disruption caused to students and did so in addition to their existing duties.
- **leadership** – there was general agreement that for the project to work it needed the support of the school executive. It was not clear if the project teams needed to have a principal or deputy leading the project – but it was clear from the staff that they certainly needed to have the executive being supportive of the team's activities.



- **leadership style** - the style of leadership that worked best to support the projects was one that encouraged collaboration, discussion and what we have described as a distributed leadership approach
- **demands on Aboriginal support staff** - there was the issue of the additional workload that was placed onto Aboriginal staff such as Aboriginal Education Officers and teachers' aides, who were paid significantly less than teachers, and were sometimes provided with no relief from their other school duties.
- **Aboriginal community context** – while most Aboriginal communities face difficult socio-economic circumstances, there is always a proportion of agencies and families who can and want to be involved with schools and schooling, especially involving children in the primary and middle years. There was some concern about how teachers could effectively negotiate the various conflicts and factions within communities.
- **Aboriginal knowledge and cultures** – conceptual and practical issues. There was some confusion about the concept of local Aboriginal knowledge and to a lesser extent Aboriginal cultures. Some teachers noted that they weren't sure what they were expected to engage with and what particular local Aboriginal knowledge. There was a concern about who constitutes the Aboriginal community. There was also a set of practical concerns about knowledge and culture – where do you look? who was best to approach? how could they start getting involved? These were all challenging questions that needed to be addressed in each school-community setting/context.
- **local resources about Aboriginal histories and cultures** - there was a notable absence of localised resources about local Aboriginal histories and cultures - particularly resources that were reasonably contemporary, up to date, and ideally authored or co-authored by Aboriginal people.
- **involving Aboriginal community members**– in a number of local communities there was also additional pressure on the time of a small number of key Aboriginal community members to be involved with a school – people who would want and need to take part, but were sometimes unable or severely limited in their capacity to be involved. Addressing historically embedded negative attitudes and a lack of trust within the local community and among parents towards the school could often be done by making an effort and ensuring there was follow up by the school on any decisions that were made or actions agreed upon. Also important in considering the capacity of Aboriginal community members and parents to be involved were practical things such as the lack of transport and the need to provide transport to attend school meetings.
- **involving Aboriginal parents** – teachers continued to have concerns about their ability to engage effectively with Aboriginal parents. Some teachers did report some discomfort in their interactions with parents, and they felt that in some cases it was mutual. In some cases teachers felt more comfortable meeting and talking with parents away from school. Yet the schools showed that where teachers were willing to make an effort, and were supported in their initiatives, they often produced positive results for the staff and the parents. It was really important that teachers moved away from just taking negative 'deficit views' of the local community.
- **availability of computer and internet access** - it was important to remember the variability in availability for both students and some teachers of access to computers (in some cases it was only available at school) and to very slow internet access at

some schools. Computers and networks in some schools were not able to adequately support the required software programs being used with students.

- **academic partners** – in some cases there was a need to inform academic partners, especially those with little or no experience of working with schools, about some of the key school organisational procedures and practices. These included the nature of school year, the pressures of different times of the year, and the various pressures on staff availability. Establishing a bank of academic partners with wide ranging expertise to draw upon, if necessary, would help with the development of projects. Also important was the issue of the location of an academic partner, especially for those who were working with schools at significant distance from their workplace.

### **Project leadership and academic partners**

#### *Project leadership*

Among the schools where the most significant positive changes occurred, the project teams were generally marked by a distributive or facilitative leadership. Given that the team membership ranged from between five and eleven participants, it emerged that a facilitative approach was the most effective. This meant that the team leader, generally a principal or deputy, brought their team together, encouraged discussion and allowed for a period of confusion and messiness at the start. This enabled team members to feel encouraged and supported to make decisions and follow them through, resulting in the team accepting responsibility for progressing the project. In some cases an even more loosely controlled or distributed process enabled projects to evolve in a more organic way. In general, the adoption of a facilitative leadership style meant that teams were able to maintain momentum over a number of years and to achieve a number of the main project aims.

In one school where the project team was tightly managed by the team leader, few team meetings were held and the action learning process not applied, the project struggled to develop sound working relationships over the life of the project with the local Aboriginal community.

#### *Academic partners*

The support of academic partners did make a positive contribution to schools. How academic partners participated in the project teams varied across the case study schools. In some cases there were changes in who acted as the academic partner during the project. Also there were some concerns about the correlation between the expertise of a partner and the direction of the project. Where the relationship worked between the team and the academic partner, the academic partner was able to play an important, valuable, supportive role, helping the team to map out the issues they wanted to address, and providing feedback over time as the project developed. In some cases the relationship did not work effectively over the life of the project and the school team was not able to benefit fully from the expertise of the academic partner.

#### *Other professional connections*

A number of teams noted that what also contributed to their success was the involvement of a number of other external Aboriginal education workers, such as Aboriginal aides, Aboriginal Education Officers, and consultants, as well as other professional partners, such as a speech therapist or a literacy/numeracy expert.

### **Sustainability**

The initiative could and should be sustained by:

- providing ongoing central funding to extend the project to other schools - as a priority, to focus on those schools with a significant proportion of Aboriginal students;

- encouraging schools with significant proportions of Aboriginal students to employ more Aboriginal teachers and Aboriginal support staff;
- linking to Departmental strategies - there may be a way to include an Aboriginal professional learning initiative as a key part of a renewed Departmental Aboriginal Education strategy - ensuring that release time was provided for both teachers and support staff – and that some form of funding was provided to those Aboriginal community members who participated and were involved in their own time;
- including an Aboriginal project initiative as part of school management plans – this would encourage schools to take on the responsibility for developing their knowledge of and involvement with local Aboriginal communities;
- alerting schools to the need to periodically clarify what the school wanted to know from local Aboriginal communities and what Aboriginal communities wanted from their school – this would involve schools making a more systematic effort to plan their activities and to regularly survey their local Aboriginal community;
- investing in the production of appropriate resourcing particularly for secondary students (Stages 4-6) on local Aboriginal histories, cultures and knowledge to better match the syllabus requirements where an Aboriginal perspective is required.
- disseminating information about the success of the project – one way to disseminate the results of the project would be to provide an opportunity similar to the project conferences, where teachers could report back to a wider audience on their projects;
- rewarding and funding schools – schools that did take up the initiative would need to be financially and professionally supported to allow them to continue to offer professional learning opportunities for teachers, staff and the local community.

## Chapter 6. Recommendations and Conclusion

### Recommendations

In setting out our recommendations we have focused on a number of key areas that emerged from our study, in particular from our analysis of the case studies. We have organised the recommendations around the following headings: supporting teacher professional learning; achieving positive change; leadership; engaging with Aboriginal communities; including Aboriginal cultural knowledge(s) and sustainability.

#### Supporting teacher professional learning

- **Support for collaborative teacher professional learning** – It is important for programs like this to be well resourced to provide a way for teachers and school staff to be supported in developing their inclusion of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and engagement with local Aboriginal communities.
- **Support a collaborative, strategic activity with a common purpose** - The project showed that taking a collaborative action learning team-based approach, supported by an academic partner, can benefit teachers. Having a strategic and common purpose enables teachers and the other staff involved to further develop their knowledge and skills in addressing issues related to Aboriginal education.
- **Provide adequate funding** – Providing adequate funding is crucial to the success of a professional development program engaging teachers in a renewal process. The pressures are evident in any school setting, yet it is vitally important to allow teachers time to reflect on their practices, individually, in collegial groups or through paired observations of each other's practice. It is imperative that adequate funding is provided for professional development programs in such areas as Aboriginal education.
- **Choosing the right combination of staff** to implement projects using the Quality Teaching model is important to their overall success. Similarly, engaging an academic partner requires the team to firstly understand the direction and approach their project is going to take so that there is a correlation between the needs of the school team and the skills and expertise of the academic partner.
- **Encouraging a whole school approach is essential** to the teaching of Aboriginal cultural knowledge(s) so that it can be linked into the assessable elements of the curriculum in the Key Learning Areas and within the rigour of the Intellectual Quality domain of the Quality Teaching model. Often Aboriginal cultures and histories are segmented from the mainstream curriculum and are treated as 'special events' to be incorporated into Reconciliation Week or National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Observance Committee activities. This project has made headway in establishing these links with the everyday curriculum in schools, but there is some concern that this will not be sustained without continued Departmental support.
- **Collaboration and consultation with experts from the local Aboriginal community** - It is important to support staff in their efforts to foster closer collaboration and consultation with their local Aboriginal community whenever possible, because it builds on the notion of a shared history for the school, the students and the community.

- **Sustain a culture of high expectations for all students, but in particular for Aboriginal students** - This can be supported by a series of professional learning seminars for school staff that highlight the findings of research into the impact that effective teachers can have on student outcomes.
- **Using the project as a starting point**, develop school and locally based resources to promote local Aboriginal cultures

#### **Achieving positive change**

- **Adopt an action learning change model** - There was a clear value in adopting an action learning change model. It was one way of helping to frame future professional learning activities.

**Provide the necessary infrastructure, support for innovation and the use of digital media in creative teaching strategies** - To improve the effective application of the media will require an additional focus on the provision of resources for staff development, especially in the use of interactive white boards and movie making.

#### **Leadership**

- **Adopt a collaborative and distributive leadership model** which is inclusive of Aboriginal people and values their expertise is important to the success of any professional development project.
- **Establish a supportive leadership team** that understands the exigencies of working with Aboriginal communities.

#### **Engaging with Aboriginal communities**

- **Who is the community?** – It is important that schools are encouraged to explore who makes up their local Aboriginal community and to make contact with representatives of local Aboriginal bodies such as their Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and Land Council. At the same time it is important that school staff also understand the various pressures that these groups face and that may affect their capacity to respond to requests from schools, at the time that requests are made.
- **Increase the use of communications technologies** such as interactive whiteboards and video conferencing in schools. This helps schools to link up with communities in different parts of Australia and indeed other parts of the world. In this way students can gain a greater understanding of Aboriginal peoples throughout Australia and internationally.
- **Provide additional training for Aboriginal staff working in schools**, such as Aboriginal Education Officers. In this way they can act more effectively as advisors to teachers in accessing Aboriginal knowledge(s). Also important is that Aboriginal staff are remunerated appropriately in these positions in their school.
- **Ensure that schools are welcoming of Aboriginal parents** and members of the school's local Aboriginal community. Some of the effective ways include organising morning teas, barbecues and other family events to welcome parents. Calling or texting to encourage attendance can be a useful way of linking up with parents and the community. Newsletters can also be used to maintain contact.

#### **Including Aboriginal cultural knowledge(s)**

- **Teachers and schools need to work together** with their local Aboriginal community to provide both a local as well a national perspective on what constitutes Aboriginal cultural knowledge(s). Fostering local knowledge(s) enables all students – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – to gain an appreciation of their community’s Aboriginal history, local sites and language(s).
- **Include Aboriginal cultural knowledge(s) in the curriculum** - This should be done wherever possible with the expert advice of local Aboriginal Elders and the community.
- **Support a small grants program for local resource development** –Developing a small grants program or a similar initiative in partnership with the New South Wales Department of Education and Training, the New South Wales Board of Studies and other key agencies like local councils would assist schools and teachers to develop resources. A priority could be those schools with significant enrolments of Aboriginal students, to enable them to research, collect and develop locally specific resources about their local Aboriginal community.

### **Sustainability**

- **Arrange a conference** - Provide an opportunity for teachers from the participating project schools to write up and report on the achievements and challenges with their projects and to disseminate their findings at an appropriate state-wide conference.
- **Incorporate the Quality Teaching model into the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Strategy**, ensuring that release time is provided for both teachers and support staff to learn about the model.

### **Conclusion**

This evaluation study set out to explore how teachers’ pedagogical practices have changed and evolved to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge as a result of the implementation of the Australian Government Quality Teaching Indigenous Project in a number of New South Wales government schools.

It sought to analyse the journey of professional learning undertaken by teachers in the action learning teams in seven selected schools in terms of how they incorporated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge and the extent and effectiveness of the inclusion and collaboration with the local Aboriginal communities in the delivery of curricula in the school. Finally it sought to make observations from the data about the impact these inclusive practices have had on teacher and student learning.

The one striking feature that emerged from the findings was that teachers valued the time allowed by the project for them to reflect on their pedagogical practices, and to work in teams collaborating with their colleagues on improving their teaching practice. This focus on professional learning within a Quality Teaching model, using an action learning change model, was one way of achieving teacher ‘renewal’. In the context of the increased requirements by organisations such as the New South Wales Institute of Teachers as well as Teaching Australia for increased teacher professionalism the capacity for teachers to have release time to discuss and reflect on an important educational initiative such as Aboriginal education is seen as very important. This is particularly so given the high numbers of teachers who felt that there was room for improvement in their understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge.

The project showed that a collaborative action learning team based approach, supported by a Departmental project team, with an academic partner to assist in the design and implementation of each particular project, was an effective method of enabling school change. While issues did arise from time to time in terms of progress and direction, it was successful in enabling teachers and students and in many cases the whole school to further develop their knowledge and skills in addressing issues related to Aboriginal education.

In each school enthusiasm for the project was high and there was an increased and genuine willingness to engage in discussions about Aboriginal cultural knowledge (eg, about cultural protocols or ownership) as well as an increased willingness to learn and talk to local Elders and parents. The connections built with local Aboriginal communities through shared community based projects such as creative arts projects, commemorative bush gardens, murals and local history projects, and digital technology projects are excellent examples of how schools, parents and local Aboriginal community members worked to bridge the divide that sometimes does exist between school, home and the local Aboriginal community.

This involvement did result in enhanced teacher knowledge of the needs of Aboriginal learners with many teachers reporting a greater sense of confidence in students who were happy to research and talk about their culture, indicating an improved self concept. One other positive feature of the project was that often the profile of Aboriginal staff involved in the project has been raised within the schools. The study does note however the importance of continued funding to increase the number of Aboriginal teachers and Aboriginal Education Officers in schools as one way to sustain the gains of a project such as this.

It comes as no surprise to note that the active support of the executive leadership team of the school was vital to the success of this project. It was clear from our findings that where the school principal was engaged in the project, and adopted a facilitative leadership approach, the collegial networks that formed were very supportive of each other and this led to an atmosphere of shared learning and innovation that enabled safe spaces for creative and experimental teaching ideas to be trialled. The result was some very exciting and effective teaching ideas that involved new media technology showcasing many aspects of traditional and contemporary Aboriginal cultures.

The increased use of digital media, interactive whiteboard technology and video conferencing were features of some projects and deserve mention. There is much scope for improving classroom practices with the appropriate use of technology tools in the different Key Learning Areas. These tools are not an end in themselves, but should be applied in innovative ways that encourage student engagement, a greater focus on self directed learning and result in enhancing the intellectual quality of students' work.

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## Appendices

### 1. School and Aboriginal student enrolments 2009

<b>Name of school</b>	<b>Enrolments</b>	<b>Aboriginal students</b>	<b>%</b>
Blue Public School	356	52	15
Cadmium High School	1020	65	6
Cobalt Public School	393	68	17
Crimson Public School	630	62	10
Dolomite Public School	96	33	34
Magenta High School	990	11	1
Red School	2000	94	5

## 2. Quality Teaching Indigenous Project – Action Learning Teams

The following tables outlines the make up of the QTIP Action Learning Teams (ALT) in the case study schools reported in both 2007 and 2008.

SCHOOL	QTIP ALT 2007	QTIP ALT 2008
<b>Phase One schools</b>		
Blue Public School	Assistant Principal Assistant Principal Teacher Teacher Academic Partner (5)	Assistant Principal Assistant Principal Teacher Teacher Academic Partner (5)
Cadmium High School	Deputy Principal Head Teacher (English) Head Teacher (Teaching and Learning) Teacher Teacher Academic Partner (5)	Deputy Principal (Eng) Deputy Principal (TAS) Head Teacher (English) Head Teacher (Teaching and Learning) Teacher (Vis Arts) Teacher (Music) Teacher (History) Parent/Community member Academic Partner (9)
Crimson Public School	Assistant Principal Teacher Teacher Teacher Teacher Teacher AEO* Parent/Community member Academic Partner (9)	Teacher Teacher Teacher Teacher AEO* Academic Partner (6)
Magenta High School	Deputy Principal Head Teacher Admin. Teacher Librarian AEO Academic Partner (6)	Head Teacher Admin. Teacher (Vis Art) Teacher (TAS) Librarian AEO Academic Partner (6)
<b>Phase Two schools</b>		
Cobalt Public School		Principal Deputy Principal AEO* Teacher Teacher Teacher Academic Partner (7)
Dolomite Public School		Principal Teacher Teacher Teacher Academic Partner (5)

\* AEO – Aboriginal Education Officer