

REAL STORIES, EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM AN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY-CONTROLLED CULTURAL IMMERSION PROGRAM FOR LOCAL TEACHERS.

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Abstract

This paper reports on effective strategies for developing the cultural competence of teachers involved in Aboriginal education and presents the preliminary findings of a review into the Connecting to Country Program (CTC), a joint venture of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) and the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC). They suggest that the AECG three-day cultural immersion has a dramatic impact on participants' knowledge and understanding of local Aboriginal society, history and culture. Some reported a transformational experience while almost all reported:

- improved knowledge and understanding of local Aboriginal people, histories and cultures;
- enhanced confidence in incorporating Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum; and
- new skills and awareness of the benefits of communication with Aboriginal people and organisations.

A mixed methods approach using qualitative and quantitative data has, in this preliminary stage, elicited responses from 130 teachers, 26 Aboriginal students and 8 Aboriginal parents and community members. These responses indicate the importance of developing the cultural competence of teachers through training delivered by local Aboriginal people. This approach supports teachers in developing meaningful and respectful relationships with Aboriginal students, parents and community members where teachers, students, parents and community members are all engaged in Aboriginal student learning.

INTRODUCTION

The educational disadvantage of Australian Indigenous students is well documented in state and national reports and research over many years. These consistently testify that Indigenous student educational outcomes are well below those of their non-Indigenous peers (See Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2011; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2011; NSW Ombudsman, 2011; Aird, Miller, van Megen & Buys, 2010; Nolan, Hill & Harris, 2010; NSW 2009; Dockery, 2009; NSW Parliament Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues, 2008; Gray & Beresford, 2008; Doyle & Hill, 2008).

Moreover, these disappointing outcomes persist despite the ongoing commitment of all Australian governments to address this as highlighted in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment and Training and Youth affairs, 2008) and the development of numerous policies, initiatives and programs to rectify this situation. This study reports on new and innovative directions in teacher professional learning in Aboriginal

education in NSW, Australia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research literature suggests the continuing impact of several key factors in the failure of schools and teachers to make significant inroads into the gap between the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

The continuing inability of many teachers to develop meaningful relationships with Aboriginal students and communities is clearly one key factor. Research persistently suggests that, despite their best intentions and commitment, teachers often have difficulty in establishing effective relationships with Aboriginal students and communities and have little understanding of the complexities of contemporary Aboriginal societies and cultures. (Santoro, Reid, Crawford & Simpson, 2011; Bucksin, Hughes, Teasdale, Gregory, Clarke, Morgan, & St Clair, 2008; NSW DET & NSW AECG, 2004; Mellor & Corrigan, 2004; Bourke, Rigby, & Burden, 2000). The significance of these findings is highlighted in a report by the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (NSW AECG, 2009) that found that the Aboriginal community regarded the quality of the relationship with teachers as the “make or break element” for their children's progress at school. The report suggests that the teacher-student relationship is crucial in developing trust and a sense of belonging for Aboriginal students and therefore consequent engagement in their education (Burgess & Berwick, 2009).

Another factor identified in the literature that may impede efforts to bridge the gap in educational outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in Australian schools is the failure to affirm Aboriginal student identity through appropriate curriculum, pedagogy and the visible involvement of the students' families and community in their education. The seminal Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education (AER) in NSW (NSW DET&NSWAECG; 2004) found that a school's response to valuing and respecting Aboriginal cultural knowledge and skills impacted significantly on Aboriginal student outcomes. Moreover, it suggested that strategies to bring about improvements in the attendance, retention and academic performance of Aboriginal students are doomed to failure if they don't understand and do something about identity and belonging (NSW DET& NSW AECG, 2004, p.195). The report also acknowledged the challenges, including the persistence of racism, that many Aboriginal children face in coming to terms with their identity and that schools and teachers can play a significant role in supporting the development of strong and resilient Aboriginal identities for their students. Other research identifies key qualities in teachers of Aboriginal students such as empathy, caring, mutual respect, passion and enthusiasm, patience and perseverance, and a belief in student ability that contribute to a student's sense of belonging and engagement at school (AECG, 2009; Hawk, Tumama, Cowle, Hill & Sutherland, 2002). In the broader context, this segues into cultural and cross-cultural understandings, superior communication skills, working in and within communities, being a team member and working within broader collegial networks, high levels of professionalism and integrity, and the ability to articulate self and professional awareness (AEU, 2004, pp.5-6).

A common element in these critical factors is the cultural competence of teachers. However, despite the importance of teachers having the cultural competency necessary to meaningfully relate to Aboriginal students and communities it remains secondary to much of the current research on quality teaching for Aboriginal and other students. Instead the research focuses in the main on what teachers know or can do, their subject knowledge and pedagogy, rather than on their skills in parental and community engagement (Ingvarson & Rowe, 2007; Griffiths, Amosa, Ladwig, & Gore, 2007; Ingvarson & Kleinheinz, 2006; Hayes, 2006; Rowe, 2003). This study clearly identifies this shortfall in the acquisition of teacher cultural competency in Aboriginal education.

CONTEXT

In 2010, the NSW AECG commissioned Dr Shane Williams to develop a program to foster the

cultural competence of teachers. This identified the need for teachers and schools to develop:

- “deep knowledge and understanding of” their Aboriginal students, families and local communities (NSW DET& NSW AECG, 2004, p.78)
- “cultural programs that allowed them to make connections with local Aboriginal culture” (NSW DET& NSW AECG, 2004, p.88)
- strategies to affirm the self identity of Aboriginal (NSW DET& NSW AECG, 2004, p.96)

This program, “Being Culturally Aware Becoming Culturally Inclusive: A Pathway to Cultural Competence” (Williams, 2010) was designed for implementation by local and regional AECGs. It was intended to empower local Aboriginal communities to lead teachers and principals in developing their knowledge and understandings of local Aboriginal community culture and issues and their ability to engage local Aboriginal community members in schools.

Subsequently, the NSW Department of Education and Communities's (DEC) Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate (AETD) designed a professional learning program for teachers and principals which, combined with the AECG program is collectively known as the *Connecting to Country* Program (CTC). It consists of two complementary components:

1. an initial three day cultural immersion workshop organised by local AECGs and delivered entirely by local Aboriginal community people; and
2. a subsequent two day workshop delivered by the relevant regional office of the AETD to develop practical school-based applications of the knowledge and understandings gained at the cultural immersion workshops.

The long-term objectives of this program are to create a substantial transformation of approaches to Aboriginal education in the participating schools and to achieve improved and sustainable outcomes for the Aboriginal students of those schools by developing the cultural competence of participants.

Emerging from concepts such as cultural awareness, cultural security, cultural respect, cultural safety and transcultural competence (Grote, 2008, pp.11-13), the concept of cultural competence is relatively new to Australian education. However, in 2011, Universities Australia developed ‘Guiding Principals for Developing Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities’ and defined the concept as:

Student and staff knowledge and understanding of Indigenous Australian cultures, histories and contemporary realities and awareness of Indigenous protocol’s, combined with the proficiency to engage and work effectively in Indigenous contexts congruent to expectations of Indigenous Australian peoples.” (p3)

The research from which this paper has emerged was commissioned by DEC's Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate to review the effectiveness of the CTC and, in doing so, has inevitably focused on strategies for developing cultural competence in teachers.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2009) using quantitative and qualitative data is being used in this study. This includes case studies to gain greater depth of analysis of the key emerging themes and concepts. The quantitative data includes de-identified teacher and principal pre and post surveys collected by the AETD and teacher participant evaluations administered by the AECG that include both quantitative and qualitative responses. Qualitative data also includes semi-structured in-depth interviews of voluntary participating teachers, principals, Aboriginal parents and community members and visual mapping workshops with Aboriginal student volunteers whose teachers participated in the CTC program.

The findings of this paper are based on the limited amount of data that has so far been collected and

analysed from the following sources:

- teacher participant evaluations of the AECG's cultural immersion workshops (N=130);
- semi structured individual interviews with teachers who have completed both components of the CTC (N=19);
- analysis of Y diagrams completed by students from four schools where teachers have completed the CTC (N=26);
- interviews with parents or community members associated with these schools (N=8).

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Preliminary analysis indicates three main findings:

- The Aboriginal community recognises that teachers and schools lack the cultural competency needed to address the educational needs of Aboriginal students;
- Aboriginal students want their identity affirmed through the incorporation of local Aboriginal culture and history into the curriculum; and
- the AECG's cultural immersion program has an immediate positive impact on teacher attitudes to Aboriginal people; their motivation to adopt appropriate curriculum, pedagogy and classroom management; and on their confidence in community engagement.

Community awareness of the lack of cultural competency in teachers and schools

Throughout the Aboriginal community there is an acute awareness that most teachers and schools generally lack the cultural competence to address the needs of their Aboriginal students. This is clearly evident in the limited number of parent and community interviews conducted for this research and, also remarkably evident in the workshops with Aboriginal students from the schools where the research has been undertaken.

The eight parents interviewed were adamant that most teachers knew very little about either the historical context or the contemporary socio-cultural context from which their students came and the impact of this on student participation.

White folks don't understand that cultural side of it, yeah.....And it's not their fault it's just that they never learnt, they're not aware of it..... that's (both) those uni students just coming out and the dinosaur teachers that's in there already

... the teachers don't have that knowledge or background with Aboriginal people (and) they think the kids should be like everyone else ... (that) they are all fully assimilated ... But the point is that many of the kids here come from large extended families and may be coming from other parts of the country. The teachers don't understand this and don't understand the family responsibilities that the kids have.

The parents recognised the predicament that this created for teachers and were sympathetic to their situation. They knew that the lack of cultural awareness impeded positive relationships with students and made it difficult for teachers to access potentially helpful community networks. They also believed however, that teacher awareness of the local historical context and its impact is important.

... you get a teacher that comes out of uni that might not have the cultural awareness, which is not compulsory in universities, and ... they're set up to fail. They're sent into schools, K to 12, whatever, with a high population of Aboriginal students, they've not only got to deal with the students, they've got to deal with the parents, the carers, of those kids, extended families, community people ... it's those sort of broader network thing that they need to be aware of

all schools and all teachers need to be aware that white Australia has a black history ... a lot of them don't know the history of this valley ... The massacres and that sort of thing.

The mainstream, middle class background of most teachers was acknowledged as a contributing factor. Teachers lacked awareness of how the contemporary socio-cultural context has evolved from historical disadvantage and the impact this has on participation in schooling. One parent, for instance, gave a hypothetical but graphic description of the impact of high morbidity rates in Aboriginal communities by explaining the potential impact of a family funeral on a student's disposition.

... teachers need to be aware that a lot of our kids come with baggage, excess baggage. Too many just think everyone's the same. They come from a different background and they see other kids from this background they just think everyone's the same ... for instance when there's a funeral in our town, our kids suffer. The teachers don't realise but they've got to make room for more to come in town ... so when they get to school they're not worried about school work ... what about their mums and dads fixing up their clothes for the funeral and stuff? And sleeping at home tonight, is mummy and daddy are going to be drinking? Is there enough food at home to eat? Is there enough to pay for all the extended family that's come from out of town? ... Even the beds, where am I sleeping tonight? I'll go and sleep at Auntie's so there's enough room there.

Several of the secondary students were equally aware of this lack of understanding and its impact on the relationship between teachers and their Aboriginal students. Establishing positive relationships was difficult because, as one student suggested, "they don't understand what kids like us are going through ... the stress and so on ... they just don't know about our out of school life". Moreover, students recognised the need for better training to address this.

I think they need to educate people about what Aboriginal people are going through these days, like the teachers don't understand why these kids are mucking up in class ... some of these kids don't have a proper home, food in their house ... and ... they put them out as bad kids because they have a bad home ... But it's because they might be going through stress and stuff...

These concerns of parents and students about the cultural competence of teachers and the impact of this on their ability to address the educational needs of Aboriginal students clearly suggest the continuing need for professional development programs to assist teachers involved in Aboriginal education.

The affirmation of Aboriginal identity through appropriate curriculum.

Preliminary analysis of the data also clearly indicates that Aboriginal students want their identity affirmed through the curriculum. Some expressed concern that teachers did not always recognise the diversity of contemporary Aboriginality and that "most teachers don't even know we're Aboriginal." Others were concerned that teachers did not recognise the prevalence of racist jokes in the school. But in all four schools the predominant concern of students was that their identity be affirmed through the curriculum.

The interviews revealed the value they placed on Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum. They were remarkably aware of the importance of this to their identity as Aboriginal people and also for the maintenance of Aboriginal culture in their local area, and they were quite clearly disappointed that the curriculum, as currently delivered in their schools, did not include more Aboriginal content. They even asserted a role for the school in reclaiming cultural knowledge that had been largely lost:

... You learn about your own culture and stuff 'cause like these days we don't really know much about it 'cause everything's like modernised and futurised and ... [it helps] you know where you come from ... [and it's important] to keep it going for our future generations...

... I actually get to learn about my culture and everything because ... there's only very few Aboriginals in our family and most of them don't [know] ... and since my pop's dead, he died when I was three, I don't get to see anything or learn anything about it.....No, not even mum, 'cause he didn't really teach mum stuff so.

Some students were particularly aware of the significance of reclaiming and preserving local languages. Moreover, they recognised the important role of schools in assisting with this by involving knowledgeable Elders from the community.

I've got a book down in my classroom and it's got all the language and stuff ... But it only goes for 15 minutes ... [But] my little brother can say the Welcome to Country in Dunghutti, 'cause he got taught by Elders, how to do it and ... Yeah, like he can do it really like fluently ...

I reckon they should have a [community] teacher in here, like an Elder, that knows their language ... 'cause once they pass away who's going to ... know the language ...

Even the primary school students were aware of the network of local cultural knowledge and expressed a desire for the school to access this more than it currently did. These students spontaneously provided a list of people who could assist in the teaching of local culture, for instance: “Uncle Mal, Uncle Bruce, Auntie Sue, Auntie Lois, Auntie Deb, Uncle Joe”; people who knew local stories, art, dance and sites of significance. They were nonplussed that the schools did not do more to tap into this network of local knowledge. “ The teachers could go out for half an hour or something and they could talk to us about culture or something, like my Nan and Pop”.

The students' knowledge of these human resources contributed to disappointment that the curriculum did not include more Aboriginal content. Some primary students thought that Aboriginal perspectives were limited to the reading of stories by a Year 6 teacher. Some high school students were disappointed that Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum appeared to be limited to Year 7. Others, when asked about perspectives in the Stage 4-5 History curriculum, were adamant that History was “only about war” and complained that “we learn more about other people than we do about ourselves”. Senior students were particularly disappointed that the HSC course in Aboriginal Studies was not available to them because of insufficient numbers that they attributed this to a lack of interest, even antipathy, from non-Aboriginal students and a lack of commitment from the school.

This enthusiastic support for more local Aboriginal Studies contained an implicit recognition that this would facilitate school-community relationships and reinforces research findings that Aboriginal participation is encouraged by curriculum and other practices that encourage Aboriginal students to feel more valued as Indigenous people. (Bourke et.al, 2000; Purdie, Tripcony, Boulton-Lewis, Fanshawe & Gunstone, 2000; NSW DET& NSW AECG, 2004).

However, though parents and community members were also supportive of the inclusion of Aboriginal content within the curriculum they expressed some ambivalence about its ultimate impact on educational outcomes. Indeed, several parents were concerned that it might in fact be a distraction from efforts to improve academic outcomes. They were particularly concerned at the amount of normal class time that was being lost by some students who were required to take part in cultural performances and rejected the concept of special, “add on” Aboriginal Studies programs. One parent states that schools should;

embed programs in curriculum rather than have 'add on' programs, especially when students are being pulled out of regular class to do something like finger puppets ... it's the English and Maths - learning to read, write and count - that's what's important ... And dedicated committed teachers can use the existing curriculum to reinforce students identity and culture ... it's there already.

Such qualifications are a reminder that professional development programs like the CTC need to provide teachers with a range of strategies to effectively address the disappointing educational outcomes of Aboriginal students. There is a need to be wary of simplistic strategies that promote Aboriginal Studies as a pedagogical panacea while overlooking the need to develop the skills that Aboriginal students need to achieve educational success. Ultimately, such success will be at least as

significant in developing positive self concepts and strong identities in Aboriginal students.

Positive impact of cultural immersion on teacher attitudes and motivation

The third finding to emerge from the preliminary analysis of the data is the immediate positive impact of the AECG's cultural immersion strategies. It is already quite clear that these strategies are fostering positive attitudes towards Aboriginal people and culture in participating teachers. As well, teachers are motivated, at least initially, by the cultural immersion program to consider new strategies in the implementation of the curriculum, in classroom management and in developing consultative processes with their local Aboriginal communities.

That teachers, along with the rest of the community, might benefit from close personal contact with Aboriginal people in experiences of this sort, is evident in the research findings of the Australian Reconciliation Barometer (Reconciliation Australia, 2008). Among other findings, this report found that there was little contact between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and continuing high levels of suspicion, mistrust and misunderstanding. Almost two in three Australians gain their information about Aboriginal people from the media rather than from first hand contact and 72% believe Indigenous people hold "very high" or "fairly high" levels of prejudice towards them. Not surprisingly levels of trust are very low with 81% of general community respondents believing that Indigenous people have "fairly low" or "very low" levels of trust for other Australians and only 44% believing that they are open to sharing their culture. There was also a strong awareness of high levels of prejudice between the two groups.

There is clear evidence that the cultural immersion component of the CTC is addressing and impacting on such attitudes where they exist among participating teachers. Almost all of the evaluations (98%) reported that the cultural immersion had furthered their knowledge of Aboriginal history, culture and society and 57% responded that it had changed previous perceptions they had of Aboriginal people and culture. (Many of those responding to this question in the negative indicated that this was only because they came to the workshop with very positive attitudes to Aboriginal people and culture). 92% indicated that the workshop would change the way they taught about Aboriginal history and culture; 84% that it would change their approach to teaching Aboriginal students; and 82% that it would influence the way they approached Aboriginal parents and community members.

However, the statistical analysis of the data does not fully reveal the impact of the cultural immersion in developing teacher empathy with local Aboriginal communities, nor its impact in inspiring them to make changes to their approaches to curriculum, pedagogy, classroom management and community engagement.

Establishing empathy with the local Aboriginal community

Many of the individually interviewed teachers provided more graphic accounts of how the experience of hearing the "personal stories" of Aboriginal people, and even simply yarning with them, helped develop empathy with the local community. The personal stories were frequently listed among the "best liked" feature of the immersion and they had a significant impact in breaking down barriers, challenging stereotypes and establishing an empathy that had not previously existed.

One participant reported that these life stories had, for her, been "a life changing experience". Others spoke of being moved by the generosity of people who not only shared their stories but also welcomed them into their homes so that long-held stereotypes had been broken down and replaced by an awareness of the commonalities that all people share.

The local community days that we had were excellent, they certainly opened our eyes to the different organisations in our town and also to stories about the Stolen Generation ... telling [those] stories was definitely quite profound for a lot of us, helping us realise just how raw that emotion still is for those people and how it has affected their life, so it made it very real ... Visiting particular sites as well ... and being invited into their home we thought was ... You know come and see my home and it's interesting 'cause there tends to be a

certain stereotype I suppose that they live in a messy way, they don't care about their furniture, houses and things like that but we got invited to a home and just the pride and the family photos and we all live in a very similar way and that was really nice and we felt awkward in going in at first but she wanted to proudly show off her home.

The long-term impact of this empathy is yet to be determined. However, it has clearly laid the groundwork for the establishment of new school-community relationships. It is also motivating participating teachers to consider adapting curriculum and classroom management procedures to better suit their Aboriginal students

Impact of greater awareness of the home environment on student management practices

Many teachers noted that the cultural immersion workshop also gave them a much greater awareness of the home environment and social context from which Aboriginal students came. They were now more willing to take these factors into account when working with their Aboriginal students and also more willing to involve family and community in attempting to address behavioural issues. This was the case even with quite experienced teachers, two of whom independently reported similar impacts:

I would say it's made an effect on my teaching, certainly ... [it's given] me a greater understanding of the kids out in the playground, if that makes sense.... An example would be a student I have who lives in a caravan park whose behaviours have gone off the wall ... I've made connections with his parents and they've allowed me into their home ... that's affected me, I have a greater understanding of where this kid's now coming from ...

..... We (already) know what these kids come to school with ... (But) ... to have a deeper understanding of why some of those behaviours and situations that the kids encounter on a daily basis why ... it's making it real, you know, you're seeing this on a daily basis but it's that one step removed thing where a fellow sitting in front of you discussing this openly, it makes it real, it really does ... And it's amazing how we move in our own circles (even when we're) just across the road sort of thing.

This new awareness of the students' home backgrounds was encouraging teachers to consider changes to their general classroom management strategies and consequently, were feeling comfortable with their Aboriginal students.

I believe it has allowed me to view students and their families as members of a wider community, from a different culture, and a different history ... acknowledgement of this is critical to developing relationships within the school.

Other teachers reported that they had "opened up new lines of communication" and been "helped in making connections" with their Aboriginal students. Several reported that students had noticed the Aboriginal "artefacts and souvenirs" that they had produced at the workshop these had become a talking point with students. The significance of this was explained by one high school teacher:

One of the boys who had previously been difficult to engage now smiles at me and talks with me. He previously said very little. I think he now sees that I'm interested and he knows my class is a safe supportive place to be. That's definitely come from the course for me --- it was life changing, we all of us who went, thought that.

An experienced primary school teacher referred to a new awareness of the role of Aboriginal Education Officers (AEO) and other Aboriginal workers and how they could help facilitate contact with the community:

I'm [now] able to use the network in this school, you know ... the AEOs ... now I have an understanding of [how they] connect to certain families, ...they've given me information on how to deal with that kid and the family, I suppose, so instead of just yelling at him and telling him to go to detention for a week or be suspended or whatever, so it's just ... yeah,

opening it up to other possibilities.

A newly appointed high school teacher also commented on how her new awareness of the impact of history had increased her understanding of the attitudes and behaviour of her Aboriginal students and helped her to become more flexible in her approach to classroom management:

... there are very different circumstances and the history has had an effect on so much of the community, on both sides of the fence, and in particular that the children are still feeling the effects of that history to the present day, which is something probably I didn't realise ... the extent of how much it effected the current generation we've got at school. So that was a real insight. [Also] things like they're not being naughty in class when they're being boisterous and just they're laughing and they're still learning when they're doing those things and that has really, particularly now in the classroom, I acknowledge that there are kids who can do that and learn at the same time, so I'm not as quick to jump and say right, now quiet down, just sit quietly ... so it means my classroom's become a little more lively but we do seem to be getting through a lot more, ... I can feel like I'm connecting a lot more with the kids.

New confidence in establishing community links

Many teachers also noted that the workshops had given them a new awareness of the importance of involving community members in the classroom in assisting in the delivery of content about local Aboriginal culture, as role models to the students and as aides to classroom management. It was also evident that the cultural immersion experience had made most of the teachers more confident and less threatened by the prospect of engaging with the local community. As one teacher reported:

... prior to attending the CTC training I didn't feel I had earned my way in this coastal Aboriginal community even though I had worked in other Aboriginal communities ... I got a lot of information about the local community and a lot of reinforcement.

An immediate outcome of this boost to teacher confidence was greater involvement in local AECGs. Several teachers reported that they had attended AECG meetings since participating in the CTC and that the cultural immersion had empowered them to do so by making them less worried about making mistakes and more aware of a supportive community network. Other teachers reported that they now recognised the value of involving Aboriginal people in their classrooms. Thus an experienced secondary school teacher commented:

I now think [it's possible] to involve more community in our classrooms wherever we are [teaching] ... you need to be reminded that it's definitely an important part of education and ... there are so many people in the community who just want to be part of education and want to help that really you just have to ask and they'll be there ...

A younger teacher focused on the potential benefits to his classroom management of having community members more involved in his classroom.

... when you can talk to kids about the Elders that you've met and about people that you know in the community and I think they're probably doing the same from the other end, ... that helps to know that there's a dialogue happening there, that there is some contact.

Another teacher commented on how the cultural immersion had helped her establish contacts within the Aboriginal community that she was now using to help her develop a girl's program in her school.

... through Connecting to Country, [I got in touch with] the Lands Council ... I made an appointment and went and had a long chat with her and told her that I was in the early stages of getting this program together and she has got a women's programming running. So I thought there was probably some way that we could tie in the girls' program and the women's program so I'd have those community contacts and the school and then get to be working within their own community on a wider scale

CONCLUSION

Clearly, the preliminary evidence emerging from this research indicates that professional development controlled and presented by local Aboriginal community people enhances the cultural competency of teachers by developing their knowledge and understanding of local Aboriginal history and culture and motivating them to consider changes to curriculum, pedagogy and community relationships.

Participating teachers appreciated the cultural immersion experience with 95% indicating that they would recommend it to their colleagues. This enthusiasm was also evident in the comments of the 19 individually interviewed teachers whose comments on the AECG's immersion program ranged from the very positive to the highly superlative. The experience was described not only as “really useful” but also as “fantastic, reaffirming”, “inspiring” and even as “overwhelming, “profoundly moving” and “much better than anything I've done in the past”. It is highly unlikely that many professional development programs receive such a high rating from participating teachers.

However, the research is not yet sufficiently developed to determine the long-term impact of the CTC on student outcomes. Teachers expressed some concerns about the effectiveness of the DEC workshops and the obstacles to maintaining enthusiasm after returning to the ‘day-to-day’ routines and realities of school. The concern of some parents that Aboriginal Studies is not a pedagogical panacea must also be noted.

Moreover, further research and analysis is required to determine such issues as:

- the practical curriculum strategies, other than Aboriginal perspectives, that might assist teachers develop better academic outcomes for Aboriginal students;
- strategies for structural change to ensure the initial enthusiasm generated by the CTC continues; and
- the longer term impact of the CTC on the academic outcomes of Aboriginal students.

Finally, the importance of teacher knowledge, understandings and skills in local Aboriginal histories, cultures and communities cannot be underestimated. The development of trusting and respectful relationships with Aboriginal students, parents and communities is basic to the development of quality teaching for Aboriginal students. In order to improve the statistically poor educational outcomes of Aboriginal students, the cultural competence of teachers must be developed. Without such relationships, efforts to improve quality teaching by focusing on curriculum content and its transmission will not be sustainable.

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