

# **At Different Points Along the Road:**

*You must have a heart miss.  
None of them other teachers ever go there.*

**Second Interim Report by the External Research Team on the  
implementation of the**

## ***Connecting to Country Program***

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## INTRODUCTION

The *Connecting to Country* Project is an intensive professional development program for Principals and teachers from 143 Department of Education and Community (DEC) schools targeted on the basis of their profile in Aboriginal Education. The Project, which began in 2011, essentially consists of two components:

- ♣ an intensive 3-day cultural immersion workshop delivered in various areas around the state by local or regional Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) presenters: and
- ♣ a follow up 2-day workshop delivered by regional DEC officers which aims to develop the practical implications for curriculum, pedagogy and school organisation of insights gained from the cultural immersion

The project is administered by the DEC's Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate (AETD) in conjunction with the NSW AECG through funding provided by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR).

In June 2011 the AETD contracted an External Research Team (ERT) to report on the implementation of the Project. The ERT is comprised of Ms Cathie Burgess (Principal Researcher) and Dr Paddy (Pat) Cavanagh (Assistant Researcher) who are both academics working in Aboriginal education programs at the University of Sydney. Ms Burgess is also President of the Aboriginal Studies Association (ASA) and Dr Cavanagh is on the Executive of that organisation.

The ERT submitted its first interim report, *Beginning the Journey*, in November 2011. That report indicated a very positive initial response by participants to the program, particularly to the cultural immersion component delivered by local and regional AECG presenters.<sup>1</sup>

However, the findings of the first interim report were based on the very limited data available to the researchers at that stage. This second report, though still not final, is more definitive as the ERT accessed and analysed considerably more data in its preparation. It focuses on assessing the following potential program outcomes:

- ♣ the impact on individual participants particularly in relation to their:
  - understanding of Aboriginal culture, communities and history
  - confidence in engaging with Aboriginal students, parents and communities
  - ability to implement appropriate pedagogical practices and curriculum
- ♣ the impact on *whole* school practice and organisation
- ♣ the impact on Aboriginal students parents and community members in relation to:
  - the cultural inclusiveness of school and classroom practices and processes
  - the levels of Aboriginal community engagement in school planning and decision making processes
  - the levels of Aboriginal community engagement in the development and delivery of curriculum and units of work.

This focus is consistent with the June 26<sup>th</sup> 2011 Memorandum of Understanding between AETD and the Principal Researcher. It is intended to also assist AETD in reporting to DEEWR on the agreed dimensions and impacts of the program.

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1 A summary of the findings of the first interim report, *Beginning the Journey* are included as Appendix A.

## **Sources of Data for Second Interim Report**

Considerably more data was collated and analysed for this report than was available to the ERT when it compiled the first interim report. The increase in available data makes the findings of this report more authoritative than were those of the first interim report.

The data analysed for this report up to December 2012 includes:

- Departmental documentation providing background information on the Project
- Observation of / participation in 3 cultural immersion workshops.
- Observation of / participation in 4 DEC professional development sessions
- Individual interviews with 50 participating teachers at 13 different participating schools --- 7 high schools, 5 primary schools and 1 central school.
- Individual evaluations (including qualitative and quantitative data) by 295 participants in the local AECG cultural immersion programs
- Interviews with 24 parents / community members about the program and its potential impact.
- Interviews with 2 cultural immersion community program presenters
- Focus group interviews with a total of 92 Aboriginal students, drawn from each of the 7 high schools, the secondary section of the Central School, and 4 of the 5 primary schools.

**Table 1**  
**Principal Sources of Data: Summary**

<b>Source of Data</b>	<b>Numbers</b>
Observation of / Participation in 3-day Cultural Immersion Workshops	3
Observation of / Participation in 2-day DEC Follow Up Workshops	4
Visits to participating schools	13
Individual interviews with participating teachers	50
Analysis of evaluations of 3 day cultural immersion workshop provided by individual participants	295
Interviews with parents and community members	24
Interviews with local AECG presenters	2
Focus group interviews with students from participating schools	92

## **Research Limitations**

Despite the increase in data used in compiling this report there are some limitations to the research that need to be noted. These include:

- for most schools involved in the program there has still been insufficient time since the workshops to determine medium to long-term outcomes particularly in relation to changes to school structure and administration and the sustainability of the program
- the interviews with teachers rely on the self reporting of outcomes and teachers are traditionally suspicious of and defensive when subject to external evaluations;
- there is still insufficient data available to fully determine the medium to long-term impact of the program on student outcomes;
- it is too soon after the workshops to fully determine the impact of the program on increasing the involvement and participation of Aboriginal parents and community members in schools;
- the observations of parents and students can, as with the self-reporting of teachers, also be subjective and based on limited background or specialist knowledge.

Because of these limitations any findings or suggestions emanating from this report should still not be regarded as definitive or final.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sufficient data has now been accessed and analysed to allow this second interim report on the *Connecting to Country* Program to confidently define some of its immediate achievement. In particular the program has had an immediate dramatic and positive impact on almost all individual participants by:

- ▲ enhancing their knowledge and understanding of local Aboriginal culture and history;
- ▲ providing them with skills and confidence in engaging with Aboriginal parents and other members of their local Aboriginal community;
- ▲ developing more flexible attitudes to *appropriate* curriculum and pedagogy for Aboriginal students and practical strategies for implementing this in their classrooms

This success should be celebrated and promoted and all those responsible for developing and implementing the *Connecting to Country* Program should be applauded.

However, the data does not yet indicate the achievement of all the program's aims. In particular there is some concern at the absence of explicit strategies to assist individual participants to become *change agents* with the ability to transfer the knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes they had gained at the workshops to other members of their school staff. Nor is there yet any widespread evidence of structural or procedural change within the participating schools. As well, it is still too early to assess the full impact of the program on the schools' engagement with their local Aboriginal community and certainly too early to determine its medium to long term impact on school participation and engagement of Aboriginal students.

The program's successes and these potential issues are canvassed in more detail in the discussion throughout the body of this report. The brief consideration given to them in the points below is intended only as an executive summary.

1. There is no doubt at all that the *Connecting to Country* Program is having an immediate and extremely positive impact on participating teachers and is enhancing their knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture and history and of the communities in which their schools are located.
2. The Program is also boosting the confidence of participating teachers to engage with their school's Aboriginal community and developing their awareness of appropriate curriculum and classroom pedagogy for Aboriginal students and their skills in applying these.
3. The 2-day, DEC *follow up* workshops were much better received by participants throughout 2012 than had been the case in the initial stages of the program. The more structured format adopted and explicit addressing of a range of issues in Aboriginal education provided a useful template for future pre-service training and post-appointment professional development in Aboriginal education.
4. The transfer of the knowledge, understanding and skills gained by individual participants in the program to other members of staff and the long term sustainability of the program has not yet been embedded in the structures and processes of participating schools. This needs to be addressed possibly through the development of a module (for inclusion in the follow up workshop) to assist participants to return to their schools as effective *change agents*.
5. Some Principals of participating schools appear to either not fully understand the aims of the

*Connecting to Country* Program or not be fully committed to it. Nor do they necessarily recognise the reason their schools have been targeted for participation. There is a need to provide Principals with more explicit pre-workshop briefing on the nature and intent of the program and post-workshop support to assist them in embedding the *whole of school* change that the program is intended to develop.

6. Aboriginal parents, community members and students are not always aware of the *Connecting to Country* program but, when informed of its aims, are fully supportive of its attempts to develop teachers knowledge and understanding of local Aboriginal culture and history and of the issues associated with the socio-economic background of Aboriginal students.
7. Parents and community members are also fully supportive of the programs attempts to provide teachers with skills that will allow them to better engage with the community. However, they are also aware that this does not necessarily happen and there was a definite sense that, whether deliberate or not, schools still tend to favour some factions within the community over others.
8. There is little evidence of the establishment of the development of support networks for teachers and Principals and this needs further monitoring.
9. Similarly, there is as yet no evidence of strategies for developing school-community networks and community mentoring to help sustain the project.
10. There is some discrepancy between the views of most teachers as to how their school is performing in Aboriginal education and the views of parents, community members and students.

## DETAILED FINDINGS

### Impact on Individual Participants

The additional data obtained and analysed by the ERT throughout 2012 confirms initial findings that the *Connecting to Country* Project is having a remarkable, dramatic and very positive initial impact on the attitudes almost all individual participants. An overwhelming number report that it is enhancing their:

- ▲ understanding of Aboriginal culture, communities and history
- ▲ confidence in engaging with Aboriginal students, parents and communities
- ▲ ability to implement appropriate pedagogical practices and curriculum

### **Enhanced understanding of Aboriginal culture, communities and history**

Analysis of the 295 evaluations of the cultural immersion component of the program that have been collected by the NSW AECG to November 2012 allows some quantification of the program's impact on participants' understanding of Aboriginal culture, communities and history.

A remarkable 98.3% of these evaluations indicate that the cultural immersion component of the program developed the participants' *knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal history, culture and society*. Moreover, every one of the 88 participants (29.8%) who identified as never having *had an opportunity to learn from Aboriginal community members before taking this program* found this experience *educationally rewarding*. Moreover, 279 (or 94.6%) indicated that they would recommend this workshop to their colleagues.<sup>2</sup>

This overwhelmingly positive statistical response to the cultural immersion was borne out even more meaningfully in the comments of many of the 50 participating teachers interviewed by the ERT. Most of these used superlatives like *fantastic, unreal, overwhelming, and brilliant* when asked to provide an initial response to it. Others bubbled over with positive phrases like *it was a real eye-opener, it was gold medal stuff* or *it was a real light bulb turning on experience for me*. Several went even further in voluntarily rating it the very best professional development they had ever experienced.

*It was the most significant professional development I have experienced in 10 years of teaching .... it was highly significant in the depth of its content and in building inter-cultural respect, confidence and understanding.*

*Those 5 days were the best I have ever done in professional development since I've been out here.*

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<sup>2</sup> Only 1 of the 295 evaluations (0.3%) indicated they would not recommend the workshop to other colleagues with 15 (5.1%) not providing a response to this question on the evaluation



Hearing the life stories of local Aboriginal people was particularly significant to most participants with many reporting that this was an *emotional, profound* and even a *life changing* experience for them. While teachers were generally familiar with stories of this sort and aware of the their historical context, it was clear that the experience of hearing these told *first hand* by local Aboriginal people brought home the recency of these historical episodes and their continuing impact on individual Aboriginal people, including on the students at school.

*I think the best thing was connecting to people from our community face-to-face, seeing faces and sharing stories, mainly the Aboriginal community sharing their story with us .... the local community days were excellent, they certainly opened our eyes to the different organisations in our town and also to stories about the Stolen Generation and certainly having people who were part of it ... telling stories was definitely quite profound for a lot of us and helped 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.*

*it really got me ... and that's the thing, when something gets me ... that's why it was good. ... we heard some of the local people (talking) about being taken away from the Stolen Generation and some of their stories and ... and then how today they're still treated differently ... (like) going to a café and just staff treating you differently ... and it just comes back to like we're all people and ... it's hard to get my head around like that so much time's passed and they're still separate from us and it shouldn't be like that.*

*....(one of the speakers told us how) the links were broken... how he sat and listened to his great-grandmother tell of the time that they weren't allowed to come back to Mutawintji for their initiation rites ... they weren't allowed to go back to Mutawintji to hammer it on the walls, scrape it on ... their record of history .... record of families, because the white blokes had locked the gates and said no, it's much too important for you guys --- we're going to preserve this as an archaeological site. .... Isn't it crazy !*

*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 how ... the extent of how much it effected the current generation we've got at school. So that was a real insight*

Numbers of participants also reported gaining a new, much deeper understanding of the ongoing relationship between Aboriginal people and their land and the importance of understanding this in developing positive relationships with Aboriginal students and their families. Once again, it was hearing this first hand and from local Aboriginal people rather than reading about it in text books that made this more meaningful .

*the thing that really hit home with me was spending that time in Mutawintji and being exposed to a place of cultural significance I guess and having ... you know, having that personal interaction with why the land was important .... and seeing a little bit of Australian Aboriginal history, which was absolutely amazing .... you know, when I was at university there was this big thing about the need to connect the kids to the land and their culture and how, it's all one ... some textbooks are fantastic and you learn a lot but it was that moment (during the cultural immersion) that I realised that, you know, I'd made my own connection to the land ... and I sort of got it, you know, the land and its important place in the culture of Aboriginal people ... that was the light turning on moment. ... he (also) had a fantastic map that explained all the different language groups and then went into an even deeper explanation that although there are all these language groups, they belong to one language group, Barkindji and it sort of made a lot of sense ... why some kids have trouble identifying themselves*

### **Confidence in engaging with Aboriginal students, parents and communities**

A second immediate impact on participants was the enhancement of their confidence in engaging with their school's Aboriginal community. Statistical evidence of this impact is evident in analysis of the participant evaluations obtained by the AECG at the conclusion of each cultural immersion workshop which revealed 246 of the 295 respondents (83.4%) reporting that that experience would *influence how they approached Aboriginal parents and community members*. This positive outcome was again confirmed by the subsequent ERT interviews of 50 participants many of whom thought that the program had opened doors to more productive relationships. As one participant commented, *there was a reaching out here where previously the predominant narrative has been defensive on both sides*.

The cultural immersion developed the confidence and skills of the participants in community engagement in three major ways - through:

- ✧ enhancing awareness of and respect for the role and skills of Aboriginal staff in schools;
- ✧ encouraging a new-found ease and comfort in relating to Aboriginal parents generally; and
- ✧ facilitating access to a network of Aboriginal community organisations, including the AECG, which could support them in their teaching.

## **Enhancing awareness of and respect for the role and skills of Aboriginal support staff**

Enhancing participants' awareness of the role and skills of Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs) and other Aboriginal support staff and facilitating more productive relationships between the teachers and support staff was clearly one of the achievements of the program. Prior to the workshop significant numbers of participants acknowledged they had little understanding of the role of Aboriginal support staff in their schools but they emerged from the program with a new-found mutual respect.

*I've been in this (small-town) primary school for more than 20 years but I never really knew (the AEO at the High School) beforehand. But now I know who he is and what he does.*

*I felt befriended --- it was so effective in building bridges. And I loved being with my Aboriginal colleagues in an informal setting where everyone was on the same level and workingtogether.*

*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 .... and they give 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*

*We were all looking at issues together. .... no one side was dominant ... it helped us see we were all facing this difficulty together and we shared information as truthfully as possible..... There is definitely now a feeling of more acceptance.*

## **Developing more comfortable relationships with Aboriginal parents and community**

Some participants acknowledged that the historically tense relationship between schools and Aboriginal people had made them apprehensive of meetings with Aboriginal people.

*I often feel "fear" when approaching Aboriginal parents and community, as I hear the stories of "them" not being interested or not valuing the "white" teacher. This program has encouraged me to try and get out into the community again*

*... authority has told us to be very cautious in engaging with the community --- told us not to go to the house, not to go through the front gate, not to go to funerals.*

However, suspicions, fears and apprehension about engaging with the Aboriginal community were very much allayed by the program which clearly succeeded in convincing most teachers of the benefits of being more proactive in fostering community engagement.

The non confrontational and even-handed approach adopted by most workshop presenters was an important factor in developing greater trust. This was highlighted by one interviewee who recalled how *it was interesting to hear from one presenter that she had 'good memories of school.'* because *when you're not Aboriginal you are always worried about doing things the right way --- but now we know they just want us to try.*

For many participants the opportunity to meet Aboriginal people in more relaxed, informal settings was a novel and very moving experience. In some cases they felt overwhelmed by the hospitality shown when they were welcomed into Aboriginal homes where they had never previously ventured. They were actually conscious of this experience replacing previously-held stereotypes with an awareness of the *commonalities* that all people share.

*... Visiting particular sites and being invited into their home as well was terrific. We thought ...You know come and see my home and it's interesting 'cause there tends to be a certain stereotype I suppose and 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 helped us see we all live in a very similar way and that was really nice. We felt awkward in going in at first but she wanted to proudly show off her home.*

*I thought it was excellent. Getting out ... listening to people and talking to Elders, aunties who were there, going into people's homes, I thought that was ..... generous of them to let us go into their homes ... just experiencing that ....*

*I was really deeply moved (by) one speaker in particular (who) had a huge effect on me on a personal level..... We know what these kids come to school with --- you know most of us are aware of family environment or things that are happening or things that we need to be conscious of when a child might be volatile ..... (But) 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 ... how we move in our our own circles (even when we're) just across the road sort of thing.*

Many of the 50 participants interviewed by the ERT noted how much less worried they now were about the possibility of making mistakes in engaging with the community and at least one who had previously been involved with the local community noted that she had *become more active since completing the course.*

Several reported gaining new insights about the importance of contacting parents with *good* news about their children rather than only making contact when there were problems. Others reported that they now recognised the value of actually involving Aboriginal people in their classrooms - even in the secondary school – to assist with both the implementation of curriculum and with classroom management.

*I now think (it's possible) to involve more community in our classrooms wherever we are and to include them into our classes more. .... 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, so that's not an issue really ... getting them into our classes and actively involved, (as) role models.*

*Look I think that 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.*

The significance of these newly established relationships with Aboriginal parents and community members for interaction between teachers and students in the classroom was not lost on these teachers. One interviewee, who admitted that she had previously been quite tentative in relating to the local Aboriginal community explained it this way: *meeting family members was good. I could come back to school and say I met your aunt that works at the hospital. The kids were really excited that I knew and remembered.* This teacher has also begun attending community bingo games and felt that this too was helping her develop more personal relations with her students. A few days after she first attended the bingo one of her year 11 students commented on this by saying: *You must have a heart miss. None of them other teachers ever go there.*

### **Facilitating access to Aboriginal community organisations and and agency networks**

The program was also successful in making participants aware of the existence of a supportive network of Aboriginal organisations and agencies that could assist teachers with Aboriginal students.

Given its role in hosting the cultural immersion component of the program it is not surprising that most participants gained a heightened awareness of the role of local AECGs . At three of the 13 schools visited by the ERT several participants reported either attending AECG meetings since the CTC or now realising that they would be welcome at AECG meetings if they chose to attend. One who had never before attended an AECG meeting because she *did not think it her place to go*, felt that the cultural immersion had *empowered* her to do.

In addition, the workshops also introduced participants to the extensive network of support

available through Aboriginal community organisations and agencies. This was done in the main through the *speed dating* or *community agency fairs* which provided participants and agency representatives with the opportunity to introduce themselves and explore possible relationship and networking opportunities that would support programs or initiatives for Aboriginal students at schools.

The more experienced participants realised the potential of these contacts for developing a more holistic approach to the implementation of school programs. Through the contacts that were made at these sessions, some participants have already begun involving agencies in a variety of school programs such as girls personal development programs, social skills and sports programs at their schools. Some also realised that the agency contacts they had developed were relatives of the students they were teaching and that this helped them establish a more personal, friendlier teacher-student relationship.

*... making connections through Connecting to Country .... I went and had a long chat with the Lands Council Coordinator 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 have the school working within their own community on a wider scale .*

*we got to meet the services ... that was fabulous ... and realising all the different services that were out there. That we didn't even know existed and how you might be able to utilise them from school so ... because you know we're pretty big here at the moment of trying to get the whole community involved. Like we're one little part of the community and we need to see how you fit in into their world. And what you would have to do with the Health Services or Home Care and even the churches and the hospital and all those sorts of things, yeah. ... we met people from Centacare and now they're coming into our Stage Two classes this term and running a social skills programs ... And I guess it's like the two worlds coming together.*

*I have since taken students to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Fun Day, where we were able to meet other teachers and students and the local community. I have also completed the Traditional Indigenous Games training day which has allowed me to be more engaged with students and local community as I have programmed a PE component based on this training for the Primary-age students.*

*we nabbed one of the blokes to come and speak to the kids during NADOC week. And he was powerful !*

*I could come back to school and say I met your aunt that works at the hospital. The kids were really excited that I knew and remembered.*

However, here was some ambivalence to the speed dating sessions with some of the less experienced, more junior participants unable to see their relevance and one Aboriginal participants suggesting that these sessions were limited and reflected by factional divisions within the community.

*.... it was nice to meet them but I found a lot of the people kind of ... I felt like they were dragged there, like that they didn't really know why they were there.... some seemed like they didn't want to be there. ... we had to ask them everything ... like where we had to drag information out of them. They weren't really willing to give out information that freely. But then other people like they were really good. Like some of the people who worked at the hospital, they just sat there and they were like to-dah-dah-dah like they told us everything and they were really well rehearsed but then others, they weren't and so.*

Clearly, a major achievement of the Program is that it has made almost all of the participants much more comfortable and at ease in cross cultural relationships.

#### **Ability to implement appropriate curriculum and pedagogical practices**

It is also increasingly evident that another very positive outcome of the program is its impact on participants' views of appropriate curriculum and pedagogy for Aboriginal students.

The AECG's post cultural immersion evaluations revealed that, of the 295 participant returns, 267 (90.5%) indicated that the workshop *would influence their approach to the teaching of Aboriginal history and culture* and 237 (80.3%) that it would *influence their approach to teaching Aboriginal students*.

Both these findings were borne out by the ERT's subsequent interviews with 50 participants almost all of whom expressed strong resolve to incorporate local Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum. Many had already begun to do this using the new knowledge and understanding they had gained from the cultural immersion. Moreover, even those who had previously introduced Aboriginal perspectives into their teaching felt that their approach had been validated and/or that they had become much more confident that they could do this in sensitive and in a culturally appropriate ways.

#### **New approaches to curriculum**

Most participants were convinced that the introduction of local Aboriginal perspectives was a valuable strategy for engaging Aboriginal students by making the curriculum more interesting and relevant to them. This was generally an outcome from the cultural immersion component of the workshop and many participants expressed considerable enthusiasm for this approach.

*... I think as soon as you start talking to the kids about this area and their history and their nation and their country they automatically switch-on, automatically want to be a part of it and I think that that this is what I took from Connecting to Country ...*

*I think it's important to have local knowledge, you know having those insights of what is important to the local community, the significance of land features and the river and all of those physical things, and their significance . ... that comes through with the kids, you know they talk about not being able to eat the mullet out of the river and those things that I didn't know about. ....*

*Well, one of the challenges that (the workshop presenter) gave us was to find out what the kids know about their culture ... "Just ask them", she said. So we're doing an Aboriginal Australia unit at the moment and I have a little Aboriginal boy in my class and I asked him, "So what mob are you from?" And he's very, very withdrawn and a bit of a struggler, but he knew that dad was Barkindji, mum's Wilyakali, he knew the totems that he got from mum and dad, he could name his nan and pop on both sides, their totems too and it was just ... it was his 'expert moment', you know, "This is my thing!"*

*understanding where they're coming from sometimes makes a big difference. I'm just thinking of one of our kids who's fairly difficult but you get him on the didgeridoo and you just sit there and you just go "Wow!" ... it just blows you away and you just kind of go: "Well if that 's there what else is he doing in his family that we have no idea about at school?"*

However, there are some limitations to a strategy focused exclusively on local Aboriginal perspectives. These limitations, that neither the cultural immersion presenters nor most workshop participants seemed aware of and which should be addressed in future workshops and professional development programs include:

- ▲ the limited availability of appropriate local resources;
- ▲ the demands placed on local community people;
- ▲ the need to continually train new teachers in local history and culture;
- ▲ the requirements of curriculum in the senior school and the benefits to students themselves of supplementing local perspectives with regional, state, national and international perspectives on issues raised in Aboriginal Studies; and
- ▲ the limited relevance of some traditional perspectives to contemporary youth and contemporary society



## New approaches to pedagogy

The program providing participants with significant insights into potentially more appropriate pedagogical practices (other than introducing Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum) for use with Aboriginal students. In the main these new pedagogical approaches were now being introduced in the 2-day DEC follow-up workshop which, during 2012, received a much more positive response from participants than they had prior to November 2011

New pedagogical approaches that participants were enthused about and beginning to adopt included:

- ▲ taking learning outside the classroom on occasions
- ▲ conducting local excursions
- ▲ developing Personal Learning Plans for their students
- ▲ appreciating the impact of socio-cultural factors on student behaviour
- ▲ applying the 8 Ways of Learning as an alternative Taxonomy of Learning in their classroom
- ▲ opening up new lines of communication with students
- ▲ accepting Aboriginal English as a dialect of Standard Australian English
- ▲ appreciating and applying cross cultural concepts in the classroom
- ▲ providing personal development and self esteem programs for their students

### Taking learning outside the classroom.

In at least one of the DEC 2-day *follow up* workshops, the suggestion that it might help with Aboriginal students to sometimes take learning outside the classroom was, somewhat surprisingly, a revelation to some teachers who, when they later implemented the suggestion, were pleasantly surprised by the results:

*one of the lecturers just said: "Take your kids out and think of the ways that kids learn, they don't all learn the same way. So take them outside and give them the opportunity to work outside. You know what you're like when you stay in the classroom all day and how nutty you can get." And so I actually did that, I took a class outside. And it really worked! They kind of thought it was a bit of a treat actually even though they were doing the same work that we would do inside ... they really liked it.*

*(The presenter) said: "I teach my lessons outside, it makes a difference." And I'm like thinking, "Oh yeah!" But I thought I'll give it a try and I went out there and you know, they were perfect 'cause sometimes you think ... you know, as teachers I think, oh god they're going to take off or they're not going to hear me or ... but they loved it. They did, they did. So we've been using it a bit more ...*

### Conducting local excursions

The cultural immersion workshops have also stimulated interest in the value of excursions to local sites and other ways in which local Aboriginal content and knowledge can be incorporated into the curriculum.

### Developing Personal Learning Plans

Most participants were already aware of Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) but they appreciated the opportunities provided by the workshops to network ideas for developing these more efficiently and effectively.

### Appreciating the impact of socio-cultural factors on student behaviour

Many participants noted that the cultural immersion workshop had given them a much greater awareness of the home environment and social context from which their Aboriginal students came. Though most already had some awareness of these factors on their students' engagement with school, they were quite definite in reporting a much higher awareness as a result of the cultural immersion. As a result they had a new determination to take these factors into account in their teaching.

*I would say it's had 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 and very unusual ... 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.*

### Applying the 8 Ways of Learning as an alternative or variation of a Taxonomy of Learning in their classroom

In addition to gaining a new understanding of Aboriginal English and its relationship to SAE, participants in this particular workshop also benefited from a session on the *8 Ways of Learning* approach to teaching Aboriginal students. They recognised this as an alternative or variation of a taxonomy of learning and many were eager to apply it in their classrooms.

*I'd really like to try (this approach) next year .... to use that pedagogy in everything. ... I'd like to give it a go of doing everything eight ways style, and just see how that goes.*

*it was like a crash course in the eight ways program and I'd never heard of that before. But I can really see how that would particularly work here so that's something I want to look into a lot more. . . . . I can really see how I would use that in my own class. And that wouldn't matter what Year I had or anything like that. But I can definitely see how I can use that.*

### Opening up new lines of communication with students

Many participants suggested that the Program had *opened up new lines of communication* and *helped in making connections* with their Aboriginal students by making them more aware of the students' culture at different levels. Thus one reported how Aboriginal *artefacts* and *souvenirs* that she had produced at the workshop and brought back to the classroom had become a *talking point*.

*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, we all thought that.*

Others pointed out the importance of establishing personal relationships with the students that were open, friendly and showed an awareness of the student's interests.

*finding out what the kids are interested in and just remembering it is important ... like it might sit at the back of your mind and then they'll say something and you're like oh yeah. And just actually remembering and saying that to the kids, they really remember what you say as well and how you react to situations. But yeah, the relationships I think is the number one thing.*

*there's one of my Year 9 boys and we hatched out some chickens and then I gave him one of the roosters. And now the rooster's at his house and he lives a few doors up from me and I hear it every morning and my ... they've got some baby chickens from the rooster now and he's telling me every day and comes up to ... tells me about it and his mum tells me about it. She works at the shop and it's just a way of relating...*

*... it's all about building relationships with the kids. The kids aren't anywhere near as inquisitive about your personal life back on the coast. And when you say hello to a kid in the shopping centre, the kids freak out because you don't do that back on the coast but out here if you walk past a kid and you didn't say hello or you walked past their parents or their aunty and you didn't say hello or at least smiled and acknowledge them like ... they don't like that*

### Accepting Aboriginal English as a dialect of Standard Australian English

Many participants admitted they had little knowledge of dialects within Standard Australian English (SAE) and particularly of Aboriginal English with one teacher admitting that she was still quite unfamiliar with local slang and idiom --- even the term *Koori* was unfamiliar to her. They were unfamiliar with linguistic concepts like *code-switching* or the socio-linguistic and educational implications of privileging SAE over the home dialect of their students.

It was a major achievement of at least one DEC workshop that, through the session on Aboriginal English, many participants gained dramatic new insights into these issues.

*...there was a guy who came out and talked about different dialects ... like American dialects and whether or not you would correct them in the classroom. Previously I had judged the Aboriginal kids for how they speak because it wasn't the same as I speak. . . . This was a light-bulb moment for me.*

*I realised you need to acknowledge and affirm dialect. And one of the things that we have spent a lot of time doing is making posters of home talk versus school talk ...Because you need to acknowledge and affirm dialect.*

*It definitely had an impact on me. I'm not so quick to correct them like outside. If they're just coming up to me and telling me about their weekend and they might say "we done that" or something like that. If we're outside I can sort of accept now there's no real need to correct them whereas when we're inside I know that there is a need to do that.*

*I think that the biggest thing was for me was the understanding their dialect and how that they ... that the students or the community speaking in the wrong tense isn't actually a mistake.*

*That's not how I was brought up to speak but who's to say that? ... like that's their dialect and that's how they speak and I'm guilty of this. I've judged them for how they speak and like ... because it's not ...not how they ... like not how I speak, I just assumed that's it was wrong ... And that was really like a light bulb moment for me to go yeah, okay, that's just how they speak and that's how they all speak out here because that's the dialect to this area.*

### Appreciating and applying cross cultural concepts in the classroom

At one of the DEC 2-day *follow-up* workshops participants received valuable insights into the nature of cross-cultural interaction and explicit help in developing a framework for understand the cross-cultural setting in which they worked. They were invited to consider aspects of their own culture and how these related to the culture of the students and community in which they were now working. Several participants expressed great enthusiasm for this approach which they found both novel and extremely helpful. Consideration should be given to this being formally adopted in both pre-service training and post-appointment professional development in Aboriginal education.

*the first thing she did was to tell us: "You can't teach kids about their culture until you know your own." So she got rid of the tables and chairs and we were sitting around in a circle, and she put a water bottle in the middle of the room and that was the metaphorical camp-fire and we went through this huge who are you, and where do you, you know ... and then once we sort of had that of right, we now know who we are and where we're coming from, we spent the next two days, you know, the role of culture and the role of education and just, yeah, it all linked in.*

*in the second workshop we talked about our own personal culture and what that means to us and no-one's ever asked me what my culture was. I had to sit there and think what's my culture and ... well my grandparents are Polish but I wouldn't have ever said that I'm Polish. But if you ask a student here what their culture is and if their grandparents were Aboriginal, they would say they're Aboriginal. And then there was a few other questions we got asked that had us actually thinking about place ... like where we most feel connected to? And at the moment that's still back in Sydney for me like where my parents are. ... yeah, it was a few interesting questions that were asked.*

### Providing personal development and self esteem programs for the students

As a result of their participation several schools had introduced or reinvigorated personal development and self esteem programs for Aboriginal students such as the *Sister Speak*; *Bro Speak* and *Drumbeat* programs. In some cases these were being facilitated by the access to the Aboriginal community network that had been opened up by the workshops.

*I've started a girls' program here for Year 5 and 6 girls and I'm doing a 10-week program and then we'll have a change of students and a new group will come in next term but tomorrow's our last day for this group of girls and they've sent home an invitation to invite their mother or auntie or grandmother or carer or sister to come and they're going to prepare them a meal and we've been doing some therapeutic drumming so they're going to give a performance and that will be the climax of the whole 10-week program.....Drumbeat program, it's called, developed by a fellow in Western Australia, a counsellor, in Western Australia ... or psychologist I think. ... actually (with us) it turned into a three-part program, I wanted to concentrate on the self so the whole self-image, the forming relationships, how our relationships affect us and other people, all those things to do with us and how we deal with things. The next part of it was the health side, so we've gone through the food portions and fats in food, sugars in foods and preparing healthy meals. And the third component was an exercise component, so trying to encourage girls to be more physically active every day. ... we'd been tossing around the girls' idea for while, but I was the lucky one to get the role of putting it together, developing it and orchestrating it and co-ordinating the whole thing. So it's ... from what happened at Connecting to Country, I was able to take pieces of that and make sure that ... well not make sure but it gave me more confidence and more insight into the issues that I could be dealing with the girls on that level. So it's got a long, long way to go but I think that it can be really ... it will turn into a really useful program.*

### **Impact on whole school practice and structural change**

A disappointing outcome of the program is its limited impact on *whole school practice* and structural change that might facilitate the transfer of the positive impact on individual participants to other members of staff in participating schools and possibly help ensure the long term sustainability of program outcomes. Of the 13 schools so far visited by the ERT only 2 or 3 appear to have made any structural changes of this sort.

This disappointing outcome appears to stem from several factors including:

- ⤴ a lack of leadership and understanding by the Principals of many participating schools;
- ⤴ an ad hoc approach adopted by many schools and an apparent disregard of program guidelines in selecting staff to participate in the program;
- ⤴ the absence of explicit advice and strategies to assist participants to become *change agents* upon their return to school

### **Lack of leadership and understanding by the Principals of some participating schools**

The involvement of the Principals of participating schools in the program is a concern as, despite the stipulation in the original guidelines that they be involved in the program workshops, their attendance at the whole program was very much the exception rather than the rule.

Of those who did attend very few attended all 5 days. While the work pressures facing all Principals are recognised, the example they set through their casual attitude to attendance inevitably sends messages about the priority that should be attached to the Program. This seemingly apathetic approach to attendance and participation by many Principals also suggests that they had only limited understanding of the nature and scope of this program and even less of why their schools had been targeted for participation in it.

There is clearly a need for better pre-program briefing of Principals about the nature of the Program and the provision of some post program advice on implementing and sustaining the immediate outcomes from it.

### **Ad hoc approach to the selection of staff participants**

A flexible approach to the selection of each school's teacher participants was necessary when it quickly became obvious that there were insufficient numbers of *New Scheme* or *Newly Appointed* teachers to fill all these positions in accordance with the program guidelines.

However, the discretion this gave Principals in nominating workshop participants was only rarely applied in a strategic manner that would significantly advance the program's aims. For instance, in one school the lead participant was chosen because the Principal thought that, as a well respected staff member, she could drive staff development in Aboriginal education on her return. In the same school the Principal also chose a quite junior member of staff because she commuted every day for over an hour each way from a neighbouring town and had little first-hand knowledge of the school's local Aboriginal community.

In most schools, however, the selection of participants was much more ad hoc. In some cases it was a long-term staff member who had had responsibility for Aboriginal education in the school for many years. Some of these appeared to have a jaundiced, world weary

view of the issues and seemed a little puzzled as to why their school was involved in the program in the first place as they thought they were already addressing the issues effectively. For many schools, however, it was very junior members of staff who were sent to the workshops. Indeed, some schools sent participants who were only part-time staff members or Rural Area Relief teachers (RARs) with obviously little or no power or opportunity to implement significant change in any school.

Further illustrating this *laissez faire* approach to participation was the complaint of many participants that they only had very limited advance notice of their participation in the program --- in some cases as little as two days. As well, very few of the participants attended the full 5 day with many citing work or family pressures as justification for their non attendance at the 2-day DEC follow up workshop.

Understandably this approach to the selection of participants and their participation in the workshops led to cynicism about the program's outcomes among some participants:

*... I think it will have an impact for some people but others I think were just attending because they were told they had to. And then I think the ones that it will have that positive impact on ... they do a little bit already and that those days just gave them more confidence*

*Like all that I've learnt, I can't implement straight away because I'm an RAR. It's great that I learnt it but then you know if you can't put it in straight away, you forget a lot of it so. .... like a lot of the presenters said of course you can, you can use it. But no I can't because the longest that I'm on a class is for two weeks and even to get a block like that is very rare. I'm usually on like a different class every single day.*

### **Absence of explicit advice or strategies to assist participants as *change agents***

A third major weakness in the program that limited its potential for developing structural change in participating schools and ensuring the sustainability of outcomes was the absence of explicit advice and strategies to assist participants to become *change agents* once they returned to their schools. There were no post-workshop debriefings at any school and, except for one school where the Aboriginal Education Committee had been reconstituted, no formal strategies for implementing whole-school change as a result of insights gained in the program.

This meant that many participants, despite their initial enthusiasm, were concerned about their ability to maintain the impetus and initial motivation gained from the workshops faced with the disinterest and, in some cases, the perceived intransigence of other staff.



*...we talked about it in the car coming back from the workshop but we probably didn't sit together as a group and discuss it. We did have a bit of a wrap up at a staff meeting where we just spoke very briefly about just how wonderful it was ....*

*I am only 1 of 7 in my staffroom. The others, I feel, are still a bit negative. I wanted to present at a staff meeting but I still felt some resistance ... I will do it next year.*

*I'm finding it difficult because the mindset of the staff that I share with ... and they would have benefited from going to this because they're, I suppose, a little bit negative. I've come back and I wanted to present at the staff meeting about what our culture is and explain that to them. And then also about the Aboriginal English dialect ... but then I had a chat to my head teacher and she was like: "Oh, yeah that sounds like a really good idea" ... but I'm actually a little bit reluctant to do anything because of the resistance of some of the staff. And some of them are my friends and just like ...*

The sustainability of the program's initial positive outcomes will most likely be fragile unless explicit strategies to help participants become *change agents* in their schools are developed and formally presented as part of the DEC 2-day follow-up workshop. It may be that a module needs to be developed outlining a strategy for developing awareness and transferring outcomes to the rest of the staff of each participating school, providing participants with a *where to from here road-map*.

## **Impact on Aboriginal Parents and Community Members**

For this second interim report the ERT has interviewed only 24 Aboriginal parents or community members from 8 participating schools about their understanding of the *Connecting to Country* program and its impact. This is insufficient data and as yet (January 2013) it is too soon since the implementation of the program to effectively assess its impact on parents and community members in terms of

- enhanced cultural inclusiveness in school practices and processes
- greater Aboriginal community engagement in school planning and decision making processes
- enhanced levels of Aboriginal community engagement in the development and delivery of curriculum and units of work.

However, this section of the report will suggest that there is some emerging evidence of the programs impact on parents and community members in a fourth way:

- capacity building for those community members and Aboriginal Education Workers involved in the delivery of the cultural immersion component of the program

### **Community expectations and expectations of the *Connecting to Country* Program**

Parents and community members often knew little if anything about the *Connecting to Country* Program except in very small centres or in cases where they had actually been involved in the delivery of the cultural immersion workshop. In at least 4 of the 8 schools there was some concern that the community's participation in the program was limited due to factional issues..

This suggests a need for both the DEC, individual schools and the AECG to review their communication strategies and the promotion of *Connecting to Country* particularly as, when the program is explained to parents, the vast majority are very supportive of both its aims and its community based approach.

### **Impact of program on community perceptions of cultural inclusiveness of schools**

Many parents did not feel schools were culturally inclusive and suggested instead that they were still often unwelcoming to parents

*They keep parents and community members waiting outside the front office..... The best schools are those like ..... with Aboriginal people employed from the front office through to all the teachers and others*

As well, most parents interviewed by the ERT were concerned that teachers generally, not just new scheme teachers, knew little about the local Aboriginal community and its history and culture. Because of this, they were definite that any program that helped connect teachers with the local community could only help but benefit students, the community and the teachers themselves.

They also thought it extremely important that teachers should understand the socio-economic

conditions and other issues in contemporary Aboriginal society that might impact on a student's performance at school.

*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 that..... those uni students coming out, .... and you've also got the dinosaur teachers that's been there for years .....*

*...now you get a teacher that comes out of uni that might not have the cultural awareness ... and they're set up to fail .... they don't know 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 that broader network thing that they need to be aware of*

*..... they need to be aware that white Australia has a black history ..... talking about things that's real, that happened to them, a lot of them don't know what the history of this valley ... The massacres and that sort of thing*

*.... teachers know that a lot of our kids come to school with baggage, excess baggage, but the teachers just think everyone's the same ... just for instance when there's a funeral in our town, our kids suffer, they don't realise but they've got to make room, make room for more to come in town so ... when they get to school they're not worried about school work ...they're about their mums and dads fixing up their clothes for the funeral and stuff and where they'll be sleeping tonight, or are his 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.*

*... the teachers need to know that like, on a Thursday night their parents go out and get drunk and party and have a fight and the student comes in on that Friday and hangs his head on the table or something, maybe just understanding that a little bit more would help them know they don't have to hammer them all the time*

*-- the teachers don't understand the slang the kids use. It sounds rough and the teachers don't understand it. And they're not as fluent in talking as other kids and a lot of them are very shy. The teachers need to make them feel good about themselves and feel more confident. These kids are often put down at home by their older siblings and others. Teachers need to help them be more confident, not single Aboriginal kids out but treat all kids the same*

## Impact of program on community engagement in school planning and decision making processes

Even after schools had participated in the *Connecting to Country* Program parents at many schools are still of the view that they are not always fully engaged in school planning and decision making processes and at some schools still felt that they were not welcome.

At several of the schools in more rural areas where parents and community members were interviewed there was irritation and anger at what was seen as a lack of meaningful involvement even in the planning and implementation of the *Connecting to Country* Program itself.

There was considerable concern that, for whatever reason, schools were not totally inclusive and often favoured one community faction over others

As well, several parents cautioned that effective strategies to engage parents and communities needed to be long term if they are really going to address the complex issues involved in Aboriginal education.

*The trouble is that the Principals and SEDS (School Education Directors) all think the same way. They assume there's a 'quick fix' .... (and) that Aboriginal parents have the same skills and education as non Aboriginal parents and they ignore the need for community training .... You've got to change the culture of the school about how they do things ..... there's got to be a persistent approach, you've got to keep doing it.*

However, at one of the 8 schools, the parents were very positive about a newly-appointed school Principal whom they found to be very approachable and caring. And in some schools, particularly those located in more urban areas, there was genuine recognition of the difficulties that schools faced in organising parental involvement

As well, there was also optimism that there were some improvements and that the *Connecting to County* Program was an opportunity to accelerate these.

*It's about understanding, you get understanding teachers then we can learn to keep straight back on with education. They've got a bigger picture of what goes on.*

*Yeah, of course it'd be of benefit to Aboriginal students outcomes in school, big time 'cause if you've got the teachers on board and understanding what happens out in the community .... they are starting to understand that there's something wrong if the kid's not focused on their work there's something wrong with them, they usually consult us or they ask the kid what's going on*

### **Impact on levels of community engagement in the development and delivery of curriculum**

In all schools visited by the ERT there was already Aboriginal community involvement, or the involvement of Aboriginal Education Workers in the development of Aboriginal Studies curriculum and many of the 50 participants interviewed by the ERT and the 295 who submitted post cultural immersion evaluations to the AECG indicated that they would welcome further such involvement.

However, some parents in the more urban areas expressed concerns that Aboriginal Studies programs that were not embedded in the formal curriculum were a distraction that could detract from, rather than improve, academic outcomes. They were particularly concerned at the amount of normal class time lost to some students who were required to take part in cultural performances and rejected the concept of what they called *add on* or *soft option* Aboriginal Studies programs.

*(They 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 .... because 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.*

Several participants also suggested that the quality of community engagement in the delivery of curriculum could be improved if the DEC and schools were more proactive in providing community members with professional development and training in curriculum. They suggested that it was unfair to expect Aboriginal people to understand curriculum issues without some training or professional development and that it would boost both their confidence and effectiveness if they did.

*I think the follow-up workshop would have been more valuable again if there were some Aboriginal people from the school there. ... we were given a lot of information ... and then to come back and tell some of the Aboriginal people that work at the school "Oh no that's not the direction that we're heading." .... it would have been better if everyone was sort of on the same page.*

*(We need) to continue to build those relationships, so that they will feel more comfortable coming into our classrooms, because without that relationship ... they're going to feel like an outsider in our classroom, and if we bring them into the classroom they need to feel like they have a strong connection with the teacher so that they feel confident that we're not going to let them down or hang them out to dry in front of the kids and. They need to know us, about how we operate. I think that that would be beneficial.*

These observations were confirmed by the ERT's observations of some presentations at several cultural immersion workshops and consideration should be given to encouraging greater community involvement in the follow-up workshops.

### **Impact of program on capacity building for community members and Aboriginal Education Workers**

A very positive outcome of the program was the very definite evidence of its impact on capacity building and confidence of those Aboriginal community members and Aboriginal DEC staff involved in the delivery of the cultural immersion workshops. This was voluntarily commented on by several of 50 participants interviewed by the ERT some of whom actually attributed the success of the cultural immersion to Aboriginal staff members who had been crucial in the planning and organisation of the workshop. They also acknowledged that previously they had not been fully aware of the role or the skills of these staff but that the cultural immersion had given them a totally new appreciation of both.

*it was a real affirmation for the Indigenous staff to be so involved in it and to lead that training in school --- (this was real) capacity building ... I became aware how I can use those people and okay. You know, I'm not really sure of your role ... but then after that day, I think I got the feeling that there was a better understanding than I guess other schools.*

## Impact on Aboriginal Students

In the course of its research the External Research Team (ERT) conducted focus group interviews with 92 Aboriginal students from 12 participating schools --- 7 High Schools, 4 Primary Schools and 1 Central School.

The interviews were initially intended to evaluate the students' views on whether their schools' participation in the *Connecting to Country* Program had had any impact on their school experience. However, it soon became quite apparent that the students had limited, if any, awareness of the program so the purpose of the interviews was altered to explore the students' views on the characteristics of *good* schools and *good* teachers and their attitudes to Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum.

Analysis of their comments in the 12 focus group interviews and the ideas that they provided in writing when asked to complete *Y Diagrams* indicated their perceptions of what *good* schools and *good* teachers *looked like, sounded like, and made them feel like*. The ERT's analysis of their responses suggest widespread agreement about both. Their views on these subjects are relevant to the professional development of teachers in Aboriginal Education and have implications for the ongoing development and implementation of the *Connecting to Country* Program.

Some students were very much aware that teachers often had little understanding of the stress on many Aboriginal students as a result of the impoverished circumstances of their home life. Despite the student's lack of awareness of the *Connecting to Country* Program, several clearly saw a need for programs that would help improve teacher awareness of those issues in contemporary Aboriginal society that impact on students' school performance.

*Teachers 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.*

*I think they need to educate people about what Aboriginal people are going through these days. Like the teachers don't understand that these kids ... why are they mucking up in class, some of these kids don't have a proper home, food in their house and like they don't understand what these kids are going through and they put them out as bad kids because they have a bad home.....But it's not that they're naughty it's just because they might be going through stress and stuff..... Like they might have that and then they pick on them saying they're bad. I reckon when they tell a kid they're bad they just keep being bad anyway 'cause they're getting attention, 'cause they don't get attention at home maybe, I think, I don't know, I don't have that but like ...Like people don't ... they don't know about out of school life, they don't know about anything and they put like a name on you.*

Several students also suggested that it became much easier to form a relationship with teachers when they engaged with the local community and that meetings with teachers outside of school helped establish a more comfortable relationship with them at school .

*Yeah I know two teachers, I've known them since I was in kindergarten because of surf lifesaving and stuff so when like when I came here ..... I knew them straight away and it was good.....Yeah, (it made me) more comfortable 'cause I knew some of the teachers*

After a student at one school contributed the above view several others immediately endorsed it with a succession of spontaneous cryptic comments:

- ^ I met a teacher from cricket, yeah.*
- ^ I seen one of the teachers down at the footy ovals.... he plays*
- ^ Well, I've seen one of the teachers at the hospital.*
- ^ I know one of the teachers ... Miss W. from her son and her daughter-in-law which ... and her daughter-in-law is sort of my relative and so yeah so I know them from karate.*
- ^ Yeah I know Miss W. from family things.*

Finally, the interviews with these Aboriginal students revealed that they placed great value on the presence of Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum and wanted to experience this more than was currently available.

They saw Aboriginal content in the curriculum as extremely important for the maintenance of culture and even as a way of reclaiming cultural knowledge that they felt had been largely lost. Typical of their responses when asked why they liked Aboriginal content in the curriculum were:

*.... 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 stuff.....yeah.....Yeah, definitely.....Yes.....To know where you come from.....To keep it going..... Yeah, our future generations, keep them up to date with it all.*

*Well I kind of when I go here I actually get to learn about my culture and everything because my poppy was Aboriginal and he was like one of the ... there's only very few Aboriginals in our family and most of them don't even get ... I don't even get to see so don't get to learn anything at home about it or ... and since my pop's dead, he died when I was three, so 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 local language in reinforcing their individual cultural identity and that of other local people. Moreover, their comments imply the importance of the schools assisting with this by involving knowledgeable elders from the community.

*Like I've got a book down in my classroom and it's got all the language and stuff ... like only a bit on it and stuff, but yeah. But, no, it only goes for 15 minutes.*

*(But) Yeah, 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,.....*

Many of the students also clearly knew that there were many sources of cultural knowledge within the local Aboriginal community and they were somewhat nonplussed that the schools did not do more to tap into these sources.

When asked who might assist the school in teaching about Aboriginal culture the primary students spontaneously provided a list of names of community people --- *Uncle Mal, Uncle Steve, Aunty Trudy, Aunty Lois, Aunty Kate, Uncle John* were mentioned immediately --- who could teach art or dance or tell stories about the local area.

*The teachers could go out for half an hour or something and they could talk to us about culture or something --- like my Nana and Pop.*

The students were also well aware of some local stories. At one centre, for instance they were excited by the story of the *Gravelly Dog*; and of significant local sites at Bellbrook, Crescent Head, Hat Head and South West Rocks which they thought could, with the assistance of local community people, be utilised by schools for excursions about local culture.

The secondary students were equally definite, but much more specific, about the value of engaging community people with local knowledge in the school.

*I reckon they should have a (community) teacher in here, like an Elder, that knows their language so the kids ... 'cause once they pass away who's going to ...teach.... know the language, 'cause I go to Greenhill School like I've got to go now, like soon, and the little kids up there they do their language and we sit up there and do it with them, there's only two of us that goes up to the school and we sit up there and do language with them.*

Knowing about the availability of such resources contributed to a sense of disappointment that the curriculum, as currently presented in their schools, did not include more Aboriginal content. Primary school students thought that Aboriginal perspectives were limited, typically suggesting that they came into the reading of some stories, often only by one or two teachers or in a particular year. The high school students were disappointed that Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum appeared to be limited to Year 7. When asked about perspectives in the Stage 4-5 History curriculum some were adamant that History was *only about war* and complained that *we learn more about other people than we do about ourselves*.

In some high schools the students were also particularly disappointed that the HSC course in Aboriginal Studies was not available to them because of insufficient numbers. They attributed this to the lack of interest, even antipathy, from non Aboriginal students:

(There's no HSC course in Aboriginal Studies at this school) *'Cause there's not enough students but when I told the people down at AECG they said they should because basically it should be ... whatsisname should be doing that, if not they should have like ... you know how they say it's a smart world or something, they should have a little program and stuff .... like ... I think I was the only person that wanted to do it. Probably 'cause all the white kids don't really have much interest in like Aboriginal ...*

A number of students in the more urban schools also suggested that, even when Aboriginal content was incorporated into their classes it was often focused on traditional culture and there were rarely if ever any references to contemporary culture. They suggested that there was a need for the curriculum to overtly address the issue of racism in contemporary society and that Aboriginal content should include *good things* and information about *Aboriginal people today*.

## APPENDIX A

### **Summary of Findings of First Interim Report, *Beginning the Journey, November 2011***

1. The cultural immersion component of the program has an immediate and positive impact on the understanding and attitudes towards Aboriginal people and culture of almost all participating teachers. It also fosters positive attitudes towards Aboriginal students and a willingness to review curriculum and pedagogical practices. It enthuses and empowers participants to introduce more Aboriginal perspectives and consider new ideas and whole school approaches to engaging Aboriginal students.
2. There is slightly less enthusiasm for the 2 day DEC professional development component of the program though most participants did see it as a valuable opportunity for networking.
3. The targeting of participants for the program has diverged from what was originally intended with many participants being neither *new scheme* nor *newly appointed* teachers.
4. Some participating teachers reported difficulties in sustaining the initial burst of enthusiasm for curriculum development and other change when faced with the perceived disinterest or intransigence of other staff.
5. The 3-day cultural immersion component of the program has empowered and enhanced the confidence of those local and regional AECG members involved in its delivery.
6. Strategies for establishing support networks for teachers and Principals require further monitoring.
7. Strategies for developing school-community networks and community mentoring through the project require further monitoring.
8. The discrepancy between the views of teachers as to how their school was performing in Aboriginal education and the views of parents, community members and students needs further monitoring and analysis.
9. Reports of changes to school structure and organisation need further analysis as many of the reported changes are either still in the planning stage or involve the revival of previously discarded plans and strategies.
10. Envisaged changes to curriculum need further monitoring as they are currently focused on *traditional* content rather than on more broad based, contemporary perspectives or alternative approaches to pedagogy.
11. Some parents are ambivalent about the effectiveness of Aboriginal Studies in improving educational outcomes and this requires additional monitoring.

***Reported compiled by Ms Cathie Burgess & Dr Paddy Cavanagh Aboriginal Studies Association  
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