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## **Aboriginal Community-led Preservice Teacher Education: Learning from Country in the City**

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*Abstract: In Australia it is well documented that teachers continue to struggle with implementing Aboriginal content, pedagogies and engaging with Aboriginal communities. This paper describes a research project analysing place-based learning for preservice teachers at an urban university led by Aboriginal community members. We argue that place-based learning is critical in developing preservice teacher's knowledge and confidence in Aboriginal education. Surveys, individual and group yarns provided in-depth data from 64 participants completing elective courses including place-based 'Learning from Country' (LFC) experiences. Three key findings emerge from the data. Firstly, the utility of an experiential 'learning by doing' approach, secondly, the profound shifts in participant understandings of the diversity of Aboriginal cultures, histories and communities and thirdly, how these experiences highlighted the strength and presence of the local urban Aboriginal community. These findings suggest that LFC holds promise as a pedagogical strategy to improve teacher capacity in Aboriginal education.*

### **Introduction**

The critical role of teacher quality in improving student outcomes is widely acknowledged (Hattie, 2009; Naylor & Sayed, 2014), even more so for those who experience disadvantage such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (henceforth referred to as Aboriginal students due to the location of project) (Gillan, et al., 2017). Lack of teacher knowledge about and experiences with Aboriginal peoples, cultures and histories either in their own schooling and/or in their teacher education course (Lowe, et al., 2020) and the impact of racism (Bodkins-Andrews & Carlson, 2016) can make teaching in this space fraught with difficulty and inertia (Buxton, 2017). Furthermore, many teachers lack confidence, feel uncomfortable teaching Aboriginal content and fear that they will overstep their authority if they speak on behalf of Aboriginal people (McKnight, et al., 2019). Some teachers perceive Indigenous content as irrelevant to their discipline area or relevant only if they have Aboriginal students in their class (Phillips, 2011).

We argue that in order to develop effective teachers in Aboriginal education, we need to develop preservice teacher's critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/2000), in relation to the impact of Eurocentric, assimilatory education practices that have largely failed Aboriginal students (Lowe, et al., 2020). Growing from this consciousness raising we aim to build preservice teacher capacity, confidence and commitment to classroom and whole school practices that support Aboriginal identity, student learning and the inclusion of Aboriginal

knowledges in the curriculum. While pathways to consciousness raising can be achieved in a classroom through a diverse range of critical and experience based pedagogies (Norman, 2012), this paper focuses on research conducted with preservice teachers who engaged in Aboriginal community-led place-based Learning from Country activities outside the classroom on Country. Country is an Aboriginal English (as different from Standard Australian English) term that describes land as a living entity, the essence of Aboriginality and includes the human and non-human; people, culture, spirituality, history, land, waterways, animals, plants, insects, habitats and ecosystems. As Fredericks (2013) explains, Country is the “knowledge, cultural norms, values, stories and resources within that particular area – that particular Indigenous place” (p. 6). The key aim of ‘Learning from Country in the City’ (henceforth referred to as Learning from Country) is to encourage preservice teachers to think about new approaches to teaching where local Country inspired narratives of place become a foundation for learning (Wakeman, 2015) supported through classroom and assessment processes.

Consequently, this research aimed to investigate the effects of these Learning from Country (LFC) experiences on preservice teachers’ understandings of Aboriginal peoples, cultures and histories, on their understandings of Country and community, and the extent to which this learning had fostered the development of a critical consciousness. In what follows, we provide the contextual background to and an overview of teaching and learning experiences in the LFC approach and layout the three key concepts informing LFC: critical consciousness, place consciousness and critical pedagogy of place, before explaining the research design. In discussing the research findings, we highlight the importance that preservice teachers (who are participants) attached to the experiential ‘learning by doing’ pedagogical approach, the profound shifts experienced in their depth of understanding of the diversity of Aboriginal cultures, histories and communities and finally, the extent to which these LFC experiences visibilised the local urban Aboriginal community and Country.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Our team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal lecturers/researchers share a commitment to reshaping power relationships through privileging Aboriginal voices to affect Aboriginal student learning outcomes, curriculum and community engagement. We acknowledge that Aboriginal sovereignty has never been ceded and as we work on Gadigal Country we believe that this ‘place’ should be the focus of our efforts to reshape power relations. Katrina is a Worimi woman (Aboriginal) postdoctoral research fellow who has taught Indigenous Studies in teacher education for over two decades. Cathie is a non-Aboriginal educator has worked in Aboriginal education for over 35 years and parent of Aboriginal children involved in local Aboriginal community sports. Suzanne is a non-Aboriginal researcher working in community-based family, youth, sexual and domestic violence organisations who is currently learning from interactions with Aboriginal community members and Country.

### **Background**

Teacher professional learning where local Aboriginal community members teach the teachers, has been successfully implemented by the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) through their Connecting to Country (CTC) program. In this program, Aboriginal community members take teachers out of school and into their community to teach them about local histories, cultures and community priorities. Teachers reported this to

be a transformative experience that helped them develop more meaningful relationships with their students, develop better understanding of and therefore teach local knowledge, and challenge stereotypes and prejudices about Aboriginal peoples (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2016). Moreover, follow up cultural mentoring for these teachers led by local Aboriginal community members supported teachers in developing culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogies in their classrooms (Burgess, Bishop & Lowe, 2020).

Prior inclusion of field trips for preservice teachers and the success of CTC and other courses (e.g. Harrison, Page & Tobin, 2016), prompted us to implement a pedagogical approach we call ‘Learning from Country in the City’, embedded in three Aboriginal education electives available to students enrolled in teacher education at an urban university in Sydney. Each elective is a 36 hour face-to-face semester course. The elective subjects aim to better prepare the largely non-Aboriginal cohort of preservice teachers to apply culturally and relationally responsive curriculum and pedagogies to teaching Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students when they become teachers.

In this study, Learning from Country means learning from Aboriginal peoples, cultures, histories, sites and all that Country entails including the interdependent ecologies within the urban environment. To do this, we employ local Aboriginal community-based educators to take preservice teachers into the local community to walk with and listen to Aboriginal peoples’ narratives of place. This enables preservice teachers to understand that the everyday urban context (such as the university, the adjacent suburbs, local tourist areas etc) is Country. These experiences occur alongside classroom-based theoretical learning, all of which are purposeful and structured in ways to develop deep listening, critical reflection and cultural humility. Through this, we hope that preservice teachers will develop their critical consciousness so as to articulate and mobilise a critical pedagogy of place in order to engage with their local Aboriginal community and Country to become effective teachers in this area.

## Education Context

This work is driven by a deep concern about the continuing disadvantage Aboriginal people experience through ongoing assimilationist education practices (Burgess & Evans, 2017). These practices contribute to pervasive misrepresentations and deficit discourses about Aboriginal peoples, histories and cultures often reinforced by mainstream media and education (Buxton, 2017; Burgess, et al., 2020). Consequently, these views impact significantly on broader community attitudes towards Aboriginal peoples and cultures and perpetuate racism (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016), compounding the effects of disadvantage.

Moreover, the intergenerational legacy of ‘silencing’ Aboriginal histories and cultures along with repetitive and simplistic teaching of these, continues to marginalise Indigenous knowledges (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013). Clark’s (2008) research found that Aboriginal history was “taught to death, but not *in depth* [author emphasis]” leading to student disengagement and resistance to this area of learning (p. 67-69).

In recognition of the importance of knowledge and understanding relating to Aboriginal peoples, histories and cultures, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019) highlights a commitment to developing connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to improve the teaching of Aboriginal histories and cultures and Aboriginal student outcomes. It states, “Effective partnerships are based on culturally supportive and responsive learning environments” (p.10) and so the LFC project responds to this by preparing preservice teachers to develop critical skills in building

relationships with local Aboriginal communities and Country to make a difference for Aboriginal (and indeed all) students.

Prior to undertaking the elective units where Learning from Country is embedded, preservice teachers complete a mandatory Aboriginal education course. This course introduces them to the importance of understanding Aboriginal cultures, histories and perspectives in developing curriculum resources and pedagogical approaches in their teaching practices. However, the limited time of one semester makes it a challenging task (Thorpe & Burgess, 2016) to develop the depth of understanding needed to become effective teachers, and so Aboriginal education electives with a LFC focus have been implemented to address this shortfall.

### **Activating a Critical Consciousness**

Freire (1970/2000) developed the notion of *conscientization* which he described as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions – developing a critical awareness – so that individuals can take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). In the teacher education context, problematising dominant ideologies that silence, diminish and oppress Aboriginal voices is a key step in developing a critical consciousness. Research on educating students in ways that develop their critical consciousness and capacity for self-reflection, emphasises the value and power of pedagogies that draw on authentic examples and realistic situations (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Teaching for critical consciousness fosters critical thinking, in what Kholi et.al (2019) suggest is a “a dynamic and reflexive approach to reading the world (text, media, audio, interactions) that strengthens one’s understanding of power, inequity, and injustice” (p. 25).

The LFC pedagogical approach consists of purposeful, structured experiences for preservice teachers to learn first-hand from local Aboriginal community-based educators. This includes cultural tours about pre-invasion life around Sydney and the university grounds, and post-invasion experiences illuminating local ecology, resistance sites, Aboriginal art and Stolen Generation<sup>1</sup> survivor narratives which generate understanding of the continuity of political activism, survival and resilience. These Country-centred experiences occur at Australia’s initial site of invasion and so this shapes the significance of this place-based learning as controversial and for some preservice teachers, confronting in contesting Western versions of settlement and progress (Burgess, et al., 2020). Through this approach, preservice teachers’ ways of thinking about past and present relationships between Aboriginal peoples, lands, cultures, histories and communities as well as relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (Polity and Research, 2018) are encouraged.

To prepare preservice teachers, address oft expressed fears of not wanting to offend Aboriginal people and consider the cultural safety of all involved, we discuss culturally appropriate, ethical and local protocols to build awareness and confidence early in these courses. We focus on respectful and deep listening to develop reflective understandings and feelings about new experiences of place. We highlight the importance of enacting humility and reciprocity to ‘give back’ to and nourish Country (McKnight, 2016). We also introduce preservice teachers to the notion of ‘Yarning’, an Aboriginal informal, non-linear way of conversing and deep listening (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010; Shay, 2019) to enact a culturally appropriate communication style that respects and listens to all voices.

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<sup>1</sup> The term Stolen Generations describes generations of Aboriginal children removed from their families in the 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Preservice teacher assessment tasks acknowledge the importance of voice through a reflective analysis of their experiences, for example, designing a visual learning journal to express how these experiences might influence their teaching practice. This approach empowers preservice teachers as self-reflective learners and develops their critical consciousness through cycles of action, reflection, theorising and change to decolonise and transform knowledges and practices (Arnold, et al., 2012, p. 282).

The courses are structured to provide experiential and practical pathways for preservice teachers to develop their critical consciousness by listening to Aboriginal community-based educators' lived experiences of colonisation and illuminate place-based knowledges, values, and skills. Through the notion of Country we also attempt to build 'place consciousness'; an understanding of the layered nature of Aboriginal knowledges that exist in the places these preservice teachers move through everyday.

### Place Consciousness

A critical element of LFC is the development of place consciousness, a deep understanding of the importance of place and the inherent significance of 'Country' in an Indigenous framing of place. Place-based learning is commonly used to describe learning where location is at the centre. This approach emerges from various traditions including environmental, outdoor, land and community-based education and therefore includes a range of definitions (Harasymchuk, 2015). Ruitenber (2005) offers a critical rendering of place consciousness that resonates with this study:

*Each place has a history, often a contested history, of the people who inhabited it in past times. Each place has as aesthetics, offers a sensory environment of sound, movement and image that is open to multiple interpretations. And each (inhabited) place has a spatial configuration through which power and other socio-politico-cultural mechanism are at play. (p. 215)*

In developing place consciousness, Aboriginal community-based educators demonstrate how to become open to and experience Country; to understand that it is everywhere, alive with stories, people and the non-human world (McKnight, 2016). Marcia Langton (1998) notes the limitations of Western understandings of Country when she critiques the concept of Australian "wilderness" as a fantasy, reinforcing *terra nullius* which ignores Aboriginal peoples' knowledge of the "cultural landscapes" that exist across the entire continent (p. 18). Likewise, in the densely populated urban landscapes where most Australian's live, non-Aboriginal people often have trouble grasping that urban places are also Aboriginal places, as Porter (2018) notes, "this urban country is also urban *Country*" (p. 239). As teachers and researchers, it is our aim to awaken preservice teachers to the cultural landscapes of Country so they can build this into their daily practice, wherever they may teach.

Place-conscious education provides firsthand experience of local life and in the political processes involved in shaping what happens there (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 620). Local Aboriginal community-based learning is central to building place consciousness in order that we "reconnect the process of education, enculturation, and human development to the well-being of community life" (Gruenewald and Smith, 2008, p. xvi).

The limitations of Western epistemologies and ontologies in describing Aboriginal peoples' deep connection to place have been recognised by a number of Indigenous researchers such as Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth (2020) who note that shallow, tokenistic interpretations implicitly default to "Anglo, colonial and predominately male" (p. 2) versions of knowledges, cultures and histories. These entrenched versions continue to erase and deny

Aboriginal people's connection to and understanding of place (Yunkaporta & Shillingsworth, 2020).

### **Critical Pedagogy of Place**

Gruenewald's (2003) critical pedagogy of place provides a lens through which to analyse preservice teachers' responses to their LFC experiences and the influence this has on their understanding and approach to teaching and learning. He argues that synthesising the mutually supportive "critical pedagogy" and "placed-based education" provides the intellectual tools to interrogate the complex intersections between culture, education and the environment. It also reveals how preservice teachers develop their critical consciousness as they are exposed to new ways of valuing, being, knowing and doing (Yunkaporta & Shillingsworth, 2020). Moreover, Greenwood (previously Gruenewald) (2009) suggests that, *at its deepest level, critical place-based education is not merely about making education more meaningful or contributing to community life. It is about remembering a deeper and wider narrative of living and learning in connection with others and with the land (p. 5).*

Furthermore, Wakeman (2015) argues that Gruenewald's critical pedagogy of place can be actioned through listening to and learning from individual and collective community narratives; in this instance, listening to and walking on Country with local Aboriginal people. By storying the lived experiences of being Aboriginal with localised relationships to Country, community and culture, these diverse voices challenge Western, hegemonic understandings of place and reveal the power and agency of Aboriginal people who live, work and educate in these places. Their stories connect the past to the present and future.

Australian researcher, Margaret Somerville (2007) proposes that for a critical place pedagogy to develop, learning must be; embodied, local, and relational to place, be communicated in stories and other representations and involve a "contact zone of contested place stories" (p. 153). This involves reciprocal and dialogical processes between people and place and develops in students, deeper, more nuanced understandings of the local environment. Moreover, Somerville et al. (2011, p. 1) suggest a critical stance that recognises power and problematises taken for granted knowledges is necessary to challenge hegemony. Through a recognition of the importance of "self-in-relation to the other" (p. 2), they explore how place pedagogies focus on relational connections between people and places and so provide space for counternarratives. LFC is a way to both describe and analyse what is happening when preservice teachers listen to and learn from Aboriginal people, that fosters new ways of thinking about place (including their place in society), and their roles and responsibilities as teachers on Country. Contiguous to this is an understanding of their responsibility to push back against colonial narratives which espouse deficit discourses about Aboriginal peoples and cultures. Foregrounding Country as a source of community strength and well-being provides a way in which to talk back to these discourses. By facilitating a context for these new ways of thinking and doing, possibilities for decolonising education and schooling practices are enhanced.

### **Methodology**

This paper reports on phase one of a three phase project which, in line with our research aims and conceptual framing of this study, employs critical Indigenous research methodology which privileges Indigenous standpoint (Denzin & Lincoln, 2014; Foley, 2003), by

positioning Aboriginal community educator's voices as foundational to the research. The research process foregrounds community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), underscoring Aboriginal sovereignty and challenging dominant Western ideologies and cultural hegemony. Aboriginal community-based educators discussed the project with us in yarning circles to facilitate thinking about LFC and provide guidance. Although most participants in phase one are non-Indigenous preservice teachers, we apply the Indigenous method of yarning (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Shay, 2019) premised on Aboriginal ways of constructing and sharing knowledge to allow more flexibility in articulating personal and sometimes, difficult experiences. We do this for two reasons. Firstly, we wish to model for preservice teachers, Aboriginal protocols that include building relationships through the 'social yarn', 'collaborative yarn' (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010) and respecting voice and secondly, we are cognisant of the impact of inappropriate, often harmful Western positivist research that has been imposed 'on' Aboriginal communities. These processes provide the opportunity to engage more fully with Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing and potentially unearth perspectives that a Western-oriented approach may not reveal (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010, p. 47). The research was guided by three key questions:

1. What impact does LFC have on preservice teachers' knowledges and understandings of Aboriginal peoples, cultures and histories?
2. To what extent do preservice teachers develop understandings of Country and community through LFC experiences?
3. To what extent did the LFC activities develop preservice teachers' critical consciousness and how might this influence their approach to teaching?

We employed a case study approach (Harrison et al., 2017) which includes quantitative and qualitative data from preservice teachers who participated in LFC experiences from 2018 to 2019. This approach obtains in-depth data of 'real-life' interconnected experiences, bounded by time and activity (Harrison et al., 2017), in this case, the one semester courses including the community based LFC activities where the learning occurred. This case study provides opportunities to explore how preservice teachers related to the LFC experiences and to Country, each other, the lecturers (who are also the researchers) and to the Aboriginal people who led the learning experiences. This relational, dialogic approach illuminated the dynamics of change through the co-existence of multiple realities and meanings (Harrison et al., 2017).

Of the 110 students who were enrolled in the electives, 64 (58%) participated in the research. All preservice teachers undertaking the elective courses were invited to complete the surveys. The quantitative data is one element of the overall data collected and consists of 64 pre surveys and 48 post surveys. A Likert scale of one to five where a response of one is low and five is high was used. The survey questions were designed to elicit data to explore the research questions and get a broad understanding of shifts in preservice teacher knowledge. Participants were asked to self-report their level of knowledge in areas such as; Aboriginal culture, history and community (four questions), the impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal peoples, education and the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples (five questions), engaging with Aboriginal families and communities (three questions), and applying this in developing culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy to improve Aboriginal (and all) student outcomes (seven questions). The survey data informed our thinking about how to facilitate the individual yarns and yarning circles.

The qualitative data reported on in this paper consists of eight individual yarns and five group yarning circles (2018), a total of 30 participants.<sup>2</sup> All students were invited to

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<sup>2</sup> Individual participant yarns were given pseudonyms while yarning circle participants are identified by the circle number in which they participated.



participate in the individual yarns and focus yarns. These were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The questions were designed to elicit participant's understanding of the 'Learning from Country' concept, their reflections on their experiences of the different components. Preservice teachers' views on the benefits and challenges of learning from and interacting with Aboriginal people and their ideas on how this learning could inform their teaching practice were also sought.

Initial qualitative data analysis involved developing matrixes to identify emerging themes through annotating transcripts and coding in NVivo 11 to extrapolate themes and aggregate individual and collective responses. These were then reread in relation to the research questions, the literature and the conceptual framing of the study to reveal relational links, disconnections, and nuances. These processes of reading, rereading and annotating scripts "produce thick descriptions of social texts characterised by the context of their production, the intention of their producers and the meanings mobilised in the processes of their construction" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011, p. 294). The social texts emerging from the individual yarns and group yarning circles, reflect the study context and provide an ongoing, reflective account of the participants' experiences and interrelationships that emerged through the processes of LFC. These are triangulated with the survey results to affect a rigorous study where data collection and analysis are systematically organised into a detailed evidence base to identify emerging themes and their relationship to the key concepts (Merriam, 2009).

### **Limitations**

There are three key limitations with this research of which the first two arise from the structure of the university courses that the LFC experiences are embedded. Firstly, as elective courses, the cohorts are small comprising of preservice teachers genuinely interested in becoming effective Aboriginal education teachers and as such, the research findings are likely to be biased towards positive responses. Secondly, the relatively short length of the courses (36 hours each in one semester) on which the research is based curtails the range and availability of LFC experiences including the time needed to critically reflect on learning within this timeframe. Finally, until we analyse the impact of the LFC framework in classrooms when preservice teachers begin teaching (phase 3 of the project), we cannot know if this approach is contributing to effective teacher practice in Aboriginal contexts. It is important to note that this is primarily a qualitative research project that includes a quantitative data set to provide a baseline understanding of preservice teacher's knowledge before and after completing their course.

### **Findings and Analysis**

At the commencement of each individual yarn and group yarning circle, preservice teachers were asked what prompted their interest in the course. As foregrounded in the literature (Herbert, 2019; Moreton-Robinson, et al., 2012), many preservice teachers chose the subject because they felt ill-prepared to teach Indigenous perspectives and engage with Aboriginal families and communities. While all preservice teachers had prior learning through their completion of a mandatory Aboriginal education unit, there were mixed views regarding the success of this course in developing their confidence and depth of knowledge. Some did not believe it was adequate, for example, *'I felt that the education we'd received in the core units of our degree on Aboriginal Australians and Aboriginal education in general had not been very good. It had been pretty weak content and not very thorough at all'*

(participant, yarning circle 4). Preservice teachers indicated their desire to learn more to enable them to contribute to social justice outcomes for Aboriginal people. The elective unit attracted Aboriginal preservice teachers who indicated it provided opportunity to give back and *'be involved'* (Felicity) in an area they were already passionate about. Some preservice teachers, mindful of their own limited schooling experiences, were keen to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to provide their students with more accurate experiences of Australian Aboriginal peoples, cultures and communities. As this preservice teacher commented about his own schooling *'It was just a whole lot of reading from textbooks about Aboriginal people in past but not about Aboriginal people now in Australia and how we can learn from Aboriginal perspectives and through Aboriginal perspectives'* (participant, yarning circle 1). In addition, most expressed concern and frustration that, despite undertaking other teacher education courses that stress the importance of *'learning by doing'*, they had not been provided with opportunities to learn *how* to teach by doing, or how to put their theoretical knowledge into practice.

The survey data demonstrated a marked increase in preservice teachers' self-reported knowledge about Aboriginal culture, history and community at the end of each course. Aggregating responses designed to capture this knowledge shows a marked increase from less than a quarter (21.4%) who assessed their knowledge level as high prior to undertaking LFC compared to over three quarters (84%) after completing the course. Similarly, their understanding of the ongoing impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal peoples, racism and relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples increased from 31.4% who scored themselves as high before the course, to 91% who scored themselves as high after the course. This upward trend continued in student assessment of their capacity to apply their learning to develop culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy and to engage with Aboriginal families and communities. Aggregated responses for the former suite of questions showed an increase from just over a quarter (25.3%) to almost all preservice teachers (96%), while the later rose from under a quarter (21%) to almost 87% (86.6).

While such marked shifts are encouraging, we also wanted to contextualise these results within the more nuanced reflections and insights captured through individual yarns and yarning circles. The section below details the key findings from this data.

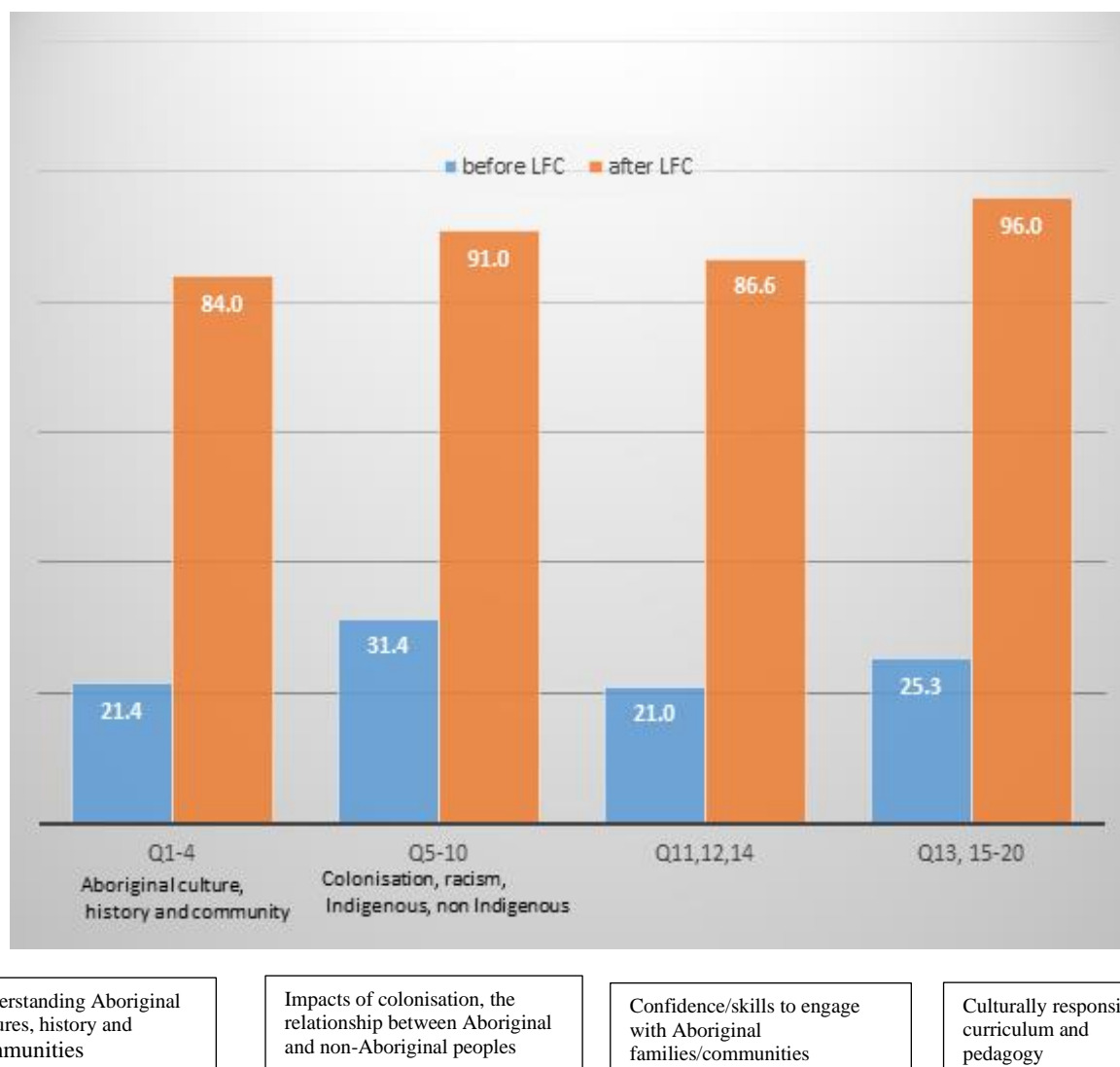


Figure 1 Preservice Teacher Pre and Post Survey Responses

### Experiential Pedagogies

Many preservice teachers noted that LFC experiences exposed them to new ways of thinking about and experiencing learning. Preservice teachers enjoyed the LFC experiences largely because they were outside and practical – something they could replicate in their own teaching, as noted by this preservice teacher, *‘It’s giving you the tools and the knowledge of how to reflect on your practices’* (participant, yarning circle 4). As they come to understand who they are in the context of where they are (Wakeman, 2015, p. 58), the interaction between self, interpersonal and collective reflexivity encourages agency and action, so that *‘you get more involved and learn better when you get to meet people from the community and listen to their experiences and stories’* (participant, yarning circle 3). This preservice teacher continues, *‘it also makes it stronger when we walk home together and discuss it as it feels more real and, on the body’*.

Importantly this ‘practical knowledge’ was constantly and irremediably positioned by the preservice teachers as embodied in the community educators who led them through the

LFC experiences. As demonstrated above, many preservice teachers developed a better understanding of the notion of Aboriginal knowledges. As Harrison and Greenfield (2011) highlight, teachers often grapple with understanding the difference between Aboriginal perspectives and Aboriginal knowledges. While Aboriginal perspectives focus on perspectives *about* Aboriginal people and cultures, Indigenous knowledges are instead grounded in place (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011), and consequently being *on Country with* Aboriginal people enabled preservice teachers to grasp the continuing diverse relational knowledges that exist between Aboriginal people and city landscapes. This knowledge they emphasised, could not be learnt in the classroom. Although preservice teachers had some idea about the impact of colonisation, (e.g. the Stolen Generations) and Aboriginal cultures generally, they consistently reflected on the depth of understanding that being in the presence of Aboriginal people had brought to their consciousness:

*Being able to learn from Aboriginal people and communities ... they have their whole history with them and when they talk to us, they don't talk about themselves, they talk about their entire community and the history from millions of years ago and that everything has a foundation in something that's so big. (participant, yarning circle 4)*

Through this experience, the participant is developing insights into the significance of collective biographies of place which have been shared over generations, highlighting Aboriginal values and practices that privileges the connection of the collective to place in contrast to Western values that oftentimes elevates individualism.

#### Understanding the Diversity of Aboriginal Knowledges

A key tenet of the LFC approach is privileging Aboriginal voices as expert knowledge holders. Preservice teachers were impacted by the opportunity to listen to a diversity of Aboriginal community-based educators (gender, age, activists, Elders) and so they began to question unconscious assumptions about how they had come to 'know' Aboriginal peoples' cultures and practices. For instance, one preservice teacher noted; *'I thought what's really interesting is the idea that different people have different knowledges and practices ... reinforcing diversity ... highlighting the complexity of each situation ... it's not what you see at face value' (participant, yarning circle 2)*. Learning from Aboriginal people about multiple Aboriginal knowledges and practices prompted her to reflect on her experience of Aboriginal culture as one dimensional and invisible/hidden. Hearing diverse voices enriched preservice teachers understanding of the different layers of knowledge:

*Listening to people from different communities helped me to really see how the knowledge was quite different. At the beginning of each talk they would always say, "This knowledge is knowledge from our community and it is different to other communities' knowledge". People would ask questions about things that they'd learnt in the past and they would say, "I can't really comment on that because that's a different group's knowledge. I can't talk about that because that's not my knowledge". I think the experiences showed me that in the real-world, different knowledge [exists] for each group, each community, but actually hearing it from the people's mouths helped me to see that. (Sophie)*

Acknowledging the existence of the diversity of Aboriginal voices also had a profound impact on building understanding that experiencing place was just the beginning of their learning journey:

*One thing that Gordon said that I thought was really helpful for us as teachers is, "You know, I don't want you to go away from this being like, "Oh, well I heard from*

*Gordon so that's the be all and end all and nothing can be different or disagree and challenge what another Aboriginal person says". I thought that was really helpful because I think that perhaps we think, "Oh, we've heard it from one Aboriginal person, that is the gospel truth". (participant, yarning circle 2)*

Furthermore, Somerville's (2010) suggests that revealing the 'intersection of multiple and contested stories' from Indigenous and Western traditions about the same place, can be theorised as a "contact zone" (p. 338). She contends that contested stories should be held in "productive tension" (p. 338) for deep learning to occur. This productive tension was noted by one preservice teacher who was dubious about some of the claims made by one Aboriginal community-based educator:

*There's very little evidence. But again, this is someone coming from a completely different perspective, coming with a lot of pride and so, I was definitely willing to listen and critically evaluate... One day, something might come out about that, but I don't think there's anything out there are the moment. (participant, yarning circle 2)*

The narratives shared by Aboriginal community-based educators exposed preservice teachers to stories that reflect diverse social and political lived experiences of Aboriginal people living in urban areas. Uncovering these contested stories is vital to enacting a critical pedagogy of place (Wakeman, 2015, p. 59). Preservice teachers appreciated the generosity and challenge they were tasked with when listening to these complex and layered histories. As the preservice teacher quoted above continues, 'you park it and think, "Okay, well I'll leave that, and I'll still respect you. I've still got a lot to learn from you". So, all that again, is part of the complexity of the learning, which was a valuable part of what we learned'. These are important opportunities enabling preservice teachers to speak back to essentialised and reductionist stereotypes of Aboriginal peoples, cultures and histories as well as opening a dialogue to new learning and relationships.

Learning from diverse perspectives also created enthusiasm about the potential for LFC to engage with cross disciplinary learning as Sophie comments, 'it engages students so much more. They also how show they fit with all the other KLAs [such as] science, geography, history. Going out into the bush and walking around with an Aboriginal person, learning about sustainability, it's so closely linked'. It is interesting to note that while the LFC experiences were not "in the bush", Sophie notes the application beyond the urban context into a range of settings.

### **Knowledge of the Local Aboriginal Community**

One of the key areas of learning identified by participants was a growing awareness of the commonly held stereotype that Aboriginal communities are located in the 'outback' or 'bush', and therefore one must travel to remote Australia to experience Aboriginal culture. As Felicity comments, she hadn't realised until she participated in the local walking tours through her own university, and local tourist spots such as The Rocks area of Sydney 'just how much is around us, and how much is local, and how much I didn't know about really . . . it's been there the whole time, but I wouldn't have known about it'. Indeed, for Isabelle, a preservice teacher who had worked in a number of rural Aboriginal communities 'the biggest takeaway' from the LFC experiences was realising that what she refers to as 'quite a naive misconception [that she] came in with at the beginning that there is not a lot of Aboriginal culture alive in Sydney'. She reflects on her experience of being guided through Redfern, that also serves as a transport hub and pedestrian thoroughfare for many university students.

*I think the Redfern tour was pretty eye opening [there] was a lot of history. I understood that Redfern was a significant town for Aboriginal people, but I didn't understand why. And then you got all these stories and I understood it heaps more and it made a lot more sense why this is a strong community space.*  
(Isabelle)

Like many university students, Isabelle had some awareness that 'Redfern was a significant town for Aboriginal people' but she had not understood the history and because she could not see the knowledge, the culture and the community, she assumed had been erased. Indeed, the sense of local Aboriginal history, knowledge and culture becoming visible was a reoccurring theme, whether expressed through a sense of disconcertion that it was only now, in their final year of study that they had been introduced to this, or an awareness of the extensive history of struggle, resistance and resilience embedded in the Redfern urban environment such as the long history of successful community-controlled organisations in the area.

More broadly, the rapport the Aboriginal community-based educators built with the preservice teachers appeared significant in enabling them to gain a more grounded understanding of the ways in which colonisation continues to impact Aboriginal peoples and communities. The following excerpt describes Frances's reflections on hearing from survivors of Kinchela Boys Home<sup>3</sup>, one of the notorious institutions instrumental in the government policy of systematically removing Aboriginal children from their families.

*Getting to meet them, it really hits home as to how much government policies, and the actions that followed, have impacted the communities, I mean previous to that, I actually knew about Kinchela, I watched a documentary on it, I read about it in a book, I've seen newspaper reports, and I felt like I knew it, but I didn't. You don't know it until someone's standing there talking to you about how it has impacted their life and you can see that emotion. You don't get from textbooks or documentaries. Having that face-to-face connection with someone, and, even though they're talking to an entire room, I think everyone in that room felt that personal connection. That one hour with them was worth, probably 10,000 hours for me.* (Danielle)

Importantly, the preservice teachers extrapolated from these narratives ways in which both the history of and current institutional racism manifests in government policies, and so this structures the way Aboriginal students, and their families may react to the institutions such as education. There appeared a heightened awareness of the ways that these experiences can play out through a lack of trust, fear and reluctance to engage with teachers and schools:

*Like the talk we had at the community centre, acknowledging the fact that a lot of Aboriginal Australians had poor experiences with education. So, there are very good reasons why they might not be comfortable and might not want to connect with us. Again, it was like, Duh, but, so helpful to think about this because that can really affect how to approach in my teaching (participant, yarning circle 4).*

Finally, participants highlighted the importance of the practical knowledge and guidance they had received on how to engage with and develop relationships with Aboriginal communities. As this preservice teacher highlights, 'A lot of subjects will be like, it's really important that you establish these relationships, but they don't actually give you any practice, they're just like, do it, and you're like, Great, but how do I do it?' (participant, yarning circle 4).

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<sup>3</sup> The survivors who talk about their experiences receive training and support from the NGO with whom they are affiliated. Typically, the preservice teachers are just one of a number of education, community and industry groups with whom the survivors generously share their knowledge and lived experiences.

As a result of LFC experiences, preservice teachers felt confident in contacting Aboriginal organisations such as local AECG's once they embarked on their teaching careers as they now have a sense of *'the protocols for knowing your place, and knowing what you can do that's actually going to maintain relationships or be helpful'* (Felicity). Participants recognised the importance in enabling relationships based on notions of reciprocity, of their role in the work they needed to do in *'learning to give and take'* (Danielle) and of the time needed to build trusting relationships as Michael indicates *'as a teacher, you need to earn your stripes, you need to demonstrate that you're worthy of trust'*. Indeed, Danielle, a preservice geography teacher, is clearly excited at the ways she has been able to incorporate her learning about local plants and sustainability into her practicum lesson plans and quite perceptively points out its *'when you don't have that practical knowledge that can stop a lot of people from actually going ahead and making those sort of connections' . . . because of the fear of 'just screwing up and offending people'*. She further noted that *'the biggest impact of this course, [is] the confidence to go out and engage which sounds easy but can be quite nerve-racking'*. Indeed, for a number of preservice teachers, their LFC experiences seemed to have reinforced very real and concrete ways the responsibility incumbent on them – as (predominantly) non-Indigenous Australians – when approaching Aboriginal community members.

### Counternarratives

Challenging dominant ideologies and assumptions about Indigenous peoples and cultures through privileging counternarratives lies at the heart of the LFC project. Without this epistemological and ontological stance, opportunities to challenge Western hegemonic ideologies, assumptions and discourses will be limited. The need to learn from Country as a pedagogical experience (Harrison, 2017) in order to challenge mainstream approaches to Aboriginal education is noted by this participant *'I think one of the big things is that as soon as you're on Country and talking to Aboriginal people, it completely mitigates the tokenism which is so ubiquitous in the education system'* (participant, yarning circle 2). This observation reflects the all too common school experience of surface level learning in Aboriginal histories and cultures which disengages many school students and reinforces the stereotypes and misinformation that reproduce the deficit discourses.

Opportunities for Aboriginal community-based educators to convey their narratives of place, history, cultures and lived experiences provide for many preservice teachers, counternarratives of otherwise superficial understandings. This is evident in this participant's observation that, *'they are able to speak about their own history, to present it in the way that they want to instead of us reading a book and having our own thoughts ... I think that's pretty special'* (participant, yarning circle 2). For Aboriginal people, the opportunity to articulate experiences of colonial oppression and witness positive responses from preservice teachers supports healing through the restorative power of stories, as this participant suggests; *'I think they also feel heard, validated. Uncle Percy said that sharing helps his healing. Because these things aren't discussed, us listening and hearing that story has flow on effects, which ultimately will be positive for Aboriginal communities'* (participant, yarning circle 2).

While most preservice teachers had some existing knowledge of Aboriginal experiences of colonisation, hearing the lived experiences of Stolen Generation survivors, enabled a concrete understanding of how these injustices continue today. A number of preservice teachers commented that this helped them to understand the ongoing impact of intergenerational trauma on families and communities. Danielle notes:

*Looking at disadvantaged communities today, the fact that having your culture stolen away from you can have effects from that. This is how you can end up with drinking problems and people...[have] lost their language and their children have been raised with a different language.*

Hearing counternarratives illuminating the resilience of Aboriginal knowledges in urban places prompted this preservice teacher to rethink her understanding of history as follows:

*The depth of immersion and the history in the stories and in the lives of people, and for me, that all came back to the Country and community even though it's seen as historical, it's living now, and it's still being shaped ... because it's our country as well and we should be interacting with it as much as we can.*  
(participant, yarning circle 2)

This preservice teacher's sense of a collective biography of place, 'our country', indicates that she is beginning to view Country through a deeper and more nuanced lens. These experiences raised broader questions for preservice teachers such as; what is happening in this place, who are we in this place, whose voices are heard (Wakeman, 2015, p. 57) and what are the shared responsibilities in shaping future narratives that are inclusive of Aboriginal people. These critical questions support the learner to better understand the "false binary of 'us' and 'them', and instead provide openings for discursive struggle showing the complexity and scope of cultural understanding" (Acton, et al., 2017, p. 1321).

## Discussion

The research questions which framed the study focussed on revealing the impact of LFC experiences on firstly; preservice teacher's knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal people, culture, and histories; secondly on their understandings of 'Country' and community; and finally, on how these experiences developed their critical consciousness to influence their approach to curriculum and pedagogy.

In response to the first research question, preservice teachers deepening understanding of place consciousness through an Aboriginal lens had a significant impact on their knowledge and understandings of Aboriginal peoples, cultures and histories. The diverse range of experiences afforded the opportunity to listen to Aboriginal community-based educators' lived experiences of colonisation, rather than relying on textbook accounts, and so these stories became counternarratives revealing new ways of engaging with Indigenous knowledges, experiences, values and skills. Importantly, the LFC pedagogical approach invoked more than just the 'experiential'; by being on Country, preservice teachers developed insight to the layered nature of Aboriginal knowledges that persist around them in the places they traverse in their everyday lives. Indeed, it was the extent to which the LFC experiences made visible urban Country, together with the profound effects of relationship building with the Aboriginal community-based educators, that appear key to the preservice teachers shifts in understanding or capacity to reflect on their assumptions about a perceived 'loss' or absence of Aboriginal cultures and communities in urban contexts.

The second research question is significant as our findings provide evidence for the importance of engaging with Aboriginal peoples and communities to bring to life and make relevant local histories, cultures and places. As making meaningful connection with Aboriginal families and communities is an area of uncertainty and tension for teachers, for these preservice teachers LFC gave them the tools and confidence to engage with Aboriginal families and communities when they begin their teaching career. Significantly, as Sophie noted, that even when listening to difficult narratives, the Aboriginal community-based



educators created an atmosphere of belonging and inclusion, *'I felt like they were wanting to team up with us a little bit. They often were saying, 'You're the future teachers. We need to work together to improve things for our kids and everything'.* Being on Country with Aboriginal community-based educators provided the first practical steps in understanding how relationships can emerge between Aboriginal people, teachers, students and place. LFC facilitated a sense of belonging for many preservice teachers who could imagine ways of enacting 'Country-informed' teaching. This sense of inclusion and shared belonging is critical for the development of community-informed knowledges and practices that teachers can implement in their classrooms.

The final research question asked to what extent preservice teachers were able to develop a critical consciousness, and to that end, we found that through deliberate and constructive reflexivity in class and through assessment, preservice teachers developed their critical consciousness and consequently, felt confident in their newly acquired knowledges and skills to implement this in less tokenistic ways. By understanding personal positioning in relation to Country, and through exposure to Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing, opportunities to mobilise a critical consciousness became an important element of the journey. Preservice teachers such as Michael, noted the significance of Aboriginal education as an *'important area in Australian society, of who we should become. It is powerful, you can really play a role in pushing ... to try and bring society along'*. Opportunities to implement Aboriginal communication protocols such as deep listening, yarning and cultural humility developed practical enactments of critical consciousness and prompted preservice teachers to articulate this with their own families, as this participant from yarning circle 2 noted, *'with my father, we talked about "What have you learned?" and from this course, I have so much to say and I'm like, "Oh, I did this and we met these people and this is so influential"'*. Opportunities to influence non-Indigenous people beyond the classroom is an important contribution to sovereignty awareness, reparative activism and decolonisation (Burgess, Bishop & Lowe, 2020).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, LFC contains a number of elements which contribute to the process of decolonising education through nurturing relational connections between Country and the people who hold the cultural, social and political narratives of place. Central to this is rejecting deficit discourses about Aboriginal peoples and cultures and instead, making visible Aboriginal knowledges through a strength-based paradigm where community-based educators develop preservice teacher's capacity to better understand, engage and teach on and with Country.

Importantly, the preservice teachers observed that the Aboriginal community-based educators frequently expressed their desire to educate teachers so that better relationships can be built between schools, parents and communities to improve the educational outcomes of their children and grandchildren. Moreover, preservice teachers noted the importance of Aboriginal voice in acknowledging and understanding the impact of colonisation and ongoing injustices, and the criticality of bringing this knowledge into the curriculum.

Given we recognise Country as the centre of this learning, this means that all Australian education institutions are situated on Country and therefore within an Aboriginal context. The key implication here is that the LFC approach can be mobilised as a foundation for learning in all education institutions, not just those with significant Aboriginal student populations. It also indicates that a commitment to educating non-Aboriginal preservice

teachers, teachers and school students through Learning from Country experiences is critical to the process of decolonising education.

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