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3. A STUDY OF ACTION LEARNING AND ABORIGINAL CULTURAL EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION
A team of education researchers from the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia, was commissioned to carry out a study of the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project. The schools' action learning projects aimed at providing teachers with professional learning about Aboriginal cultural knowledge and its application for culturally appropriate teaching practices in the classroom. The ultimate objective of the project was to improve student engagement and learning with an emphasis on (English) literacy and numeracy. The study was therefore designed to investigate the extent to which teachers and their teaching practices were inclusive of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and how this changed as a result of the project. The impact of these inclusive practices had on teacher and student learning, and in particular, on how they enhance learning for Aboriginal students; and the effectiveness of collaboration with local Aboriginal communities in teaching and learning practices in improving learning outcomes for students.

METHODOLOGY
The research team used a mixed-method approach. Quantitative data was collected in the form of a pre and post Aboriginal cultural education survey gathering data from teachers in all project schools (see sample survey in the Appendix). Sources of qualitative data included a literature review and in seven schools, field visits, meetings, interviews and focus group discussions.

QUANTITATIVE METHODS
Survey Data Collection
A survey instrument developed specifically for the project was administered twice, once in the beginning of the project and again a year later, to school staff in each of the 20 participating schools. The purpose of survey was two-fold. First, the survey aimed to provide a map for resources to assist teachers in their role and responsibilities as education, to strengthen cultural awareness for Aboriginal students in their school. The questions in the survey explored responses to the conditions in schools that, from the research, best supported learning environments for Aboriginal students and partnerships with their parents/caregivers and community. Second, the survey provided a tool to gather pre and post views about the extent to which Aboriginal cultural education had become a feature of the school. Participation in the survey was voluntary. All teaching and administrative staff at each participating school was invited to complete the survey. In the first year a total of 274 participants completed the survey. A year later, the number completing the survey increased to 429 participants.

AN OVERVIEW OF SURVEY FINDINGS
The findings from administering the survey twice in each school were analyzed and compared in terms of the following key areas:
- professional learning;
- teaching practices;
- culture of expectations;
- including Aboriginal cultural knowledge;
- assessing student learning;
- engagement with the Aboriginal community; and
- involvement with Aboriginal parents/caregivers.

Professional Learning
In considering the impact of a project in New South Wales schools, it is important to note that the first Aboriginal education policy in New South Wales government schools was published in 1992, followed by a comprehensive second policy in 1996 that for the first time introduced a five-year plan for teacher professional development on Aboriginal issues. This was followed by a major review of Aboriginal education in New South Wales commissioned in 2004 which resulted in an updated Aboriginal Education and Training Policy in 2008 (Department of Education and Training 2008). This means that while teachers may have been involved in professional learning, until the project started in 2006 there had been no other major cross-regional teacher training initiative in Aboriginal education in New South Wales government schools since the end of 2001. The survey data showed that the funds provided by the project had made a significant impact on staff at the schools involved in the project. A high proportion of respondents, 78% in 2007 increasing to 87% in 2008, said that they had participated in professional learning about Aboriginal education. The responses showed that there had been a significant increase in targeted professional learning on Aboriginal education between the first and the second surveys.

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

Literacy and Numeracy Training

Over recent years a major effort has been made by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training to provide literacy training for teachers across K-12 years in New South Wales government schools. The State Literacy Place identified Literacy as Profound as a key professional learning course for teachers, and it was being delivered across regionally targeted schools in 2007 and 2008 (Taylor, 2007). When asked about their involvement in literacy and numeracy training over the previous two years, less than half (45%) had taken part in 2007, with a higher proportion (56%) having undertaken literacy training in 2008. The data on numeracy training over the previous two years showed that only 44% undertook any training in 2007, and the proportion dropped to 36% in 2008. In terms of the impact of literacy training on teaching practice there was a noticeable increase in the proportion who said it had made a significant impact, rising from 28% in 2007 to 43% in 2008. The proportion indicating that their numeracy training had a big impact on their teaching practice also increased, from 22% in 2007 to 34% in 2008. This was also reflected in a noticeable drop in those who felt the training had made either a “slight” or “no” impact on their teaching practice, from 26% in 2007 to 14% for literacy and from 44% to 19% for numeracy training.

Teaching Practices

In relation to Aboriginal education, teachers did feel they needed to improve their teaching practices, and the survey data showed that the project assisted teachers to identify teaching strategies to better meet the needs of their students. Almost all the respondents in both surveys (93% in 2007 and 93% in 2008) felt that there were areas of their teaching practice in Aboriginal education that needed to be improved. However no follow up question was asked in order to explore which particular aspects of their practice were of major concern. When asked specifically about how often they adjusted their teaching strategies to better meet the needs of Aboriginal students, the proportion who said they did so “frequently” increased from 37% in 2007 to 39% in 2008. The proportion who said they did so “occasionally” had decreased from 49% in 2007 to 41% in 2008, leaving only a small proportion, 17% in 2007 and 8% in 2008, who “rarely” or “never” adjusted their teaching practice. The impact on teaching practices of teacher engagement with their local Aboriginal community was assessed as “substantial” by 27% in 2007, increasing to 36% of respondents in 2008. On the other hand there was a smaller proportion, 27% in 2007, dropping to 14% in 2008, who said the programme had “very little” or “no” impact at all on their teaching.

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Significantly, about half (47% in 2007 and 49% in 2008), said that engagement impacted only “somewhat” on their teaching.

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

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

The least used resources were those obtained through Internet access (42% and 48%). The kinds of resources teachers said they used “usually” and “always” to inform the teaching of Aboriginal cultural knowledge were generally traditional text based and media forms. They ranged from curriculum resources/materials (53% in 2007 and 56% in 2008) and textbooks about Aboriginal culture (51% and 59%) to Aboriginal resources (28% and 37%) and film and video (27% and 17%). Also used were Aboriginal art materials, which increased from 19% in 2007 to 32% in 2008, as did computer assisted programs incorporating Aboriginal culture, which increased from 13% in 2007 to 21% in 2008. Although field trips to local Aboriginal communities were the least used kind of resources, the proportion saying they “usually” and “always” used a field trip, grew from 9% in 2007 to 13% in 2008.

Culture of Expectations

Given that developing a culture of high expectations for students has been recognised as an important factor in improving Aboriginal school student outcomes (Jenks 2005; Rowe 2005), a significant proportion, 41% in 2007 increasing to 49% in 2008, said that their school “substantially” had a culture of high expectations for the achievement of Aboriginal children. This meant that only a small proportion (11% and 8%) said that they had “very little” or “not at all” this kind of culture of high expectations, while 64% and 45% rated the culture of expectations as “somewhat”.

Including Aboriginal Cultural Knowledge

Another important area was the inclusion of Aboriginal cultural knowledge in teaching. A majority of respondents, 56% in 2007 and 59% in 2008, said that their teaching strategies were “substantial” inclusive of Aboriginal cultural knowledge. The proportion who said their practices were “substantial” inclusive increased from 18% to 27%. This was accompanied by a drop in the proportion from 25% to 15% who said they did “very little” to be inclusive of Aboriginal cultural knowledge, or answered “not at all” to this question.

Including the discussion of contemporary Aboriginal issues in class was not a feature of most classrooms teaching. When asked about it only a small proportion, 13% in 2007 and 16% in 2008, said they did so “often”. On the other hand there
A study of action learning and Aboriginal cultural education was a noticeable increase in those who said they did so “occasionally” increasing from 33% to 50%. And there was a drop in the proportion who said they did so “rarely” or “never”, falling from 51% to 33%.

What asked about who was responsible for Aboriginal cultural knowledge being shared at the schools, 65% strongly agreed that it was a whole school responsibility, with 55% in 2007 and 61% in 2008. Others key players were identified, and ranked in descending order: Thirty percent (30%) rating to 33% in 2008 considered that the local Aboriginal community was responsible. Significantly, only a small proportion, 14% in 2007 and 17% in 2008, believed that the teacher was responsible for sharing Aboriginal cultural knowledge. At the same time Aboriginal staff in the school were also not seen as having responsibility, with only 9% and 13% agreeing that Aboriginal staff held a key responsibility.


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A very high proportion of respondents, 84% in 2007 increasing to 92% in 2008, said that their professional learning activities did involve engagement with Aboriginal people. However, it appears that despite having this high level of engagement in and focus for professional development, this did not necessarily translate into further ongoing involvement with the local Aboriginal community. Engagement is seen as more than just making contact during their professional development days and is seen in terms of discussion and exchange of information about education — an important survey finding was that the proportion who reported “occasionally” engaging with the local Aboriginal community to discuss their views about education increased from 24% in 2007 to 34% in 2008. The proportion who “never or rarely” engaged in community discussion fell slightly from 69% to 62%.

Involvement with Aboriginal Parents

Another aspect of engagement with the Aboriginal community was involvement with Aboriginal parents. The only question that explored this relationship asked about having the opportunity to discuss contemporary Aboriginal issues with Aboriginal parents. The proportion doing so “frequently” went from 5% in 2007 to 12% in 2008. At the same time there was a deep in the sample majority who reported that “never or rarely” had the opportunity to discuss contemporary Aboriginal issues with Aboriginal parents, rising from 69% in 2007 to 77% in 2008.

The proportion doing so “occasionally” also dropped from 43% to 22%.

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

The survey findings indicated that teachers’ participation in professional learning that focused explicitly on integrating Aboriginal cultural knowledge and histories in the curriculum increased their confidence to do so. In focus groups of teachers, there was widespread agreement that engagement with Aboriginal knowledge, history, and culture had improved their understanding of Aboriginal cultures, Aboriginal histories, and Aboriginal perspectives. There was also a considerable growth in the number of teachers who said they were planning to use Aboriginal content in their teaching practices.
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QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

Members of the research team visited each of the seven schools, with the first visits
commencing in 2007. Schools were selected from the schools that took part over
Phase One and Phase Two of the project. In Phase One, commencing in 2006, a
total of eleven schools were involved and in Phase Two, commencing in 2008 a further
nine schools were added, making a total of twenty schools. Research data were
gathered from school visits to seven sites where the research team attended school
planning meetings and conducted interviews and focus groups with a range of
school participants. This data collection was supplemented by a series of
teleconferences and email correspondence.

Sample Group

The participants in these processes included:

- teachers from each school’s action learning team;
- classroom Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs);
- the school principal or deputy principal;
- each school’s academic partner or cultural connector;
- members of the local Aboriginal communities; and
- local Aboriginal Elders/stationers who were specifically involved with the school.

Data Source

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

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

Annual progress reports all Quality Teaching Indigenous Project schools were
required to prepare an annual Progress Report for the Department. These reports
were initially prepared in a text-based format, however, a review of the reporting
process led to the Manager of the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project activity
providing schools with the opportunity to present their 2008 report during school
visits. This enabled team members to focus on different aspects of their work with

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students and to use selected audio visual and other material to illustrate elements
including their approach to programming and student achievements. Presentations
were video recorded and the video reports by schools were made available to the
research team for their analysis.

DISCUSSION ON ACTION LEARNING

What Did the School-based Action Learning Teams Look Like?

In each of the 20 schools involved in the project a small team was formed
comprising teachers (usually 4-8 teachers), Aboriginal Education Officers, an
academic partner and community members. Over the period of the project the
action learning teams engaged in cycles of planning, acting, observing, describing,
recording, discussing, reflecting, evaluating and celebrating together.

1. Teams of teachers

A small group of colleagues with a shared responsibility for learning, formed an
action learning team to take effective action to address a real workplace learning
and teaching challenge related to integrating Aboriginal cultural knowledge into
teaching and learning.

2. Project-based learning

Their action learning project addressed learning and teaching challenges that
had specific curricula and syllabus outcomes and addressed the priorities in
the school’s plan for Aboriginal education.

3. Participant direction

Members in the action learning team decided on the area of inquiry that
informed their professional learning plans. They decided on the goals, set the
pace, chose the activities, evaluated the success of the project and made
decisions about future actions.

4. Cycle of inquiry

Action learning involved the teachers in cycles of planning, implementing,
sharing and describing the effects of their professional learning on classroom
practices. They reflected on and evaluated the actions and the process. What
teachers and team members learned in each step of the process informed
decisions and actions in subsequent steps and phases of the action learning
cycles over the four years of the project.

5. Cycle of reflection

Reflection on current classroom and assessment practices was a vital element of
the action learning cycle. Action learning teams met frequently to discuss and reflect
upon their current progress and their future directions for professional learning.
Discussions with colleagues were encouraged to be honest, thoughtful and detailed
personal reflections about their own learning and their students’ progress.
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Learning Partnerships

Each school-based action learning team included an academic partner who both supported the team by bringing an external "academic" perspective and took an active role as a member of the team in the action learning processes. Academic partners brought specific curriculum, cultural and/or research perspectives that added to the richness of the teams but was not superior in terms of the dynamics of how the professional learning was structured, practiced and refined over the cycles of action learning.

Action learning teams were encouraged to use a variety of tools for making judgments about the effectiveness and impact of their professional learning on student learning and teaching practice through observing, describing, reflecting, discussing and reflecting tools, using:

- observation and reflection guides
- teaching logs/journals
- observation checklists, coding sheets, surveys and individual and focus group interviews
- student work and assessment tasks
- students' feedback through discussions, learning and teaching charts, surveys, and individual and focus group interviews
- photos and video- and audio-tapes of teaching practice
- records of classroom discourse
- records of team meeting discussions, including photos and video- and audio-tapes.

The use of a variety of tools enabled teachers to examine their teaching practice and quality of instruction from multiple perspectives including their own, their teaching partners, other action learning team members, their academic partners and their students. Evidence collected from both internal sources and an external evaluation of the project found that adopting a collaborative action learning approach was effective in increasing teachers' understanding of Aboriginal culture and history and was enabled by their contact with local Aboriginal communities. Not surprisingly, the extent to which the 20 school project teams realized their goals varied across states as contextual features played out over the four years of participation. Below is a summary of the findings that highlight the where and how the project made a difference to teacher, student and community learning.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Project Teams

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

Value of Collaboration

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

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

Attitudinal Change

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

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

Leadership

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

Academic Partners

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

The Project Manager

There was agreement by school stakeholders that the NSW Department of Education and Training Project Manager in the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project played a key role in setting up each school project, providing teams with an orientation program, monitoring their progress, and helping to address issues as the projects evolved. As well as/resources and supporting project teams, her responsiveness and ability to render practical assistance was exemplary. Regular site visits were made to all schools and additional visits were made to those schools seeking clarification and support in devising their own solutions to issues which had arisen in developing or implementing action learning plans. The Project Manager provided school teams with an outline of alternative non-text reporting methods. This resulted in increasingly dynamic and authentic presentations by school teams that incorporated data as well as visual and personal stories of cultural change. Examples of teacher and student work were showcased more effectively in these presentations than in previous written reports. The presentations were also videotaped as a record of the school's progress. The expertise and skills of the Project Manager, together with her energy and commitment to the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project, were widely acknowledged as key elements in ensuring its success.

ABORIGINAL CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

Most teachers agreed that the inclusion of Aboriginal cultural knowledge(s) into the curriculum was a whole school responsibility, rather than that of the individual teacher. The role of the local Aboriginal community was also considered to be important. While there was initial confusion and discussion as to what constituted Aboriginal cultural knowledge, the project teams developed a greater understanding of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and improved their capacity to embed this knowledge into their teaching practice in particular subject areas. In addition, the interpretation of what constituted Aboriginal cultural knowledge(s), protocols and traditions and who had access to that knowledge varied among the school communities. Negotiating the parameters of these discussions sometimes required additional time and resources for the school community to understand the nature of their local context, history and the cultural sensitivities, which applied to allow the differing voices to be heard.

School Team Focus

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

Local Aboriginal Resources

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

Community Engagement

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

Aboriginal Parents

Some schools noted that their links with Aboriginal parents and the participation of Aboriginal parents in the school had improved. In one school the project was the impetus to set up a regular Aboriginal community newsletter to inform parents about their child's learning. Highlighted examples of increased community engagement included the raising of the first time of an Aboriginal flag at one school, setting up a Koori room as a teaching and learning environment that was also a welcoming space for the community and starting up an Aboriginal dance group. In one school the process of creating a large canvas artwork through a creative arts project was a successful way of involving a number of members of the local Aboriginal community with the project.
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Respect for Aboriginal Staff

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

Project Sustainability

While this project faced several challenges in achieving its outcomes, a major concern that emerged was the need to ensure the project sustainability within the schools. Clearly, ongoing funding was one way to ensure its continuation. Teachers noted that the New South Wales Department of Education and Training's new policies on Aboriginal education and training provided support for new initiatives. The need for sustained funding for the development of local resources and expertise was identified as a major concern. In summary, the project demonstrated the benefits of a project that allowed teachers to engage in professional learning over a period of time. It demonstrated the importance of:

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

CONCLUSION

The key objective of the project in the 20 schools was to deepen teachers' understanding and inclusiveness in their teaching of local Aboriginal cultural knowledge. Analysis of the data indicated that there was an increase in teachers' willingness to engage with local Aboriginal people and their communities and to transfer information from the local Aboriginal community. Aboriginal education policy documents, reports and reviews into their teaching practices. Teachers' deeper understanding of traditional and contemporary Aboriginal culture was a key factor in greater inclusiveness of appropriate resources and mixed expectations for Aboriginal students' achievements. This shift was reflected as a significant proportion of teachers confirming that their school now had a culture of high expectations for Aboriginal students' literacy and numeracy achievements.

Developing deep respect for Aboriginal culture was attributed to engaging local Aboriginal communities in teachers' formal professional learning. This was seen as a strong message to local communities that Aboriginal people were not only welcome to the school but also had a critical role to play in the education of their children. Adopting an action learning change model provided purpose and structure for teachers to find out who was their local community, and gain a better understanding of their values and knowledge that were considered to be critical for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children's learning. New ways of learning about and understanding of Aboriginal systems of knowledge, cultures and protocols altered teachers' values and yielded reciprocal support. These outcomes identified from the data are further explored through the detailed school studies in the chapters that follow.

REFERENCES