5. MAGENTA SECONDARY SCHOOL

CONTENT
Magenta Secondary school is located on the northern shore of Sydney with predominantly Anglo-European neighbourhoods in comparison to other Sydney regions (ABS 2006). A small, but significant, number of Aboriginal students are enrolled at the school. Some students are drawn from the local area with others coming from rural and regional New South Wales. Aboriginal students attend the school for various periods of time, ranging from less than a term to several years.

While attending the school the majority of Aboriginal students lived in a nearby hostel with Aboriginal ‘house parents’ who oversaw the operations of the hostel, maintain contact with the high school and its activities and communicate with the students’ parents or carers in their home community. A smaller percentage of Aboriginal students at the school are from families that are well established locally. Throughout the project the school maintained their established connections with the hostel staff and several local Aboriginal community members including some who worked in other educational institutions such as the Technical and Further Education College (TAFE). The TAFE’s Aboriginal Learning Centre provided a space for the local Aboriginal community to gather, hold meetings and events. The Aboriginal Learning Centre houses a permanent Aboriginal cultural objects collection and host exhibitions of artworks. The Aboriginal students were frequently involved in teaching-learning activities at the Aboriginal Learning Centre.

IMPLEMENTATION
The action learning team at Magenta School initially comprised several non-Aboriginal teachers (one of whom was responsible for the management of the project), one librarian, an Aboriginal Education Officer and an Aboriginal community partner endorsed by the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. The deputy principal was also very supportive and involved in the earliest unfolding of the action learning project. Over time, for a range of reasons, this membership experienced change as did school management.

Magenta Secondary School initially commenced the action learning project activities collaboratively with two nearby primary schools with a shared academic mentor. The three schools had in common the fact that the majority of Aboriginal students resided for short or longer periods in hostels or alternate accommodation away from their community of origin.

In the initial phase of the project, the Aboriginal academic partner/mentor, whose expertise was in the area of Aboriginal English and literacy, worked with all the students at Magenta School in small groups and facilitated discussion and brainstorming sessions under the direction of the primary school mentors. The project involved focus groups with the students. The three schools developed teaching and learning activities with the overarching title of Narrative Identity and Place. By the end of the first year, the project straddles across the three schools became increasingly differentiated and the projects evolved separately in each of the schools. Mid way through the project, the role of academic and student mentor at Magenta school was given to a local Aboriginal educator and community mentor with extensive teaching experience. This provided teachers with the added advantage of having easy access to a person with sound knowledge of the local area.

Phase 1
The first phase of the project involved cross-school collaboration with a number of the Magenta Secondary School Aboriginal students undertaking work experience placements at one partner primary school to enhance their leadership, self-esteem and qualifications enabling further education pathways in early childhood education. Representatives of a local Aboriginal education organisation observed the progress of those students noting that they became “so much more confident”. Creative arts initiatives were integrated in the initial phase with those Magenta School students residing at the hostel. These included student ‘rap’ performance and art-making. This aspect culminated in an exhibition of student works for their school and broader community.

Figure 1. Example of a Magenta Secondary School student’s artwork depicting her strength, in her journey from community to community.

Phase 2
As noted above, during the second phase of the project, the two primary schools and the secondary school reported their project activities into three independent projects. One suggested reason for this was the incompatible demands of primary and secondary school organisational requirements, such as staff release patterns...
MAGENTA SECONDARY SCHOOL

and curriculum structures. The differing approaches within the broader project were also considered to be a contributing factor.

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

In the first two phases of the project, the focus had been to apply the principles of action learning and Quality Teaching with two key questions in mind:

- What do teachers need to know to improve Aboriginal students’ educational outcomes?
- How might an inclusion of cultural knowledge improve Aboriginal students’ educational outcomes?

Phase 3

In phase three of the project the school focused on the second question, though the two can be seen to be interrelated. The focus shifted to developing the students’ self-identity through research into family histories and personal narratives using Information and Communication Technologies. Students’ personal stories became narratives incorporating images, photos, maps and other resources to build a broader story of their Country and family. Students’ cultural heritage and knowledge were captured in their portfolios, reflected in their personal learning plans and engaged in dialogue with family and community members at home.

In terms of students’ extra-curricular activity, a small group of Aboriginal students were initially involved in the production of a school magazine. One student maintained that involvement. Her experience is reported to have been very positive and she is able to now mentor others.

The employment of a local Aboriginal community member as a casual teacher at the school impacted favourably on the development of the project. She fulfilled important roles as “Auntie” and teacher to the cohort of female Aboriginal secondary students at the school. Her education qualifications and Aboriginal cultural knowledge were welcomed, as was her professional contribution to the project team and other teachers at the high school. She was able to engage students in identifying a range of relevant teaching and learning activities that integrated Aboriginal cultural knowledge. These activities were developmentally appropriate and gender sensitive, incorporating syllabus requirements. A number of her own extra-curricular students, some of whom are successful in a range of fields including language, literary arts and law, provided positive mentoring and motivation to the school’s Aboriginal students.

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The Aboriginal teacher and community member assumed the role of academic partner to the project team. In this new capacity many positive changes occurred through increased opportunities to work with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and teachers to raise awareness of Aboriginal cultures and histories in the school.

With an experienced Aboriginal teacher and librarian on staff, the action learning team was able to concentrate on embedding Aboriginal perspectives into Key Learning Areas such as Science and Applied Studies and Human Society and Its Environment in the senior secondary curriculum. A Year 8 Technology Unit was based on the contemporary built works produced by women from the townsville community where the Technology and Applied Studies teacher had previously worked. The unit, which included an interactive white board presentation linked with worksheets for students to complete, was designed so that all teachers could use it. This approach was used across the school, it was described as being based on the need to “build-in” tasks so that all teachers could feel comfortable in using them even if they had limited knowledge of Aboriginal cultures. Units of work incorporating Aboriginal cultural knowledge were introduced into Science (Year 8), Geography (Year 9), English (Years 7 and 8), Creative Arts (Year 8) and Languages (Year 8).

By the close of the project, the take-up rate of subject areas incorporating Aboriginal perspectives had expanded and teachers across Key Learning Areas were approaching the Aboriginal teacher to collaborate on curriculum change.

IMPACT

The implementation of the project at Magenta enhanced teacher professional learning in a number of ways and contributed to a more school based focus on Aboriginal cultural knowledge.

Participation in Professional Development

A survey of teachers (see Appendix) indicated that staff participation in professional development on Aboriginal education grew from 60% to 75% over a twelve-month period. There was an increase in the extent to which staff engagement with the Aboriginal community was impacting on their teaching. Amongst staff who felt it had had a ‘substantial’ impact, the proportion increased from 6% to 15%.

As a result of these activities, there was an increase in staff who had adjusted their teaching strategies for their Aboriginal students and included Aboriginal cultural knowledge into their teaching and were more inclined to access the resources of the local Aboriginal community. Those doing so ‘occasionally’ rose from 33% to 50%. The proportion that said their teaching practices were ‘substantially’ inclusive of Aboriginal cultural knowledge rose from 11% to 17%.

The resources accessed from the local Aboriginal community also increased from 30% to 44% in the twelve months period.
Teacher insights

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

including Aboriginal cultural knowledge skills many of the directions of Quality Teaching – and this fact is very reassuring to teachers who are keen about focusing on Aboriginal cultural knowledge and understanding its place in the mainstream curriculum.

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

Among the many mistakes I've made is I used to write a letter to the girls' parents... it didn't occur to me that they would open the letter with the letterhead and an envelope and immediately assume that it was bad news so they didn't read it. So, we've been drastically getting letters of commendation home and two grandmas have rang, well they rang the local manager, so they that they are so happy to see these non-threatening (comments).

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

The teachers who included Aboriginal perspectives in their Key Learning Areas noted that their focus on contemporary issues – even simple things like the need to acknowledge Country – helped all students to become more confident with Aboriginal cultures. The principal encouraged the Student Representative Council to fly the Aboriginal flag, was approachable and took an active interest in Aboriginal students and engaged them in discussions about their projects or Aboriginal issues.

The Technological and Applied Studies teacher's capacity to use interactive whiteboard technology really brought the material to life. Again the teacher noted the role of the academic partner in the success of the Technological and Applied Studies program: "...my personal knowledge was enhanced... [she] warmly shared resources and knowledge to enrich the delivery of units to all students."

The Aboriginal teacher's appointment as academic partner, enabled her to act almost as an internal consultant to non-Aboriginal teaching staff. Her expertise and communication skills were welcomed by several teachers, representing a range of discipline areas, and assisted them in their incorporation of Aboriginal cultural knowledge in their teaching and learning activities. The academic partner's agency charged a degree of authenticity of Aboriginal representation to influence various avenues within the project.

The inclusion of units of work in Key Learning Areas resulted in an increased in the quality of curriculum resources in Technological and Applied Studies, English and Personal Development, Health and Physical Education. The English teachers worked on using the Knowing project resources with Stage 6 students, as well as working on poetry, fiction and non-fiction with other student groups. The Personal Development, Health and Physical Education teacher looked at various Aboriginal health issues.

Another positive outcome of the project was the replacing of teaching resources in Aboriginal Studies and increased access through the library. An audit of the resources ensured that they were culturally appropriate. The academic partner was an integral part of this process and, according to the librarian, assisted in establishing a "really meaningful and relevant Aboriginal collection. Working with the academic partner has been invaluable in that she has shared her expertise of Aboriginal [resources]...she has evaluated our collection from a unique perspective as an Aboriginal woman, academic and librarian."

Greater Level of Student Engagement

Teachers noted a higher level of student engagement as they felt more confident and motivated to learn about Aboriginal culture. They also felt that it provided students with a greater focus on contemporary Aboriginal cultures. Teachers were now including cultural knowledge into assessments.

There was a great display of Aboriginal students' confidence because their culture was being highlighted. This was reinforced by the Aboriginal office at the hostel who had the role of supporting the students while they were at the school. She noted that there were clear evidence of improved engagement and the "girls seem to be enthusiastic about their work at school - they don't complain about staying at school." Her view was that "...we really have produced a good year - hard working year - but I feel that everybody has achieved something positive."

Teachers also noted increased interaction across the student population with the Aboriginal students:

...there is more interest and a lot more talking about it - and more interest in the background of the girls - people know that it is going on.

In addition to the above, one non-Aboriginal teacher interviewee noted the work done by two Aboriginal students at the school journal raised awareness of the contribution Aboriginal students were making to the school. It also helped the Aboriginal students to expand their activities beyond their 'Aboriginal group' from the hostel.
The project activities generated a number of incremental changes. Changes were noted in students' approach to school and in their level of exposure to and awareness of future vocational opportunities. For the Aboriginal students, their sense of cultural and social affirmation was evident as a result of their non-Aboriginal peers learning about Aboriginal cultural knowledge and having Aboriginal cultural contexts integrated as part of their everyday classroom experiences. While the students always had access to the high-quality cultural and learning support from the Aboriginal Education Officers at the school, having an Aboriginal teacher as an academic partner was a new dimension in the project.

**Key Factors in Supporting Aboriginal Students and Aboriginal Programs in Schools**

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

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

There was evidence of enhanced engagement in discussions about Aboriginal cultural knowledge by project members, as well as willingness to learn and talk about the relevance of Aboriginal cultural knowledge in their teaching. Issues of protocol and "ownership" of knowledge presented real challenges that the project team resolved. The school staff were willing to listen to feedback and try to reconcile. Another feature of the project was the increased communication between the school and the community. The principal communicated in February 2008, "we had some grandmas ring us up and say 'we have never had the girls as settled'."

**Consultation and Collaboration with Aboriginal Community**

As noted earlier, schools are their places, and the expertise and opportunities for action learning teams to engage with the local Aboriginal community appeared to be shaped by pre-established views about who made up the local Aboriginal community, how they perceived the community, and the processes they put in place to link and support involvement with the community. At this school, some complexities arose from the fact that most of the Aboriginal students' home communities were outside of the school's local area. For the team members, defining "the local Aboriginal community" was significant in regard to both the direction and the extent to which the school consulted with their resident local Aboriginal community.

Early in the project, a teacher identified the "local Aboriginal community" as "the students themselves" and "what the students bring with them". Another identified the formal house parents as key community representatives. The project team members were then asked to consider what the project needed to achieve in terms of consultation and liaison with the community. In certain respects, the project focused on "the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group members and at times impacted on a truly collaborative approach to the project. However, the school understood the need to connect with the students' home communities as did the Department and other local Aboriginal community members. This enabled teachers to support students' research about their own local communities as settings for their school assignments. An example of this related to the students' work on digital narratives that linked their home communities and their experiences in their new urban environment. This enabled links to emerge between home communities and the local area.

One team member raised the practical challenges of working with school staff and local Aboriginal community organisation members. Staff from the school worked during school hours, while many community representatives attended their community meetings in the evenings. During the project phase, representatives from the local Aboriginal education group did, when invited, visit the school. But these visits were largely for presentations and not for professional development. The team members also contributed to the achievement of many goals by collaborating with the Aboriginal education group, who was a local Aboriginal community member. They enlisted the assistance of the regional Aboriginal Education Consultative Group to support the project and ensure that the project team was involved in the school and the local community. The team members also reported some positive feedback from some Aboriginal parents, as a result of the project.

Several members of the local community, including from the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, were critical of the lack of active consultation on the part of the school during the life of the project. One representative explained later that this resulted in the local Aboriginal community "...feeling invisible". Replications from a local Aboriginal community organisation indicated that the communication by the school action learning team members about planning and progress of the project was inadequate over the life of the project. Some Aboriginal community participants identified the need for regular project team meetings to be arranged with greater notice. Similarly, the development of a project advisory group with community members would have provided more
opportunities for the academic partner, team members and community representatives to collaborate in the project planning.

Understandings of Aboriginal Cultural Knowledge

The team members reported that they had enhanced their understandings of Aboriginal cultural knowledge. However, at the school site there were complexities that arose from the unique residential nature of Aboriginal students' school attendance. These complexities related to the nature of the consultation and questions of whose cultural knowledge was accessed to inform the school’s perspectives on Aboriginal cultural knowledge which were being constructed through the work of teachers in the school.

While the various 'home' cultures of the students were acknowledged, efforts made to access that knowledge, the team found it difficult to access them at a distance. Most found that communicating with regional communities was time consuming and often not always received in good time.

Something of the nature of teachers’ learning about Aboriginal cultural knowledge was encapsulated in one teacher’s statement that “we didn’t know we could put in a [Google] search for Burdekin [the regional Aboriginal language group] and for lots of info... we are learning”. Also the action learning team leader explained that she now felt much more confident as her own teaching had improved as a result of the project. She stated:

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

As suggested earlier, mid-way through the project, a member of the local Aboriginal community assisted the role of academic partner and as a result the project activity launched into a more strategic, cohesive phase. Consequently, a resource audit took place culminating in the development of a dedicated library located on Aboriginal cultural knowledge. This complemented the gradual ‘take up’ of opportunities for enhanced support for integrating Aboriginal perspectives as offered by the Aboriginal cultural mentor. Teachers on the whole, said they felt more confident in introducing Aboriginal perspectives in their units of work within their Key Learning Areas. According to the academic partner changes have occurred at the level of the staff. There has been a growing comprehension of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and Quality Teaching”.

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Barriers, Challenges and Opportunities

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

Implementing the project was perceived as increasing teachers’ workload, but in the end this was not seen as a deterrent in undertaking the project. As one member of the executive commented “I don’t know if any of us would have been involved ... well I probably would have I guess... but we realised the amount of work ... it’s seen as an enormous amount of work”. The willingness of staff to be involved was supported by adequate resources for staff relief and meetings. It was acknowledged that without the funding the project would not be sustained indefinitely.

The challenge for teachers to connect the project to syllabus outcomes was identified as a challenge. The Aboriginal academic partner played a key role in guiding teachers to find ways of addressing this challenge. For example, there was a need for resources of sufficient academic rigour for various senior high school syllabus documents, and the academic partner was able to help with those subject areas, such as Math. The academic partner was able to locate a former National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association dancer who provided appropriate cultural support and guidance to the teachers.

Another challenge was to review educational publications that contained locally generated Aboriginal community endorsed content on Aboriginal cultural knowledge. The Aboriginal academic partner also noted that sample units of work for pre-service Aboriginal cultural knowledge were not yet available to teachers from the Board of Studies New South Wales website, along with other syllabus support material. At this time, and coming many other when the limited availability of those kinds of resources provided challenges for project teams. The need to develop locally based Aboriginal teaching and learning resources represents a key challenge for future efforts to support teachers accessing and delivering on local Aboriginal cultural knowledge. The connections the school could make with the parents and the home communities of their Aboriginal students were very important to the ongoing efforts to improve student learning. The ability to connect effectively with the Aboriginal students’ home communities was an ongoing challenge, even though the project did make a positive start in helping the development of more effective contexts. A further challenge was how to sustain the program once the students who were part of this project returned to their home communities.

The challenges relating to perceptions of who constituted the local Aboriginal community have been noted and perhaps require further discussion and debate. Negotiating appropriate collaboration and consultation between the school and the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group is an ongoing challenge for the school. An increased focus on local Aboriginal knowledge will provide future students with the capacity to connect with Aboriginal communities and to learn about the local cultural heritage, which in turn will enhance broader perspectives on Aboriginal history and culture.

The team leader noted the need for further professional development for teachers across Key Learning Areas to ensure that Aboriginal cultural knowledge becomes part of the curriculum.
There is still resistance to include Aboriginal cultural knowledge in some areas, but I think that will be overcome when we do the cultural workshops through the new Aboriginal Education Policy.

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

Leadership

The support of the principal to the goals of the project, even though she was not directly involved in the day to day running of the project was critical. In the initial phase the deputy-principal led the team, at the mid point of the project, the role was transferred to the local teacher (Administration). The project team leader successfully reorganised the appointment of the Aboriginal academic partner. In doing so she demonstrated her capacity to synthesise the multiple and concurrent demands on the team, and to make the necessary structural changes, based upon her own evaluation of the project’s direction.

Role of Mentors and Other Community Based Groups

The project had two different academic mentors. The first Aboriginal academic mentor was affiliated with a regional university space distance from the school. Her research expertise in Aboriginal English and Aboriginal literacy supported various aspects of the initial project collaboration among the three original schools involved. The project team leader acted as an academic partner’s “liaison officer” to have the students also “work with their communities”. The development of the students’ Personal Learning Programs digital narratives indicated the success of this suggestion, which generated quality outcomes for both students and staff. This initiative led to transformative learning for teachers as they engaged in researching Aboriginal cultural knowledge from different regional communities.

With respect to the second academic mentor one teacher noted “the project has given us the opportunity to work with the local community and work with an academic partner who has been able to guide us and make suggestions – her contribution has been invaluable and has given us the confidence to find our own resource”. Her vast teaching experience in a range of settings and leadership skills brought necessary expertise to the next stage of the project. The teacher also added, additionally, the advantage of having an academic partner who resided close to the school. This helped with networking and with a more informed awareness of the local community. Her experience as a teacher meant that she also recognised teachers’ busy schedules. Across the 21 schools in the overall project there were few Aboriginal teachers employed at these schools. At this site, having an Aboriginal teacher involved, who was able to make many key contributions, was highly valued. She stated that “we, Aboriginal people, coming in on a project, are your equals and we wish to work with equal, mutual respect”.

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

Sustaining the Project

One of the main problems of government funded initiatives is that invariably when external funding ends, the project is scaled down. Suggestions for continued support involve collaborative partnerships with a regional Aboriginal Education consultant to organise staff development days, to expand the range of resource sites for teachers to access, and to assist individual teachers to place Aboriginal cultural knowledge perspectives into their units of work.

A continuing emphasis on the importance of contemporary cultural knowledge and in keeping with Departmental Aboriginal Education policy development this approach. The need to continue the increased connection with schools’ teachers in their local communities to build on the good work carried out by the team was seen as a priority for sustainability.

For enhanced partnership with local Aboriginal organisations and some service providers it may be worthwhile for each of the team members and/or other staff to share the extra curriculum commitment of including evening meetings and for a workplace adjustment to support teachers’ commitments to community meetings. Greater exposure to a range of models of consultative practices for working with Aboriginal communities would also be of value to schools like Magenta.

The Department of Education’s greater emphasis on Information and Communications Technologies and “connected classrooms” had already allowed the project to be further revitalised by using technologies such as video conferencing. It was noted that by using this technology, students from Magenta Secondary School were confidently teaching other students in other schools about Aboriginal cultural knowledge.

It is important to emphasise again the significant degree of curriculum change that occurred as a result of the employment of one Aboriginal teacher during the project. If further progress was to be made in the development of Aboriginal perspectives, one way to support that would be for the school to continue to maintain its efforts to employ Aboriginal teachers and para-professionals.
CONCLUSION

In summary, the project undertaken in this school was successful because several critical factors came together to build connections between teachers and students and their Aboriginal communities. There was a willingness to integrate the project into school activity, particularly in terms of allowing time for teachers to come together to learn and discuss aspects of their teaching. This professional learning time allowed teachers to gain new insights into their teaching, facilitating a greater understanding of local Aboriginal cultural knowledge. Students were visibly more engaged, and teachers were excited by using new technologies to enhance student learning.

The project benefited from a supportive executive leadership and this was a key factor in the overall success of the project as it gave the project authority within the school. The employment of Aboriginal teachers as academic mentors was another factor that contributed to the project's success. On the other hand, challenges included needing to work with the everyday pressures of school routines and timetables and an overcrowded curriculum maintaining good connections with parents and the local Aboriginal community as well as sustaining the project beyond the funding cycle.

Overall, however, much was gained by teachers in their learning journey towards a greater understanding of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and its place within the curriculum.

REFERENCES