

2020

## **“Becoming a Better Teacher” Exploring the cultural competence of non-Aboriginal teachers in a northern Australian boarding school**

Megan Hayley Spiers  
*Edith Cowan University*

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# **“Becoming a Better Teacher”**

**Exploring the cultural competence of non-Aboriginal teachers  
in a northern Australian boarding school**

This thesis is presented for the degree of  
**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Megan Hayley Spiers**

Edith Cowan University  
School of Education  
2020

## “Becoming a Better Teacher”

“My classroom approach changed over time because I was *becoming a better teacher*. Across all these different levels of work, I’d say that my mainstream teaching changed more as a reflection of my Indigenous experiences than the other way around.” (Reuben)



Road to Gunbalanya, Arnhem Land  
Photo © Megan Spiers

# Abstract

This doctoral dissertation presents an exploration of the journey to cultural competence revealed in the lived experience of teachers and boarding staff in a boarding school in northern Australia. The qualitative inquiry sought to discover the causal attribution and motivations of culturally competent teachers and to enunciate the essential skills, knowledge and understanding required to improve the development of cultural competence in teachers new to the phenomenon: namely, that of being a non-Aboriginal teacher of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, defined in the study as *teaching in classrooms of cultural difference*. The research was unique in being focused on the teachers' perspective in a boarding school, an educational context that is not explored in any prevalent way in the current corpus of scholarly literature.

A qualitative research approach was applied, using phenomenological and ethnographic methods that revealed participants to be flexible teachers, caring and empathetic, without exception demonstrating an underlying ethos that entailed a service-oriented approach, an attitude of humility, equity and respect, a strong belief in social justice and endeavouring pursuit of quality teaching. The study found that effective teaching practice in classrooms of cultural difference required positive teacher-student relationships, community consultation and a whole-school approach to supporting teachers and students. Underpinning these culturally responsive policies and practices was an alertness by teachers to the unique complexity of the educational context and a deep commitment to Aboriginal students and the pedagogical practices that ensured cultural safety and security in the classroom.

The important relationship between motivation, causal attribution and cultural competence was presented in the unique context of the research site. Although the Australian Curriculum mandates the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and clear frameworks have been developed for cultural responsiveness in schools, there is a dearth of research focused on how teachers actually acquire and demonstrate cultural competence in the classroom. In proving a leverageable relationship between motivation, attribution and cultural competence, research findings will assist teachers new to the complexities of multicultural classrooms to develop adaptive pedagogical practices, self-efficacy and connectedness. Further research is recommended, with potential research questions identified concerning improvement in government policy associated with practice in Aboriginal Education; the level of cultural competence or knowledge in preservice teachers during initial teacher education; and the provision of opportunities for schools to actively contribute to the professional development of teachers in becoming culturally competent.

*Keywords: cultural competence, cultural responsiveness, attribution, motivation, Aboriginal Education, boarding school, initial teacher education, quality teaching*

# Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- i. incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- ii. contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis; or
- iii. contain any defamatory material.

Signed:

[original signed]

Megan Spiers

# Acknowledgment

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I acquired an extensive research peer group, not least among my siblings and their partners scattered across the globe, whose doctoral expertise in different fields gave rise to excellent advice and a ready supply of PhD-themed humour. Sincere thanks to Dr Abbie Spiers for her proofreading expertise. I have appreciated many erudite conversations with fellow educators and researchers, notably Prof Martin Nakata and Dr Graeme Gower, who offered advice at a pivotal time in my research journey; Dr Thelma Perso, for providing her professional time and input drawn from her knowledge of teachers in remote schools; and Dr Anne-Marie Marias, for insights from her doctoral research on classroom management in a boarding school context.

I am in awe of the passion, dedication and resilience of teachers. Ours is a challenging profession, often exacting an emotional, physical or intellectual toll and yet, teachers demonstrate daily through words and actions their unwavering belief in students' worth and potential. To the participants who shared their experiences with me, I thank you for your courage and honesty, and for demonstrating the power of education to change people's lives.

And lastly, to my husband Colin – whose love, and cheerful provision of culinary delights formed the bedrock upon which this thesis was constructed – my heartfelt thanks.

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# Acronyms

ABS – Australian Bureau of Statistics

ABSTUDY – Aboriginal Study Grants Scheme (introduced in 1969)

ACARA – Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority

ACER – Australian Council for Educational Research

AHRC – Australian Human Rights Commission

AIATSIS – Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

AIEF – Australian Indigenous Education Foundation

AITSL – Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership

APST – Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

ARACY – Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

COAG – Council of Australian Governments

CRT – Critical Race Theory

EALD – English as an Additional Language or Dialect

ECT – Early Career Teacher

ECU – Edith Cowan University

HOD – Head of Department

IESIP SRP – Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme (IESIP) Strategic Results Projects

IRRRRE – Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education: Final Report

ITE – Initial Teacher Education

IYLP – Indigenous Youth Leadership Program

KLA – Key Learning Area

LBOTE – Language Background Other Than English

MCEECDYA – Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs

MCEETYA – Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs

NHMRC – National Health and Medical Research Council

NSW – New South Wales

NT – Northern Territory of Australia

NTCET – Northern Territory Certificate of Education and Training

NTOEC – Northern Territory Open Education Centre

PE – Physical Education

RRR – Regional, Rural and Remote

SA – South Australia

SCRGSP – Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision

SMT – Senior Management Team

TA – Teacher Assistant

TEMAG – Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group

TESOL – Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

TRB NT –Teacher Registration Board of the Northern Territory

UK – United Kingdom

UN – United Nations

USA – United States of America (also, US)

VET – Vocational Education and Training

WA – Western Australia

# Author's Note

I hereby acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we live, travel, learn and forge our future pathways. I acknowledge the contribution of Elders, past and present, to the learning and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, teachers and boarding staff in the school where I conducted my research.

I pay tribute to the Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders who provided valuable insight, commentary and healthy criticism during my teaching career and who will, I trust, continue to provide guidance in any future research. The generosity of Aboriginal students, colleagues and communities in which I worked, the sharing of their cultural heritage and enthusiasm for the future of their children has been a driving force in developing my personal teaching philosophy over two decades in diverse cultural learning environments, both in Australia and overseas.

Throughout my text, I respectfully use the term 'Aboriginal' to denote Aboriginal peoples from different language groups, nations and lands, and Torres Strait Islanders.

As a high school teacher in New South Wales and on commencing my research journey with Edith Cowan University, I noticed that *Aboriginal* was used when referring to Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders whereas *Indigenous* was specific to Aboriginal peoples. In contrast, I spent my formative years in the Northern Territory and taught in remote communities across northern Australia where *Indigenous* was used to denote both Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders, although it is my understanding the term *Aboriginal*, historically exclusive to Australia's first peoples, is now returning to common use.

Since my research was situated within the Western Australian academic environment, I have followed the Western Australian Department of Education in its use of these terms. Different terminology may occur in direct quotes from scholars and other references.



# CHAPTER ONE



Sandstone country, Ubirr  
Photo © Megan Spiers

# Chapter 1: Overview and Purpose

*It is not always the quality of the teaching that prevents Indigenous students learning – often it's the quality of the relationship between teacher and student, not to mention the school community. (Herbert, 2006, as cited in Perso & Hayward, 2015, p. 58)*

This dissertation explores the professional journey to cultural competence, as described by teachers with experience of the studied phenomenon: namely, that of being a non-Aboriginal teacher in classrooms comprised wholly of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This qualitative study seeks to explore the skills, knowledge and understandings considered to be essential for acquiring cultural competence, with a particular focus on the attitudes and pedagogical practices of teachers with longevity in the phenomenon, defined as *teaching in classrooms of cultural difference*. Teachers' perspectives are augmented by the voices of non-Aboriginal boarding staff. Adaptive research approaches are applied, using phenomenological and ethnographic methods, and fieldwork occurs at the single research site, referred to as 'the School' throughout this thesis.

This chapter serves as an introduction to the study. It presents an overview of the research problem and indicates its significance and relevance, including an appreciation of the contribution that the study may make to preservice teacher education policies and practices, in addition to onsite school-based professional learning for early career teachers. The originality of the research is demonstrated with reference to the current body of scholarly knowledge in the field of Aboriginal Education.

The quote introducing this chapter serves as a fitting preface to the study, inferring as it does several concepts distinctly relevant for teaching in multicultural classrooms: the teacher-student relationship, and comprehension of the intertwined permeance of culture in students' lifeworlds. The research setting is a unique educational context, with 33% of the School's population consisting of Aboriginal boarding students from remote communities. The research site is therefore well-placed with potential for the study to reveal and consider the rich complexity of the phenomenon.

## 1.1. Overview of the study

An extensive review of the literature identifies that the increased classroom diversity that occurred during this century in Australia has not equated to academic disadvantage for students (Sonnemann, 2018). The socioeconomic status of a student has instead proven to be a greater indicator of academic performance (Goss & Sonnemann, 2016). This has clearly been demonstrated in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results of remotely based students of Aboriginal heritage. The 2018 NAPLAN report reveals, for example, that only about 14% of remotely based Year 7 Aboriginal students are

reading at or above the national minimum standard, and less than one-quarter of Year 3 Aboriginal students from very remote areas can read at the national minimum standard (Indigenous Literacy Foundation, 2019). Of twelve annual *Closing the Gap* reports, released from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, not one has ever met more than three of the seven targets. In February 2020, the Minister for Indigenous Australians, Hon Ken Wyatt, said “multiple factors” (Allam, 2020, para. 14) were behind the failure to meet targets, yet the answer rested in working more closely with Aboriginal communities: “Community is important. We don’t engage with them as well as we should” (Allam, 2020, para. 16). To comprehend how government intentions have fallen short, the following quote from Wyatt is pertinent:

But why we’ve failed, I think it’s fundamentally because we’ve not engaged the Aboriginal community with us. ... If you want to change something, you’ve got to have the people who you are targeting sitting at the table with you. (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020b)

This commitment to connectedness with community proved to be a major focus in this study.

In the Northern Territory, Aboriginal people comprise a higher percentage of the total population than in other states and territories. In 2017, Aboriginal students represented slightly more than 40% of the total student cohort and of whom 6,450 were secondary school students (ACARA, 2019, p. 20). In 2018, Aboriginal students comprised 39% of the total student cohort (ABS, 2019). Therefore, issues affecting Aboriginal students have a greater consequence in the Northern Territory, due to their higher ratio within its population. In 2017, approximately 8.6% of Aboriginal students were enrolled in independent schools across Australia (ACARA, 2019, p. 19) and although rates of retention were lower than the overall school population, attendance had risen in recent years (ACARA, 2019, p. 20).

Data analysis of key characteristics influencing labour force participation and unemployment rates for Aboriginal people concluded that education, in particular the completion of Year 12 or higher qualification, had an effect on participation in the workforce (SCRGSP, 2014). As education is a key determinant of future prospects, it is imperative for Aboriginal students to access equitable educational opportunities, ideally in culturally responsive schools with culturally competent teachers. These concepts will be defined in the study.

Teachers most suited to support students from diverse ethnicities and cultural backgrounds in their learning aspirations are those who confidently interact with people of a cultural heritage different to their own. Confidence and a positive approach to engaging in cross-cultural communication and experiences is termed *cultural competence*, and is an extension of *cultural awareness* and *cultural sensitivity* (Moeller & Nugent, 2014). In an educational context, culturally competent teachers have

the “capacity or ability to understand, interact and communicate effectively, and with sensitivity” (Perso & Hayward, 2015) with culturally diverse students.

The process of developing cultural competence is a deliberate one, likened to a journey of self-awareness that occurs over time and is ongoing (Moeller & Nugent, 2014; Yang & Montgomery, 2011). Research has identified that it cannot only be attained through professional development in cultural awareness, as “factual knowledge about ethnic groups is necessary but not sufficient” (Banks, 2019, p. 93); neither can it be acquired by merely undertaking training in equity, inclusivity and diversity (Trent, 2015), which can be superficial and not conducive of the critical self-reflection required to advance on the cultural competence continuum (Joiner Watts, 2008, pp. 2-6). Models relating to the development of cultural competence are numerous (Berardo & Deardorff, 2012; Brace, 2011; Neville et al., 2000) and reflect its complexity. In the researcher’s experience, however, academics in this field do not commonly have lived experience as teachers in schools so there can be a disconnect between the desired capabilities for teachers and the practicalities of how precisely teachers achieve cultural competence in readiness for classroom contexts with Aboriginal secondary school aged students. The journey toward cultural competence is described by Ranzijn et al. (2008) as “a lifelong task” and “a developmental process” that cannot be achieved in undergraduate courses alone but is refined at postgraduate level by “more skills-based teaching, including placements ... and refinement of those skills in practice in Indigenous contexts” (p. 138).

Given the researcher’s extensive background in teaching and living in the Northern Territory, including in remote communities, there was a high level of personal, as well as professional interest in investigating the learning journey of relevant staff members in one of the largest boarding schools for Aboriginal students in Australia. An attentiveness regarding the essential nature of the phenomenon and the critical cornerstones for attaining cultural competence were required, and the researcher’s professional experience in this and similar settings will be positioned as advantageous to the research.

### *1.1.1. The research questions*

In brief, this research study seeks to discover the causal attribution and motivations of culturally competent teachers and to enunciate what essential skills, knowledge and understanding are required in order to improve the development of cultural competence in teachers and boarding staff new to the phenomenon. In addition to describing teachers’ experience of the phenomenon with a “rich understanding” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 63), the study aims to uncover revelatory aspects of their practice, in order to reveal how teachers acquire and apply their skills, knowledge and understanding to support the wellbeing and academic aspirations of Aboriginal students. Further, the study seeks to identify factors that are considered by participants to have contributed to their longevity in Aboriginal

Education. The perspectives of successful teachers will be sought in the hope that their experiences might lead to the development of findings applicable for a wider educational context.

In this study, *successful teachers* are defined as those who demonstrate excellent preparation and planning; create positive, culturally safe and secure classroom environments; and set consistently high expectations. In addition, the successful teacher derives lesson content from the prior knowledge, language skills and cultural experiences of students and applies a teaching pedagogy that prioritises student-centred learning (Gribble, 2002, as cited in Perso & Hayward, 2015, pp. 160-161). As the study seeks to reveal the journey toward cultural competence undertaken by teachers and boarding staff in a boarding school, and to appreciate in detail what is entailed in that process, a predominantly phenomenological method has been chosen. Using specific research processes, the study aims to reveal key factors considered by participants as essential for effectiveness in cross-cultural communication and which, if adopted more broadly, may assist early career teachers to develop self-efficacy in multicultural learning environments.

An adaptive research approach is applied, using phenomenological and ethnographic methods, to collect and analyse data that reveals the voiced articulation of teachers recounting their journey toward cultural competence, including their lived experience of the phenomenon. The relationship between causal attribution, motivation and cultural competence is examined.

The study focused chiefly on the central Research Question:

What are the causal attributes for cultural competence in teachers and boarding staff (paraprofessionals) working effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?

Designed to inform the Research Question, the following sub-questions enhanced the capacity for contextual layers of insight and rich description of the phenomenon to be gained:

*Sub-Research Question 1:* What factors, such as prerequisite skills, knowledge and understanding, are the best predictors for the long-term success of teachers in classrooms of Aboriginal students?

*Sub-Research Question 2:* What relationship exists, if any, between causal attribution, motivational variables and attainment of cultural competence?

*Sub-Research Question 3:* How can this relationship be leveraged to effectively develop cultural competence in teachers and non-teaching staff who are inexperienced or feeling overwhelmed by the challenges inherent in a multicultural environment?

The research explores the phenomenon in two ways. Firstly, by focusing on teachers' actions and attitudes that had assisted in their acquisition of advanced levels of cultural competence and secondly, by reviewing their strategies for cross-cultural communication. Outcomes are intended to inform teachers new to the phenomenon and preservice teachers with an interest in Aboriginal Education and contribute towards improving their effectiveness in culturally different classrooms.

In this qualitative inquiry, research protocols prevalent in phenomenology and naturalistic ethn methodology are utilised in data collection and a thematic analysis approach used for data analysis. Initially, a mixed method approach was planned, incorporating a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection tools and action learning elements. However, adaptive research practices allow for the modification of processes or procedures where necessary during the data collection phase and the study became purely qualitative. Inductive analysis is applied to triangulate findings drawn from two data analysis software packages, Leximancer and NVivo. Constant comparison techniques are used to test or confirm interpretations through the use of different sources, including literature, other research and theories, and conversations with experts in the field.

### *1.1.2. Justification for the study*

The specific nature of teaching Aboriginal students, as distinct from migrants and other culturally diverse students in Australian schools, requires an awareness of the history of colonisation, dominant cultural paradigms, and self-awareness of one's own cultural ideology. Many Aboriginal students live in communities that are reeling under weighty issues of welfare dependency, domestic violence, substance abuse, high rates of incarceration, and disappointingly continuous socioeconomic exploitation by the dominant culture. Sensations of discomfort, and the potential cognitive dissonance that occurs when these realities are compared to the teacher's own life oeuvre and preconceptions, are to be expected when cultures merge or interact. Uncomfortable experiences may occur between individuals of different cultures due to misunderstanding, ignorance or incorrect assumptions. The most extreme form of discomfort is culture shock (Farmer et al., 2012, p. 246) when an individual is consumed by feelings of mistrust for the people and culture with whom they are interacting, usually as a result of mistaken impressions or failed expectations, or the lack of familiar social meanings and cues (Bainbridge et al., 2015, p. 11).

And yet, the capacity for teachers to educate themselves on *how* to improve their level of cultural competence in secondary schools with Aboriginal students is unclear. There is very little research on the experience of non-Aboriginal teachers in secondary schools who are considered by their peers to be effective in classrooms of Aboriginal students, nor on the learning pathways taken that resulted in increased confidence in this specific educational context. Research investigating disruptive and violent behaviours in the classroom found that teachers listed classroom management as "one of the

greatest concerns in their teaching, often leading to burnout, job dissatisfaction and early exit from the profession” (Sullivan et al., 2014, p. 44). Consideration for classroom ecology would assist in engaging students effectively whereas ineffective classroom management, perhaps as a result of insufficient pedagogical skill, would lead to “resistance and disengagement, ... misbehavior [*sic*] and, in some cases, school violence” (Sullivan et al., 2014, p. 43). Research has shown that most disruptive behaviours in classrooms are minor yet frequent and it is this repetitiveness of unproductive behaviours on a daily basis that teachers find exhausting, leading eventually “to stress and burnout” (p. 45). Sullivan et al. (2014) concluded that teachers should cultivate “a greater understanding” (p. 53) of influential factors operating within classrooms, in order to perceive and utilise these to influence student behaviour and engagement.

The Northern Territory has a very high attrition rate for teachers. Approximately one-in-six or 15.94% of teachers leave, having been employed in schools for less than eight years on average (Aisthorpe, 2016), a figure that is among the highest in Australia (McKinnon & Walker, 2016). High attrition rates can certainly contribute to disrupted experiences for students and schools, and from the perspective of teachers, may be a result of disheartening workloads and stress leading to abandonment of their chosen career path (McKinnon & Walker, 2016). In Western contexts, within the first five years of teaching, between 25% and 40% of all early career teachers will resign or suffer burnout, and in Australia, an estimated figure presents a dire picture of up to 25% of early career teachers departing within their first five years of teaching (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2007, p. 9).

Effective classroom management is concomitant with the teacher’s capacity to move beyond the added pressure of accountability measures, educational effects linked to teacher performance and judgements about teacher quality, arising from “blame-the-teacher rhetoric” (McArdle, 2010, pp. 64, 74). Research is needed to determine how a teacher of Aboriginal students gains the ability to lift themselves above the day-to-day operational level and to seek understanding and awareness of the cultural and historical determinants that make up the lifeworlds of this unique cohort of students.

The literature is limited in this regard. Therefore, this research has optimal value in its purpose. Being concisely focused on teachers in the complex setting of a boarding school, it nevertheless has applicability in wider contexts. With clear outcomes related to the research questions, assistance will be available for early career teachers with a passion to teach in culturally diverse classrooms, in urban and remote communities, and to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students in the Northern Territory, and elsewhere.

### *1.1.3. Participants in the study*

The study investigates the perceptions of non-Aboriginal teachers and boarding staff in a secondary-level boarding school in northern Australia. The participants consisted of theoretically sampled volunteers from two groups of employees: registered teachers, and qualified youth workers. The sampling process is outlined later in this section and detailed in Chapter 4 Methods. Participants were provided with informed consent to participate from the boarding school, and their agreement to participate, or not, had no adverse effect on their position. All participants held Ochre Cards (a lawfully required police screening clearance for working with children in the Northern Territory), but only teachers were required to be registered with the Teacher Registration Board of the Northern Territory (TRB NT) as part of the conditions of their employment. Potential participants, identified through criterion sampling, were invited to participate by personal communication or email using work contacts provided by the gatekeepers (executive staff). If an individual expressed interest in participating, a meeting was held at a time of their choosing, to discuss the study and the anticipated extent of their contribution.

In phenomenology and ethnography, purposeful sampling allows for the deliberate selection of participants using a precise set of parameters for inclusion and exclusion. Criterion sampling limits the selection of participants to individuals with experience of the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998, p. 112). In the study, this was considered to be an effective method for refining a broader group of potential participants, generated by theoretical sampling, into a concise set of sub-groups wherein individuals were well-placed to provide an insider's perspective of the phenomenon.

As ethnographic elements were applied in the study, the researcher was entitled to “rely on their judgement” and make decisions on the selection of individuals “based on their research questions” (Creswell, 1998, p. 120). Teachers and boarding staff (paraprofessionals) were invited to participate if their current role at the School included a direct pedagogical involvement with Aboriginal students.

Qualitative data collection occurs largely through interviews of between five and twenty-five individuals (Creswell, 1998). Data analysis is augmented by self-reflection on the part of the researcher (Creswell, 1998, pp. 54-55) and similarly to naturalistic-ethnography, the researcher's experience of and immersion in the phenomenon aids in the interpretation and rich description of its essence (Titchen & Hobson, 2005). As a result, when adopting an indirect approach in which data emerges as part of the immersive process, the relationship between researcher and participants is characterised by empathy and a shared knowing (Titchen & Hobson, 2005).

As mentioned above, participants in the study were comprised of two groups, Teachers and Boarding staff, within which there were four sub-groups:



1. Proficient or Lead Teachers, with varying levels of cultural awareness and professional expertise, currently teaching Aboriginal Education classes at the research site;
2. Provisional or Graduate Teachers, with varying levels of cultural awareness and teaching experience, currently teaching Aboriginal Education classes at the research site;
3. Boarding Staff: qualified youth workers, graduates of cultural awareness training, currently employed in a paraprofessional capacity in Boarding at the research site; and,
4. Executive Staff, in senior leadership and middle management roles, with experience in engaging with Aboriginal students, parents and communities.

In total, it was anticipated that at least eighteen participants could provide permission for their voices to be transcribed as sources of data and be included for analysis in the study. To gain a whole-school perspective, the above sub-groups included individuals from different hierarchical strata within the boarding school.

Potential participants were provided with a Participant Information Letter and an Informed Consent Document approved by the Edith Cowan University (ECU) Human Research Ethics Committee. The purpose of the study, requirements and processes for participation, confidentiality and privacy of data and ethical considerations, including data storage and sharing results were detailed in the information provided to participants. Contents were also explained verbally, in person, and participants were given opportunities to ask questions and to clarify the extent of their involvement and level of commitment required. Contact details for the researcher and university were provided. Participants were asked to return a signed Informed Consent Document prior to their inclusion in the study.

#### *1.1.4. Context of the research site*

Ethnographic research protocols require prolonged observation of a single social group or system. As outlined by Creswell (1998), this model of qualitative research often incorporates participant observation wherein the researcher is immersed in the daily lives of participants and collects their voices through interviews, after having first negotiated with gatekeepers to gain access to the group. Key informants are located who can provide contacts and “useful insights into the group” (pp. 58-60).

In this study, the Northern Territory secondary boarding school, with a high percentage of Aboriginal students from remote communities, is the equivalent of the aforementioned single social group or system; executive staff in senior leadership and middle management roles acted as gatekeepers, approving entry to the research site and private interview spaces; and executive staff, lead teachers and boarding staff in leadership positions performed the role of key informants, interpreting shared

behaviour patterns and school processes, and providing contacts to the researcher for potential participants.

It is important to note that a boarding school is a complex structure with separate Day School and Boarding House(s) staffing structures, each with middle and senior leadership positions. Within the industry engagement partnership, the study's foundational support, expectations of in-kind support were fulfilled by the School through the provision of research spaces and meeting rooms during site visits, access to technology including printers and photocopiers, and use of facilities such as the main staff room for focus groups. School executive staff, in their role as gatekeeper, provided work contact details during criterion sampling in order to expedite the emailing of invitations to participate.

Multiple site visits allowed for observational data to be gathered alongside other data collection tools, including interviews, focus groups and classroom observation. In accordance with the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies (AIATIS, 2012), values of survival and protection, equality and responsibility were incorporated in the research protocols. Criterion sampling may identify Aboriginal staff as potential participants and therefore, values of equality, respect and reciprocity were inherent in the research processes and professional expectations established, to reduce potential for discrimination or erosion of cultural integrity and respect. Aboriginal students were not an explicit focus of the study. However, research processes indirectly revealed aspects of their boarding school experience. Alertness to cultural sensitivities and potential issues of concern were maintained throughout, and advice sought from appropriate sources when necessary. Values of respect and reciprocity were considered in the dissemination of results to the wider community.

#### *1.1.5. Significance of the study*

The interwoven dependence of health and education as social determinants is a crucial aspect of success in Aboriginal Education. When schools are not funded sufficiently for the needs of their "most disadvantaged" (Wilson, 2014, p. 15) students, the risks of increased social, psychological and economic disadvantage for the students and their future families are extremely high. The perpetuation of such inequities has been visible in the failure of successive governments to close the gap in academic achievement between Aboriginal students and their non-Aboriginal peers.

Teachers are characterised as potential agents for change, striving to ensure the aspirations held by parents and communities for Aboriginal students are attainable. In cross-cultural educational settings, they build and demonstrate confidence and belief in students through a reciprocity of learning and transformation (Gay, 2010; Perso, 2012; Perso & Hayward, 2015), continually seeking to engage and inspire students in culturally respectful and relevant ways, despite the toll this may take on them personally (Marshall, 2013). And yet, teachers are not automatically equipped for this role and the process of attaining full teacher registration recognises this fact: teachers in all jurisdictions must

fulfill a years-long process of mentoring and accountability to move beyond Graduate level to become Proficient in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2020a).

Teachers cannot reasonably be expected to meet these challenges if they have not been adequately prepared for them. (Gay, 2010, p. 251)

Ultimately, the study outcomes, related initially to teachers and boarding staff educating Aboriginal secondary-aged students, will have far-reaching relevance to educational contexts globally. Lessons learnt concerning the journey to cultural competence will be able to infiltrate national and international teacher education programs and localised professional learning plans in schools, especially those related to early career teachers and those teaching in culturally diverse educational contexts. Research questions answered, and recommendations made for future research can only support and enhance the governmental and individual approach to the educational aspirations of Aboriginal families, so producing real improvement in the education gap still evident in the field of Aboriginal Education in Australia.

#### *1.1.6. Limitations of the study*

There were several limitations to the study that required some attention. Whilst attempts were made to minimise the scope of limitations throughout the research process, there are specific limitations that may have had an impact on the research findings. Limitations are related to firstly, aspects of the study parameters, such as methodology including research site and sampling, and secondly, personal limitations such as travel constraints due to cost and geographic distance from the research site. Limitations to the study parameters will now be considered:

One limitation to the research is the selection of a single research site. This decision was driven chiefly by a focus on the School's unique complexity in terms of being a Boarding and Day School for a large number of remotely based<sup>1</sup> Aboriginal students studying education at the high-school level. The decision was hastened into effect through in-kind support provided as part of an industry engagement partnership with ECU. Research findings were necessarily derived from results confined to the parameters of the unique context of the site.

In terms of the research design, this is firmly embedded in phenomenological and ethnographic traditions. As a single method qualitative inquiry, written surveys collected demographic data, and interviews and focus groups were semi-structured with open-ended questions. The research sought to

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<sup>1</sup> The term *remotely based* denotes Aboriginal boarding students who are considered to be residents of a remote community for government funding purposes (e.g. health provision, school enrolment).

reveal the essence of the phenomenon, namely, the experience of being a non-Aboriginal teacher in classrooms comprised entirely of Aboriginal students in a boarding school. Criterion sampling thus limited participation to teachers and boarding staff with experience of the phenomenon.

Further limitations that arise in relation to the research site were considered, analysed and mitigated if possible, and are noted in the final chapter of this thesis. The next section of this chapter considers the personal limitations of the study from the perspective of the researcher:

Geographic distance from the research site has meant that travel was planned at personal cost and there was little room to change dates and times if circumstances changed at the research site. Although not initially identified as a potential constraint to research processes, final results determined the extent of this limitation.

One perceived major limitation, from a multicultural perspective in the study, is that the researcher is non-Aboriginal, and this will be addressed in later chapters. While cultural identity has been acknowledged and explicitly confronted, the researcher outlines, throughout the thesis, her life story and her strong and sustained interest in Aboriginal issues, culture and history as well as her extensive experience in Aboriginal Education and teaching in the Northern Territory. Thus, drawing upon firsthand understandings, the thesis emerges from a perspective of respect and empathy.

## **1.2. Structure of the thesis**

The structure of the thesis, and themes which emerge from the research, are grouped and analysed according to the concepts and issues identified in the voices of the participants.

The foundations for the research, and the research context, are briefly introduced and discussed in Chapter One. Education in a multicultural or ethnically diverse context is examined in Chapter Two in the form of a review of current literature. The importance of increasing the cultural capability of teachers in the changing face of classrooms cannot be underestimated, and the literature attests to the importance of improving teacher quality. Strategies such as mentoring early career teachers and the benefits in all teachers learning to teach English as an additional language or dialect (EALD), irrespective of their subject area, are treated with due diligence in Chapter Two.

Research investigating bilingualism (Athanasopoulos et al., 2015; Vince, 2016) recognised that there may be distinct advantages in how the bilingual or multilingual brain responds to challenges, adopts different focus and even adapts personal characteristics specific to the language being spoken. Aboriginal students may arrive at school multilingual, speaking English as their second or third language (McCalman et al., 2020; Wilson, 2014). As opposed to detracting from their ability to learn, these students are bringing a strength into the classroom as bilingualism utilises the brain's cognitive

malleability (Athanasopoulos et al., 2015) and strengthens its anterior cingulate cortex, thereby governing concentration while blocking distraction and switching focus with less confusion (Vince, 2016). Such findings shelve the outdated attitude of viewing Australian Aboriginal English and traditional languages and dialects as an unwelcome distraction in the classroom: “Difference, from the point of view of one dialect, may look like deficit, but it is not” (Malcolm, 2014, p. 4). When teachers adapt learning resources to reference students’ prior knowledge, the “cultural and language strengths” (Banks, 2010; 2016, pp. x, 15) of their students, engagement improves and academic achievements increase.

The review of scholarly literature in Chapter Two attests to the importance of quality and authenticity in teacher-student relationships in Aboriginal Education, and the deliberate fostering of respectful relationships is seen to be “a fundamental characteristic of teachers most effective with Aboriginal students [representing] universal principles of good teaching” (Harslett et al., 2000, p. 6). The consistency of this finding in the literature demonstrates its importance for prospective teachers of Aboriginal students (Harslett et al., 2000).

Chapter Two provides the background to the study and outlines current literature in the field of Aboriginal Education including racism in schools and the effects of social determinants on the future pathways of Aboriginal students. Chapter Three describes the research site, its historical mandate, structure and unique complexity, particularly the osmotic dynamic between the classrooms and boarding houses. Policies and programs that positioned the boarding school as a culturally responsive educational setting are articulated. In addition, the researcher’s professional experience in Aboriginal Education and multicultural settings is positioned as advantageous to the research.

In Chapter Four, the central research question is articulated through three identified components, presented as sub-research questions. The theoretical framework underpinning the study is outlined and research processes contextualised for the research site, including ethical considerations, the role of the researcher, and limitations to the study.

As the study seeks to explore the essential factors for developing cultural competence and sustaining teachers in culturally diverse classrooms, a particular focus is placed on the attitudes, perspectives and pedagogical practices of teachers with extended experience in the phenomenon. The study’s focus can be expressed in two parts: an exploration of actions and attitudes that contribute toward cultural competence, and a review of classroom strategies, in order to reveal the causal attribution and motivations underlying teachers’ lived experience. The qualitative data collection methods enable participants to reflect on their teaching practice and provide authentic accounts of resolving classroom incidents and issues of sensitivity specific to the unique context of the research site. Qualitative analytical methods are applied in order to determine whether a leverageable relationship between

cultural competence, causal attribution and motivation exists, with potential applicability across broader educational contexts.

Chapter Five contains the results in a descriptive form. This chapter investigates the lived experience of non-Aboriginal teachers teaching classes wholly comprised of Aboriginal students. Specific contextual challenges and barriers for teachers are described. Cultural difference in the classroom adds an intangible yet transformative layer of complexity to the teaching and learning process. The voices of participants provide stories and critical incidents that explore the definition of a culturally competent teacher, their concept of 'good teaching', and ways in which they manage professional relationships, conflicts and access peer support.

Whereas Chapter Five demonstrates ways in which the participants navigate their lived experience of the phenomenon, that of being a non-Aboriginal teacher of Aboriginal students, through participant voices, Chapter Six analyses these voices and the participants' use of skills, knowledge and understanding to improve their pedagogical practice. The importance of teachers being aware and respectful of cultural sensitivities, and proactive in preserving the cultural safety and security of Aboriginal students in the classroom is established. Several key strategies are revealed in Chapter Six that show the study's participants valued the three cornerstones of teacher effectiveness in classrooms of cultural difference – cultural competence, pedagogical practice and connectedness. These are explored in this chapter, in particular in relation to relevance to the research questions.

Chapter Seven addresses the findings within the unique context of the research site and concludes the study. Implications for multicultural education, generally, are described and suggestions made regarding issues for consideration by teachers commencing their professional careers in Aboriginal Education, and those currently completing preservice teacher training. This chapter reviews and concludes the dissertation, reflecting on the original aims and intentions, and discusses these in terms of the new findings and significance to this quite specific field of education. The chapter concludes with a focus on the limitations of the study, including reference to the researcher's personal limitations, followed by details of implications for future research.

The original contribution of this research to scholarly knowledge in the field of Aboriginal Education is evident in the findings and recommendations, and in particular the unique research context. It addresses a significant gap in relevant literature and goes beyond theoretical proposition, by revealing the lived experience of a noteworthy sample of educational practitioners in the Northern Territory.

As mentioned earlier, the next chapter (Chapter Two) provides an overview of the literature regarding teaching in culturally diverse educational environments and the strategies teachers use in seeking to

overcome the effects of social determinants on the future pathways of many Aboriginal students in remote communities.

# CHAPTER TWO



Turkey bush (*Calytrix exstipulata*) signals Bang-Gereng (April) turning to Yegge (May to June)  
Photo © Megan Spiers



## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

*It takes an awful long time. ... And it's not that they don't trust you, it's just that they either don't need a relationship with you, or they don't see the value in the relationship with you, or they don't deem it necessary to make verbal contact with you. And you have to be persistent. (Tania)*

This chapter discusses issues drawn from the current body of scholarly knowledge in Aboriginal Education pertinent to the Northern Territory context and the perspectives of the practicing teacher. An overview of the historic context is presented with reference to social determinants and the persistent failure to 'close the gap' between the academic achievement of Aboriginal students and that of their non-Aboriginal peers. Discourses on teacher preparedness, initial teacher education, teacher quality and the multicultural nature of Australia's classrooms are considered in relation to the unique context of the Northern Territory. Issues of racism, Whiteness and dominant culture narratives in schools are necessarily touched upon when articulating the complexity of educating Australia's most disadvantaged students. Definitions of key terms are included in this chapter, setting the groundwork for interpreting the findings revealed later in this dissertation.

The quote introducing this chapter represents the core of teacher-student relationships: time, persistence and willingness on the part of the teacher to make the effort to connect. This study focuses on the experience of non-Aboriginal teachers in classrooms comprised wholly of Aboriginal students. All teachers participating in this study, as demonstrated later, all at some point experienced the revelation that *they did not know enough* to teach 'this' particular cohort of students, a realisation that prefaced their journey toward cultural competence in a boarding school setting. The following section reviews the issues, both current and historical, necessary for understanding the Northern Territory context.

### 2.1. Historical context of the study

The historical context of the study is described below, firstly describing the Northern Territory context with reference to dominant cultural narratives and historical issues of significance followed by an overview of schooling in the Northern Territory, Aboriginal students' experiences of boarding school, current issues in Aboriginal Education and the perspectives of Aboriginal parents.

#### 2.1.1. The Northern Territory context

Education plays a key part in the wellbeing of young people. Engagement in a positive school environment is known to build resilience and self-efficacy, is protective against health issues such as depression and harmful behaviours, and holds the potential to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people that resonate far beyond their school years (Blair et al., 2005; McCalman et al., 2020; Waters

& Cross, 2010). As mentioned above, this study is contextualised within the field of Aboriginal Education, specifically high-school or secondary education in the Northern Territory, with the research site being a large Boarding and Day School in Darwin in which over 30% of its students come from remote communities in northern Australia.

The current, as-yet-persisting disparity between the academic achievements of Aboriginal students and that of their non-Aboriginal peers has been raised in recent decades by government reviews, such as the Northern Territory Government commissioned review, *A Share in the Future* (Wilson, 2014). While reasons are sought and pored over as to why this situation continues, many contributing factors have been named: difficulty in accessing an appropriate level and quality of schooling in remote communities, affordability and viability of options, and differing community aspirations and expectations that have a flow-on effect on how persistently or successfully students in remote and very remote communities seek access to schooling (Mander, 2012; Osborne et al., 2018).

The Australian Government provides funding for education and health to states and territories, in effect for those jurisdictions to do the heavy lifting in service provision. This results in a disjunction between the statutory responsibility of each government to service adequately the educational needs of all students, and the policies and funding models that assist in its exertion of that responsibility. Consistency is sought through the use of overarching policy frameworks established by the Australian Government, with input from State and Territory Governments, that is, through Council of Australian Governments (COAG) meetings, linked to specific purposes such as Australian Curriculum development (Australian Curriculum, 2020b), safety and facilities, and teacher quality (Council of Australian Governments, 2014; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2011). In contrast to the cooperative approach in managing broader educational fields, the foremost responsibility for Aboriginal Education rests with the Australian Federal Government, a duty it realises through the provision of funding and special grants to State and Territory Governments in order that they may fulfill the unique needs of each jurisdiction. In addition, the Federal Government supports research and analysis aimed at improving quality in and targeted provision of Aboriginal Education. For example, the Federal Government provides annual funding to eligible higher education providers in the form of Research Block Grants, that in part provide support for research doctorate degrees such as this study (Australian Government Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2020).

Despite the existence of initiatives and programs designed to increase the learning engagement and academic achievement of Aboriginal students, overall this particular student cohort attends school less and exits formal education earlier than non-Aboriginal students. The historic perspectives and current issues concerning Aboriginal Education in Australia today are next examined.

#### 2.1.1.1. Emerging from a dominant racial ideology

The dominant cultural narrative exists in Australia as a result of over two-hundred years of colonisation by the British, also termed ‘invasion’, and the subsequent establishment of a society based on predominantly Christian values and laws with largely an Anglo-Saxon cultural heritage and Westminster system of governance. Robust debate has emerged on numerous points, particularly the proposal for formal recognition of Australia’s First Peoples in the Constitution and growing interest in the formation of a ratified Voice to represent Aboriginal communities in Parliament (Murphy, 2019).

Issues of cultural identity, dominance and subordination, and centuries of disempowerment hold powerful sway over interactions between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students and teachers (Partington, 2003). Despite changes in Australian society and law to encourage greater tolerance and recognition of other cultures and to enhance the status of Aboriginal people, racism is still prevalent in Australian schools, whether or not teachers recognise this fact (Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010; Partington, 2003).

Efforts to improve schools’ cultural responsiveness are useful in Australia when considered in the context of the continuing disparity between the school experience of many Aboriginal students and their non-Aboriginal peers. The historical background to this issue is a timely reminder of the impact of generational disadvantage.

#### 2.1.2. *Historical issues of significance*

Several important milestones in Aboriginal Education have also been landmarks in Australian history, the effects of which have continued to shape educational discourse and influence the school experience of Aboriginal people into the present day. A truncated selection of historic events runs the gamut of colonisation, racial segregation and assimilation; the 1967 Referendum, advent of ABSTUDY, CDEP and the concept of self-determination; the *Hobart, Adelaide and Melbourne Declarations* of school goals; the *Australian Apology* and *Closing the Gap* framework, and the Northern Territory Intervention. These events and initiatives are next briefly described.

An iconic event that looms large in Australian history was the 1967 Referendum, in which over 90% of the Australian population voted to amend certain sections of the Constitution to enable Aboriginal people to be counted in the census, and thereby for the Australian Government to assume control of Aboriginal affairs from the states (Parliament of Australia, 2017). This event marked a turning-point in the management, funding and orientation of policies and practice in Aboriginal Education from exclusion and assimilation to inclusion and equitable outcomes, with an underlying ethos of self-determination (MCEETYA, 2000a; Parliament of Australia, 2017). While this nationwide expression of changing hearts and minds was long overdue and represented a worthy pursuit in reinstating the

human rights of Aboriginal people in the form of equitable education, it has been argued that the policymakers, schools and teaching staff responsible for implementing these changes did not sufficiently understand the complexity of Aboriginal Education, and hegemonic power differentials are suspected of spilling over into modern schooling provision and being “uncritically ignored” (Benveniste, Disbray, et al., 2014, p. 10). Consequently, elements of earlier inequitable policies and practices have persisted as undercurrents in Aboriginal Education discourses and practices (Beresford et al., 2012).

The disenfranchisement and the iniquitous shunning in mainstream society of Aboriginal people has been documented extensively, though perhaps not disseminated as widely or accurately as might have been desirable (Christie, 2012, p. 171) given that vast tranches of the historical experience of Australia’s First Nations were for a long time neglected in school curriculums and history texts (Elder, 2014; Pascoe, 2014). The legacy of inequity and discrimination has cast a long shadow over subsequent generations, because of policies that denied access to lands, authentic expression of culture and language, and the rights accompanying citizenship such as employment and education. The forced removal of children lingers as a spectacularly ruthless chapter in Australian history, the lasting effects of which are still being felt, resonating as critical determinants for the present disequilibrium in educational achievement and circumstances (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

Exclusion of Aboriginal children and youths from government schools in some states persisted until the 1950s and, reminiscent of apartheid policies, Aboriginal people were generally excluded from non-Aboriginal society. Despite Acts of Parliament mandating the establishment of “Public Schools in which the main object shall be to afford the best primary education to all children without sectarian or class distinction” and segregated high schools for boys and girls (Parliament of New South Wales, 1880, pp. 14-15), State Governments made little overt effort to educate Aboriginal children, with estimates of low numbers of Aboriginal students in government schools in the 1940s (Neville, 1947, as cited in Zubrick et al., 2005). Racial assimilation as a policy was enacted through the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, to be placed in government-run institutions and church-led missions. Some of these institutions received government funding to “use all diligence to draw to the said school, and to retain in it, as many of these native [*sic*] children as possible; and that you feed, clothe, and educate them” (Hale, 1889, p. 64). While proponents of these policies, such as Hale (1889), expounded on idealistic moral purposes, the reality of the Aboriginal children’s experience, particularly in the level and quality of schooling provided, left a lot to be desired.

Such inherently unpalatable policies of discrimination and dispossession listed above were enacted in the decades prior to the 1960s, as State Governments held sway over the rights and prospects of Aboriginal people. In that era, it was societally acceptable to envision Australia’s First Nations as

inherently inferior without potential for academic success or progressive development. Inadequate provision of schooling was therefore customary (Bateman, 1948). Limiting the access of Aboriginal children to education on parity with their non-Aboriginal peers was no longer an official stance by the 1950s, but a similarly exclusionary approach seems to have extended into the 1970s (Burridge & Chodkiewicz, 2012). While Aboriginal students became more visible as a cohort in state schools toward the latter part of last century, participation was often limited to primary schools and attendance and retention remained low or inconsistent. This situation has persisted into the present day, and educational policies intended to curb historic practices that evinced such statements as: “the children were troublesome and ran away” (Hale, 1889, p. 65), have not reversed the centuries-old combined legacy of segregation, subordination and separation. For this unique student cohort, schools have not been the humanitarian panacea that originators of the 1880 Public Instruction Act (NSW Government, 2019; Parliament NSW, 1880), preceded by the 1833 Factory Act in Britain (Parliament UK, 2020) mandating schooling for all children, particularly the poor and powerless, had intended.

Following the 1967 Referendum, mentioned above, which placed Aboriginal people and their affairs under the legislative power of the Australian Government, instead of the states, Aboriginal Education began to receive greater attention. Purposeful policies were enacted, including the Aboriginal Study Grants Scheme of 1969, now termed ABSTUDY (Department of Social Services, 2019), which assisted Aboriginal people to access tertiary education and included enabling programs for those who had not completed secondary school; closely followed by the establishment of the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs (Dow & Gardiner-Garden, 2011), arguably a more modern, politically palatable version of the role of Protector of Aborigines from an earlier century, the first department aimed solely at the issues and interests of Aboriginal people. Other programs were established in the 1970s, such as the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), which recognised the “exceptional” (Altman & Klein, 2018, p. 133) circumstances of remotely based Aboriginal people, and promoted the concept of self-determination through engagement in locally-relevant training, employment and cultural pursuits.

As a result, improved interest and participation of Aboriginal students in secondary school occurred but employment outcomes were limited to low-skilled occupations. A slew of Australian Government and state reviews focused on the academic performance, participation and retention of Aboriginal students in comparison to their non-Aboriginal peers; these include the National Aboriginal Education Committee, the House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, and the Report of the Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs, also known as the Miller Report (Dockery & Milsom, 2007; Senate Committee on Employment Workplace Relations Small Business and Education, 2000). Subsequent recommendations from inquiries and reviews sought to address endemic issues of disadvantage (Dow & Gardiner-Garden, 2011), and the

recognition that external factors influenced classroom success, especially health, gained traction. Conceptually, holistic approaches were considered necessary to address the continuing challenge of achieving educational equity. In 1988, the establishment of a national education policy was recommended by the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force (Hughes, 1988; Zubrick et al., 2005) and shortly after, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy was formed (Beresford et al., 2012; Department of Employment Education and Training, 1989), recognising Aboriginal students as the “most educationally disadvantaged group in Australia” (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989, as cited in Long et al., 1998, p. 3). This policy signified an intention to develop culturally appropriate educational policy and practice with community engagement, yet its remit notably did not extend to considering the socioeconomic and environmental factors that affect educational outcomes for Aboriginal students.

The historical context of dispossession and disempowerment that might inhibit remote communities from managing their own futures and serve as a barrier to learning engagement for students, was not included in the abovementioned Aboriginal Education Policy. Failure to consider these issues has been linked to a lack of understanding the complexity, implementation difficulties for schools, and ineffective leadership in policy implementation (Hughes, 1995; Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999). In 1998, the *Report of Aboriginal Students and the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE)* interviewed Aboriginal students completing secondary school and identified barriers to engagement that included “racism, lack of parental support, lack of available tutors, transiency, poverty and competing responsibilities” (Rigney et al., 1998, as cited in Long et al., 1998, p. 5). Problems with change-making were addressed by the MCEETYA Taskforce on Indigenous Education in 2000, which formally acknowledged deficiencies such as “a systemic lack of optimism and belief in educational success” pertaining to Aboriginal students (MCEETYA, 2000b, p. 10), pointing toward wider areas of disadvantage that affected the ability to implement and improve educational outcomes both at policy and grassroots levels.

The capacity for schools to implement government policies, plans and programs has in many cases been inadequate. Key areas of concern have not been addressed, leading to piecemeal approaches that have failed to reduce the hurdles of relative disadvantage that Aboriginal students must overcome. This is despite pinnacle ideals expressed at a national level, such as the 1999 *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century* (Education Council, 2014; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002), which represented the aspirations of Australian, State and Territory Government initiatives in the education sector. The *Adelaide Declaration*, which superseded the *Hobart Declaration* of 1989 (MCEETYA, 1999) and was itself succeeded by the *Melbourne Declaration* (ACARA, 2016; MCEETYA, 2008), held two extremely focused articulations relevant to the social justice role of schools:

- Goal 3.3 – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have equitable access to, and opportunities in, schooling so that their learning outcomes improve and, over time, match those of other students (Education Council, 2014); and,
- Goal 3.4 – all students understand and acknowledge the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to Australian society and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Education Council, 2014).

Broadly speaking, these goals espoused the need for improved school access for Aboriginal students and commitment to its worth, and of improved cultural awareness for non-Aboriginal students, such that schools could become places of change, of reconciliation and of the embodiment of awakened societal values.

Cultural awareness in schools and its further manifestation, cultural inclusiveness, were seen as dovetailing the framework of the *National statement of principles and standards for more culturally inclusive schooling in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (MCEETYA, 2000a), by deploying important skills and capabilities, including building the self-esteem and self-efficacy of Aboriginal students. Research by MCEETYA found educational success required: teachers committed to improving outcomes for Aboriginal students; and tailoring of teaching practice to reflect the needs of individual students, including cultural difference, in order to create learning environments appropriate for age, developmental stage, and cultural heritage (MCEETYA, 2000b).

Since the Australian Government's *Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples* in 2008 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008; Philpot et al., 2013), also known as the *National Apology to the Stolen Generations* (Parliament of Australia, 2020), and the establishment of the *Closing the Gap* framework by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), there has been increased dialogue between representatives of Aboriginal communities and the Australian Government. The *Closing the Gap* framework outlined seven interconnected domains for bipartisan action: child mortality, early childhood education, school attendance, reading and literacy, attainment of Year 12 or equivalent, employment and life expectancy. Considered to be crucial in the journey to empowerment and self-determination, these seven targets were reflective of the "interrelatedness of key social and economic determinants" (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018, p. 11), through which Aboriginal people may halt the perpetuity of disadvantage that has been their lot since colonisation.

However, a decade later, COAG has fallen short of meeting most of these targets, as detailed in successive annual reports, and was on track to meet only three of the seven targets prior to the expiration of four targets in 2018 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017a, 2018, 2019). COAG's Indigenous Advancement Strategy specifically

detailed an intent “to close the gap that lies between us” in sentiments echoed in the *National Apology to the Stolen Generations* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008), and yet there remains significant disparity in health, education and employment targets to close the gap in life expectancy; halve the gap in reading and literacy; close the gap in school attendance; and, halve the gap in employment (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018, pp. 9-10).

History shows that, on occasion, democratic processes provide some reassurance that injustices can be brought out into the open and possibly resolved. The *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (‘RCIADIC’) examined the terrible recurrence of insufficiently explained deaths of Aboriginal people under custodial sentences and made comprehensive recommendations (Johnston, 1998). Following this, a Parliamentary inquiry investigated the unacceptably high rate of incarceration of Aboriginal youths, a statistic that had risen sharply despite the aforementioned Royal Commission and that was reasonably considered to be a “shameful state of affairs” and “national tragedy” (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2011, pp. ix, 1). However, the emotion surrounding these two issues has yet to diminish, given the continuing evidence of inequity in the volume of custodial sentences given to indigenous youths both here and abroad (Gebhard, 2013; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2011).

Research has indicated that Whiteness, defined as an inherited system of law and principle, established in an era of colonialism, offers hegemonic advantage to those of Anglo-Saxon heritage or “White European identity” (Fylkesnes, 2018, p. 26), who knowingly or unknowingly benefit from a racial ideology that “grants privilege and allows supremacy” (Castagno, 2014, p. 7). Imbalances of power, control of resources, knowledge construction and the political process serve to perpetuate and normalise certain values and ways of being, thereby granting an “exclusive right to define both ‘truth’ and social order” (Fylkesnes, 2018, p. 26) to members of the dominant cultural group.

This dissertation is not a racial discourse. Rather, it is educational discourse, but racism and discrimination are necessary to consider as our educational system in Australia functions within the *dominant cultural perspective* or worldview, also termed “WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic)” (Markus, 2016, as cited in Klassen et al., 2018, p. 72; Markus, 2016, p. 162).

This discourse continues to evolve, including the need to “critically (re)consider” (Vass, 2018, p. 98) the role of teachers in Aboriginal Education, and so-called truisms of Aboriginal students as learners. Studies of teachers’ perceptions of their capabilities in Australia, and the USA, have revealed some uncertainty (Buchanan et al., 2013; Gallavan, 2007; Vass, 2018), including in relation to “the understanding, relationships, and expectations [they] are being invited to (re)establish” (Vass, 2018,



p. 98) with Aboriginal students. The recommendations of the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Halsey, 2018), commissioned in 2017 by the Australian Government to examine the challenges faced by country students, included strong action for improvement in the preparation and professional development of teachers in this context.

Recommendations emphasised that recognition was required of the diverse contexts in which teaching and learning occurs in Australia, and a focus on adequately preparing and supporting teachers and leaders prior to their taking up positions in regional, rural and remote areas (Halsey, 2018, p. 6). Refinement of processes for attracting and retaining experienced teachers and leaders in demanding schools was presented as an important consideration, one that would enhance achievements and opportunities in those areas. Potential for raising awareness of the “historical, economic, social, political and environmental importance” of regional, rural and remote contexts and communities in the Australian Curriculum (Halsey, 2018, p. 6), and the Australian Curriculum’s relevance to students in far-flung locations, was highlighted. A prominent defining characteristic of “a successful school” was its ability to engage all students in “rich and meaningful learning” (Halsey, 2018, p. 6) while valuing them as individuals, demonstrating respect and contributing to the community. The crucial factors for achieving this were teachers, leaders and support staff who are flexible, creative and dedicated with the capacity to bring the dry prescriptiveness of curriculum into the lifeworld of students in ways that are engaging and evocative (Halsey, 2018). This kind of productive effort needs to be valued, supported and recognised for teachers to maintain their enthusiasm and energy in these contexts.

### *2.1.3. Schooling in the Northern Territory*

In the Northern Territory, Aboriginal people comprise a higher percentage of the total population than in other states and territories. In 2017, slightly more than 40% of its student cohort identified as Aboriginal, with 16,763 enrolled in urban, regional and rural, remote and very remote schools (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2019). In 2018, Aboriginal students accounted for 39% of the NT student cohort (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2019). Issues affecting Aboriginal students thus have a greater consequence in the Northern Territory, due to their higher proportion of its population.

The attendance rate in Northern Territory schools for Aboriginal students in Years 1–10 was 66.2% in 2017 compared with 91.8% for non-Aboriginal students. Nationally, the attendance rate for Aboriginal students in major cities was 86.2%, reducing to 75.4% in remote areas, and 64.6% for very remote schools. Although attendance of Aboriginal students was lower for all senior year groups, this decrease was particularly sharp in remote and very remote areas, with a national average of

Aboriginal students in Year 10 attending only 48.6% of the school year in very remote locations (ACARA, 2019, p. 80).

The Northern Territory's *Indigenous Education Strategy 2015–2024* stipulated a target for the attendance rate of Aboriginal students attending “four or more days per week” in government schools to reach parity with non-Aboriginal students by 2024 (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2015a, p. 9). Three years into this timeframe, national attendance targets set by COAG were not likely to be met preceding their expiry in 2018, with Aboriginal students in Year 10 attending less than 50% of their school year in remote and very remote areas (ACARA, 2019). Although statistics speak broadly of this situation, the ramifications are felt personally, and the experience of individuals can be lost in the data.

Political decisions that are ostensibly unrelated to schooling yet which have a direct effect on students may impact, inadvertently or otherwise, the engagement of students in school and their sense of autonomy, particularly in future pathways of education and employment (Zipin et al., 2015). In 2007, the Australian Government and Northern Territory Government commenced an initiative titled the *Northern Territory Emergency Response*, known as ‘the Intervention’, six days after the public release of the Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, title *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: ‘Little Children are Sacred’* (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2007). The Intervention and its suite of measures was “designed to intervene in Aboriginal lives, with the overt justification of ameliorating Aboriginal disadvantage” (Morphy & Morphy, 2013, p. 182).

In spite of a critical review of the Northern Territory Intervention (AHRC, 2007) questioning the justice of overruling community input into solutions to reduce criminal behaviour, the Intervention continued, along with its effect of reinforcing negative perceptions of Aboriginal people in the wider community (Macoun, 2011). Oversight in prescribed areas by Commonwealth-appointed personnel, with logistical support from the Department of Defence and Australian Federal Police, served to implement policies that included: income management of welfare payments (e.g. linking income support and family assistance payments to school attendance for all people living on Aboriginal land), reduced service provision, compulsory acquisition of community land leases, removal of customary law or cultural practice as a mitigating factor for determining court sentencing or bail applications, the planned abolishment of CDEP, alcohol bans in prescribed areas, and compulsory health checks for Aboriginal children to identify and treat health problems and any effects of abuse (AHRC, 2007). The *Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007* (Cth) excluded the Intervention from specific Commonwealth and Territory laws, including Northern Territory laws that dealt with discrimination and property acquisition, and from Part II of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth) (AHRC, 2007), thereby contributing to a perpetuation of coercive force being applied to Aboriginal

peoples with the effect of decreasing the relative autonomy of remote communities and limiting opportunities for self-determination (ABC News, 2016; Morphy & Morphy, 2013; Northern Territory Law Society, 2007; Ross, 2007; Wild, 2007). Chris Sarra, school principal and architect of the Stronger Smarter Institute, stated: “The Intervention rolled on like a juggernaut, inflicted on Aboriginal people of the Territory. To me it had seemed a despicable approach that lacked any sense of humanity” (Sarra, 2012, p. 296). On travelling north shortly after its commencement, the researcher can recall her own shock and indignation at the official wording on signs erected along the highway at the entrance to remote communities, that effectively tarred every community member with the same tainted brush.

The Intervention was seen to undermine the dignity of Aboriginal people, diminishing “their right to self-determination” while taking potentially “a step towards apartheid” (AHRC, 2007, p. 66). That its efficacy was questioned, and the punitive aspect of its processes criticised, is important within a democratic society. The necessity for these debates and the need for Royal Commissions to nudge Federal, State and Territory Governments to enact greater justice and change for one of the most disadvantaged groups in its society, are powerful indicators that Whiteness (Fylkesnes, 2018) still persists. Framed within these debates are the schooling experiences of Aboriginal students.

#### 2.1.3.1. Aboriginal students’ experience of boarding schools

For many Aboriginal students, access to secondary education requires relocation to urban schools or interstate (Butler et al., 2019), a situation not dissimilar to non-Aboriginal students living in remote areas. Opportunities may arise through the offer of scholarships, including the Indigenous Youth Leadership Program (IYLP: <https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/programs/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander/indigenous-youth-leadership>) and Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF: <http://www.aief.com.au/>), although questions have been raised over the latter’s retrospective funding model, as success rates may be lower than reported if dropouts within the first year are tallied (AIEF, 2015; Hose et al., 2018; O’Bryan, 2018). The need for Aboriginal students to attend boarding schools instead of schools closer to home is a discussion that is fraught with emotion described by Butler et al. (2019, p. 151) as “a tension” between choosing formal schooling and transmission of cultural knowledge in community settings. This situation is not helped by the long shadow of the Stolen Generations (AIATSIS, 2018) intermingled with recurrent allusions to deficit narratives and failure because of the socioeconomic and political disadvantage inherited by Aboriginal people.

A comprehensive literature review of Aboriginal domains of wellbeing identified nine interconnected wellbeing dimensions, that covered broad aspects of the external lifeworld and interior psychosocial worlds of Aboriginal people (Butler et al., 2019). Notably, among the contributing factors for reduced wellbeing, “disconnection from family and community” (Butler et al., 2019, p. 148) could undermine

the individual's delicate balance of identity and self amid their complex navigation of Western and Aboriginal ways of being. The authors concluded that: "The wellbeing derived from the *quality* of the connections among these aspects of life was paramount" (Butler et al., 2019, p. 140, emphasis in original). Clearly, when Aboriginal students are absent from family and community, their wellbeing is diminished. On their return to their home communities following a stint at boarding school, students can continue to experience a reduced sense of belonging, an esoteric disconnection that further reduces their wellbeing. This is described as a loss of social capital and diminution of self-concept (Macdonald et al., 2018, p. 23). Hence, discussions regarding the necessary relocation of young people from remote communities to urban or regional boarding schools, a situation described as a "choice-less choice" by Mander et al. (2015, p. 28), should incorporate awareness of accompanying challenges, including a potential depletion of wellbeing. Mitigating this potentially destructive outcome of well-meaning policies forms part of the discourse on the equitable access to, and provision of, secondary education for Aboriginal students.

In a statement regarding the necessity of providing boarding school options, Noel Pearson, as Director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, concluded that the required scale, quality of teaching and specialisation for "a proper secondary education" in remote locations is "impossible with small student populations" (Pearson, 2004). In the *A Share in the Future* Review of Aboriginal Education in the Northern Territory, Wilson (2014) concluded that "the unequal struggle" to provide a secondary education in regional, rural and remote areas on par with urban schools would require the aggregation of students into larger groups that might better address "the needs of a small and thinly distributed student population" such that they would enjoy "a substantial secondary education including a breadth of options in the senior years" (p. 143). Respected Aboriginal academic, Professor Marcia Langton acknowledged the complexity of the boarding school debate in an ABC Lateline interview yet offered an insight into the nuances of options faced by Aboriginal parents and families: "The conditions are there for them to perform much better than the children who don't attend boarding schools. It's a tragedy to have to say that, it's heartbreaking, but those are the facts" (ABC Lateline, 2013, para. 7).

Ultimately, the continued pursuit of boarding school as the most viable option for Aboriginal students in remote communities is drawn from the rational conclusion that local schools are insufficient. More precisely, that the level and quality of engagement on offer has not provided secondary school-aged students with an education at parity with that of non-Aboriginal students, even those in similarly remote locations. In 2012, the Northern Territory Minister for Indigenous Advancement addressed the NT Legislative Assembly on the potential for local schools to be the solution: "With the right curricula and policies and funding, we can get properly functioning schools with proper teachers. If you get the schools right other things will gradually fall into place" (Anderson, 2012, p. 6). In

contrast, other commentators consider that success for remote schools is unlikely due to “inordinate obstacles” (O’Keefe et al., 2012, as cited in Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2016, p. 3).

While all levels of government have had an obligation and responsibility to provide access to education for every Australian young person from as far back as the 1880s (Parliament of New South Wales, 1880), the spectre of the Stolen Generations remains very present in public educational discourse, either distinctly stated, as in the aforementioned address by Anderson (2012), or in the undercurrent, as with the Garma Festival speech by William Tilmouth (2018), Chair of Children’s Ground and member of the Stolen Generation. And yet, prominent Aboriginal spokespeople have suggested the best answer may still rest with sending children away (ABC Lateline, 2013; Mundine, 2014).

In the course of reviewing current literature, it is apparent that boarding schools and Aboriginal students, while being a subject of some debate, have not been studied in any prevalent way, although researchers have investigated the wellbeing of parents and families, including those with children in boarding school (Zubrick et al., 2005). Several targeted studies have tested the assumed value and worth of the boarding school experience against the views of those who have actually experienced it (Mander, 2012; Stewart, 2015). Amongst the emerging scholarly knowledge, a “theory of change” (Guenther et al., 2020) has been proposed that recognises the contextual complexity of boarding schools; the relationship between schools and students, families and communities; and potential intended and unintended consequences. The researchers used complexity theory to explore the nonlinear and unpredictable relationships between cause and effect, and the consequences thereof (Guenther et al., 2020, p. 38) in order to develop an evaluative tool for policy and practice (Guenther et al., 2020, p. 46). Potential undesirable or unintended outcomes of boarding school include “social distress, mental ill-health, substance abuse, loss or confusion of identity, culture and human capital” (Guenther & Fogarty, 2018, para. 5), although these may not be the end-result for all boarding students.

The interrelationship of cause, effect and consequence have been articulated in two reviews: *From surviving to thriving: Educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students* (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017), and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet’s *Study Away Review* (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017b). Concerns related to the preparation of students and families, accommodation and travel funding, retention, school readiness and associated procedures for managing unacceptable behaviour, including expulsion, were expressed in the above reports, and these are closely linked to other deeply personal impacts such as loss of culture, health and wellbeing. Options for students in remote communities are limited and the demand for boarding school placements for Aboriginal students

increased by 40.5% between 2012 and 2016, according to Australian Boarding Schools Association census data (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017b, p. 15).

The sweeping *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Halsey, 2018), mentioned earlier, was commissioned in 2017 by the Australian Government as part of a commitment to improve education and future pathways for students residing in locations far distant from urban centres. The report's remit included key barriers and challenges affecting the educational outcomes of regional, rural and remote (RRR) students and the effectiveness of current modes of education delivery (Halsey, 2018, p. 86), in order to find innovative solutions to these recurring challenges. Recommendations covered: curriculum and assessment, initial teacher education, professional support for teachers and leaders, future pathways to employment, further education and training with transition support, philanthropic contributions and entrepreneurship opportunities, ICT provision and training, innovative delivery approaches, and a national focus on enhancing access, outcomes and opportunities through regional, rural and remote research, education and training (Halsey, 2018, p. 5). Nine themes or factors were identified in the review (Halsey, 2018, p. 3) as having an influence on students' achievements and the capacity to provide new opportunities in remote locations:

- Curriculum and assessment;
- Teachers and teaching;
- Leaders and leadership;
- School and community;
- Information and Communication Technology;
- Entrepreneurship and schools;
- Improving access through enrolments, clusters, distance education, boarding;
- Diversity; and,
- Transitioning beyond school.

Research shows the factor *teachers and teaching*, listed above, is of importance to success in culturally diverse classrooms and this is discussed later in this chapter. An overview of boarding school models and community impacts will now be outlined.

#### 2.1.3.2. Models of boarding

There are various models of boarding in Australia, with two main categories that are outlined in the next chapter. Briefly, the first category involves high-cost independent schools based in urban centres in which Aboriginal student placements are funded by full or partial scholarships. The second

category operates somewhat closer to home for Aboriginal students, with boarding programs in remote locations offering accommodation for students from surrounding communities. Both options were in effect championed by the Northern Territory and Australian Governments following the *A Share in the Future* review (Wilson, 2014), to address issues related to opportunities, social capital and practical reconciliation. However, besides the review submissions and recommendations, little independent evidence was provided as the basis of the Northern Territory's further commitment of significant resources to increase the proportion of students from remote locations transitioning to boarding schools. Initiatives, guided by principles that formed the backbone of the *Indigenous Education Strategy* (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2015b), were coordinated with existing funding mechanisms, including Australian Government support provided through ABSTUDY, IYLP and AIEF funding. Principles incorporated a belief in the social and economic benefits of education, respect for students and culture, community engagement and choice, resource decision-making driven by evidence-based practices, and autonomy. An underlying ethos of accountability placed alignment with Northern Territory Government policies foremost in relation to meeting the needs of Aboriginal students (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2015a, p. 5).

Approximately 700 Aboriginal students attend boarding schools in the Northern Territory and about 1000 attend boarding schools interstate (Guenther & Fogarty, 2018). In funding terms, analysis showed that as per-student funding to very remote schools in other jurisdictions increased from 2009 by a considerable measure, the Northern Territory's funding for very remote schools remained stagnant. In contrast, non-government schools increased recurrent funding per student by 30% (Guenther, 2016, para. 11, 12), although attendance was on par with government schools or slightly lower. In the *Closing the Gap Report 2019* (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019, p. 65), the Australian Government declared an investment of \$38.1 million over five years in recognition of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ABSTUDY, to improve support for school attendance and retention, and support Year 12 attainment for over 5,000 Aboriginal students and their families. The continuing need for specific funding allocations, coupled with a seemingly endless parade of reports and inquiries (Dow & Gardiner-Garden, 2011; Gardiner-Garden, 1999), has led to an erosion of trust in the capacity of governments to provide an equitable education for Aboriginal students, particularly those from remote communities, and a lack of belief that the situation can change (Allam, 2020).

An analysis of submissions to the *Educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students* inquiry (Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2016; Parliament of Australia, 2016) revealed a large body of knowledge and experience and numerous oft-cited issues, including: remote education as an issue, funding and boarding, quality, post-secondary school career pathways, and partnerships and collaboration. The analysis concluded that while individual concerns ought to be addressed, the

system required an overhaul in order to sufficiently meet the educational needs of Aboriginal students.

Qualitative research, particularly the doctoral and subsequent work by Mander (2012, 2015), has sought to articulate, and perhaps quantify, the contemporary experiences of Aboriginal boarding students in Western Australia, including their transition to boarding school and the impacts of limited schooling options on parents, families and communities. Teachers' perceptions, and students' reflections of their classroom learning environment were also explored. Family support, the friendship, humour and understanding of Aboriginal peers, and maintenance of cultural identity were factors contributing to Aboriginal students' perceptions of their experience (Mander, 2012, p. 248). Incidents of prejudice, covert racism, and teachers' lack of cultural awareness contributed to negative impacts such as "greater emotional symptoms, as well as greater levels of indicators associated with depression, anxiety and stress when compared with non-boarding students" (Mander & Lester, 2017, p. 142).

Inclusive school environments are important for the continued wellbeing of students. For these environments to be developed, "school leaders have to drive professional development in cultural competency" (Partington, 2012, as cited in Mander, 2015, p. 180) and assume a "pivotal" role in creating inclusive school cultures (Gower & Byrne, 2012, as cited in Mander, 2015, p. 180):

If boarding schools are to be places in which Aboriginal students feel safe and confident to express a sense of self and cultural identity, ... [schools must] promote school practices that positively embrace the complexity and diversity of socio-cultural realities that construct and give meaning to Aboriginal students' life-worlds ... Hence, professional development assisting staff at boarding schools to empathise with the significance of culture to Aboriginal boarding students represents a key area of need. (Mander et al., 2015, p. 34)

In the South Australian context, research by Benveniste, Guenther, et al. (2014) highlighted the need for better modes and quality of communication between schools and caregivers, indicating this may improve the experience of students and their families. Other qualitative studies have critiqued the "role of residence" and the capacity of boarding schools to achieve the vaunted outcomes of reconciliation, self-determination and the ability to "walk in two worlds" (Benveniste et al., 2015, p. 166). Doctoral research by Stewart (2015) revealed that in the Far North Queensland context, a significant number of Aboriginal students from remote communities do not complete their first year in a southern boarding school, are unable thus to complete Year 12 and disengage prematurely from formal education (Stewart, 2015, p. 3). The challenges of being separated from family, friends and community can result in a "de-enrolling event" and subsequent failure to resume schooling after "self-exclusion, parent withdrawal, exclusion or cancellation of enrolment" (Stewart, 2015, p. 3).



Intentional partnerships may be one way of addressing the issue of non-completion, with communication between remote schools and boarding schools ensuring a smooth transition, hence benefitting the student in a multitude of ways (O'Bryan, 2015, as cited in Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2016, p. 4). Studies in the Central Australian context suggested that many families view boarding as a viable option for their children, holding positive views on the potential benefits for strengthening Aboriginal students, and yet will only access this option and its benefits depending on family and community priorities and needs at the time (Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2016, p. 4). This may seem arbitrary but represents the consciously constructed decision-making process of Aboriginal families, in which a range of options for educational pursuits are considered valid, including remaining 'on country' in preference to following a prescriptive 'one size fits all' model touted by government and non-government boarding school advocates.

Research by the Cooperative Research Centre-Remote Economic Participation (Ninti One CRC-REP, 2020) has not focused specifically on boarding but provided three supporting reasons for the argument of parental choice. Firstly, though boarding school was viewed by participants as "a transition space between community, school and career" (Guenther, Disbray, et al., 2016, p. 131), the informants felt transition processes should be supportive and at an appropriate level for student success. Secondly, "relationships, structures and environments which give young people a positive experience" (Guenther, Disbray, et al., 2016, p. 131) were essential and assisted students to navigate the residential experience. Thirdly, "family influence and support for young people going to boarding" (Guenther, Disbray, et al., 2016, p. 131) was raised by informants as significant, lending weight to the suggestion that the relationship between school and family is a key factor for successful experiences.

Guenther, Milgate, et al. (2016) discussed the establishment of a boarding school in the Kimberley Region of Western Australia that represented one example of partnerships between remote communities and urban boarding schools. Few others have been documented or independently evaluated. According to Guenther, Milgate, et al. (2016), the touting of catchphrase terms such as 'best practice', 'what works', 'innovation' and 'culturally responsive' boarding (Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, 2015; Perso, 2012; What Works, 2012; Wilson, 2014) seems to indicate that the 'answer' to the challenge of providing an equitable education for remotely based Aboriginal students is known and achievable. And yet, the recurrent situation in which academic parity and retention through Year 12 and beyond for the majority of Aboriginal students is not reached indicates that these answers are either not working or not enough. Guenther, Milgate, et al. (2016) suggest that while best practice solutions portray complex problems as simple, this is not the case. Simplistic and generalised 'answers' that are unvalidated or not evaluated in measurable or visible terms will not provide the necessary solution.

The substantial work of Mander (2012, 2015); Guenther et al. (2020); Guenther, Milgate, et al. (2016); Stewart (2015); and other researchers cited in this review of current literature, provide a modicum of much-needed insight into this very specific field of education. Boarding school has not been presented, by the aforementioned researchers, as a panacea for remote communities nor is it treated as a pariah. Community leadership, capacity-building and social cohesion are positive aspects of enhanced educational outcomes in remote communities. Self-concept, self-esteem and self-identity are enriched when Aboriginal students are engaged, feel supported and have a sense of belonging in their learning environments (Partington, 2003).

Questions have been posed, potential solutions offered, and the complexity of the educational context acknowledged in the research to date. The importance of considering the interconnection and interrelatedness of policy and practice with the social and cultural needs of family and community has been reiterated in reviews and reports. However, in the researcher's opinion, certain practical knowledge is missing from the writings, such as how schools respond successfully to the consultation needs identified by Aboriginal parents and students.

It is necessary to provide aspirational pathways to enhance the ability of Aboriginal students to construct meaningful futures for themselves and their communities, in other words, to achieve self-determination. The perspectives of Aboriginal parents and the abovementioned issue of *teachers and teaching* will be discussed in the following sections.

#### 2.1.4. *Current issues in Aboriginal Education*

This section will outline the continuing challenges experienced by Aboriginal students.

The *presence* of particular system elements and prescribed system outcomes related to work, wealth, critical thinking, personal agency and control as well as democracy and belonging to the nation, frame the indicators and therefore the rhetoric of educational advantage. The *absence* of these system elements and outcomes is therefore reflected in the discourse of disadvantage. (Guenther et al., 2013, p. 107, emphasis in original)

Although Aboriginal people are twelve times more likely than non-Aboriginal people to live in remote or very remote areas (ABS, 2014b), approximately three-quarters of their total population resides in urban areas. For students, this means 60% live in major cities or inner regional areas while approximately 20% grow up in remote places (Hyde et al., 2017). The mobility of Aboriginal students, although necessary to maintain strong ties to family, culture and place, particularly for those attending school outside of their community, can contribute to inequitable educational outcomes (Prout & Hill, 2012).

Following the 2013 census, only 55% of Aboriginal students remained in school to Year 12 compared to 83% of non-Aboriginal students (ABS, 2014a). Between 2012–2014, 43% of Aboriginal people reported having attained Year 12 or equivalent, contrasted with 70% of non-Aboriginal people. Only 6% of Aboriginal people held a Bachelor’s degree or above, compared with 26% of the total non-Aboriginal population (Andersen & Walter, 2017). In 2020, although the gap in Year 12 attainment rates appeared statistically on track to be halved, between 2012-13 and 2018-19 the gap widened in all areas except in major cities (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020a, p. 60).

National efforts to increase school attendance, promote engagement and improve Year 12 attainment in areas beyond major city limits have fallen short of targets set by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) *Closing the Gap* framework (ACARA, 2019). Although *Closing the Gap* will be further discussed, other high-profile initiatives to improve school attendance and community engagement have met with mixed success. For example:

- the longitudinal study, *On Track*, recorded the post-school destinations of Victorian school leavers and while, at its conclusion, all participants were meaningfully engaged in study, work or apprenticeships, Aboriginal students did not complete Year 12 at rates comparable to their non-Aboriginal peers (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2014);
- the *Cape York Aboriginal Australian Initiative* (ACER, 2013) was evaluated for its performance but many reported improvements could not be quantified due to missing data;
- the *Stronger Smarter Institute* (Sarra, 2012) received \$16m of funding from the Australian Government and earned negative press along the way for labelling remote communities as the place to “tuck away your white trash” teachers (Sarra, 2012, p. 304); and,
- five *Aboriginal Language and Culture Nests* in New South Wales (Halsey, 2018) were established with a base school, tutors to promote Aboriginal languages in surrounding communities and provision of employment pathways.

While positive connections between schools and communities occurred in these projects, and attendance and other measures of achievement somewhat improved, as with most attempts to decrease the cycle of disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal students, the bigger picture requires greater degrees of success.

The *Melbourne Declaration* followed the *Adelaide* and *Hobart Declarations* (Education Council, 2014; Hughes & Hughes, 2012, p. 22) on setting broad-brush academic goals for Australian students, with specific equity and educational targets set for Aboriginal students. These initiatives still reflected the inherent systemic inequity and discrimination in education and the unwillingness of successive Australian Governments to find workable, lasting solutions to complex problems. In 2008, the

Australian Government under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd reduced the Aboriginal Education target “from ‘fix the problem in four years’ to ‘fix half the problem in 10 years’” (Hughes & Hughes, 2012, p. 22).

As the cultural composition of Australian classrooms changed, there remained a persistent cycle of disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal students to long-lasting effect. Data analysis of key characteristics influencing labour force participation and unemployment rates for Aboriginal people concluded that education, in particular completion of Year 12 or higher qualifications, had an effect on participation in the workforce (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision [SCRGSP], 2014). A number of social, health and educational determinants influence school attendance by Aboriginal students (Grindlay, 2017) and this has a long-term effect on academic performance and future employment prospects. Remoteness was of significance with Aboriginal people in remote areas more likely to be unemployed (SCRGSP, 2014). Regardless of location, poor access to education made “the greatest contribution to the gap in labour market outcomes” (ABS, 2014b, p. 12) between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The statistics of academic achievements of many Aboriginal students are a product of over two centuries of inequality in Aboriginal education (Ministerial Council for Education Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, 2010; Perso, 2012).

Research demonstrates that the teacher-student relationship has an important bearing on student academic success. The cultural competence of teachers, or lack thereof, directly impacts the learning environment and is influential in students’ future academic performance (Gower, 2012, p. 229). More particularly, the “centrality” of the teacher-student relationship is of significance in assisting students to feel a “sense of connection and belonging with school” (Gower, 2012, p. 161). Aboriginal students in boarding schools valued teachers more highly who were “perceived as interested in building positive, genuine, and reciprocal relationships” (Gower, 2012, p. 162).

The *A Share in the Future* review recommended greater consistency of cultural training for teachers, acknowledging that a key factor in increasing Aboriginal students’ wellbeing is recognition of their “background, experience, language and culture” (Wilson, 2014, p. 179). The learning engagement of Aboriginal students improves when teachers incorporate cultural references into the curriculum and when schools take a proactive approach to involving parents and community (Armstrong et al., 2012; Burridge et al., 2012). However, there is difficulty in proving the learning effect between what teachers say and do in the classroom and the lifelong success of students, or that which contributes towards wellbeing when viewed from a “whole-of-life perspective” (Day et al., 2016, p. 376), due to many other compounding factors.

The continuing disparity between academic achievements of Aboriginal students and their non-Aboriginal peers has led to government reviews focused on attendance and achievement in rural, regional and remote schools (e.g., Grindlay, 2017; Halsey, 2018; Wilson, 2014). While governments, schools and communities may stipulate what needs to be done and which targets should be met, effective strategies seem few and far between in a bald statistical sense. In 2017, 9.8 percentage points separated the average attendance rates of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (ACARA, 2019). When the numbers appear seemingly immovable, leading to “intractable” academic inequality (Banks, 2016, p. 93), it is understandably difficult to know where solutions may lie.

Media attention on the failure of respective governments to meet Closing the Gap targets (Buckskin, 2018; Conifer & Higgins, 2019; Hogarth, 2019) can, in effect, pull focus from significant efforts made by parents and communities to ensure Aboriginal students attend school and gain an education. For some Aboriginal students, particularly those who are the first in their families to complete Year 12, meeting academic milestones can be a difficult and daunting enterprise. Many obstacles stand in the way, for example, health (McCalman et al., 2020), harsh weather conditions (Grindlay, 2017), access to services, financial burdens, and feelings of isolation (Hose et al., 2018).

#### 2.1.4.1. Barriers to learning for Aboriginal students

Factors affecting the learning experience of Aboriginal students are known as health, social and educational determinants (Armstrong et al., 2012). The relationship between cultural competency and health outcomes has been investigated (Bainbridge et al., 2015) in health settings. Health issues can have a major effect on education accessibility. Studies, notably the *Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey* (WA ACHS), have examined the health of Aboriginal young people and identified cycles of disadvantage and factors contributing to the perpetuation of these cycles (Zubrick et al., 2005). Infections, limited community resources, and historical experience of trauma serve to contribute towards “the gravity and breadth of the physical and mental health morbidities” for Aboriginal people and fundamental change is required in order to produce health advantages and increased wellbeing (Blair et al., 2005, p. 435). An overview of health in remote communities (Blair et al., 2005, p. 434) noted disparities in perceived support provided by parents and schools that, when combined with low expectations and limited future pathways to employment, were influential on Aboriginal students’ attitudes to school and learning. Cause, effect and consequence resulted in poor behaviour, reduced academic performance and in tragically increasing numbers, loss of hope and increased suicides (Zubrick et al., 2005).

The longitudinal study *On Track* (ACER, 2014) found that although Victorian school leavers were meaningfully engaged in study, work or apprenticeships, Aboriginal students were not completing Year 12 at rates comparable to their non-Aboriginal peers (ACER, 2014, p. 7). Issues that can arise in

the classroom can affect the learning that occurs, such as health and wellbeing aspects, culturally different ways of learning and being, and in boarding schools, additional factors may impact students, including homesickness, community responsibilities and obligations to cultural responsibilities.

Reaching targets for school attendance and retention have so far proved elusive. This is despite initiatives to improve Aboriginal students' access to and engagement with secondary schooling and employment pathways (ACARA, 2012, pp. 27-28) such as data tracking of Aboriginal student enrolments and retention in school (ABS, 2020), and statistical reporting against government benchmarks (ACARA, 2019). Gaps in Year 12 completion rates and subsequent engagement in employment and higher education have been difficult to nudge closed, although positive progress has been made in Year 12 attainment (Conifer & Higgins, 2019). A study of quality of life indicators for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students by Dillon et al. (2020) collected data from 171 primary schools in New South Wales for students in Years 4-6. Data indicated that while both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students showed similarities in how community and teacher support related to their wellbeing, differences were evident in the way in which family support related to wellbeing. Family support was correlated positively with the wellbeing of Aboriginal students, not so for non-Aboriginal students:

This finding, as well as past research, suggests that enabling Aboriginal families to be supportive in their children's education can assist not only in promoting wellbeing, but also academic outcomes, thereby enriching the whole school experience for Aboriginal children. (Dillon et al., 2020, p. 10)

A systematic review of the impact of racism on Aboriginal students' education (Burgess et al., 2019; The Educator, 2018) was conducted by thirteen academics with over 10,000 Australian studies analysed. Findings revealed that racism affected many areas of life and learning, with issues including literacy, numeracy, school leadership, remote education and school-community partnerships (Guenther et al., 2019). In a separate study, Dr Kevin Lowe's review on factors affecting the development of partnerships between schools and Aboriginal communities found that parents sought collaborative and transformative relationships that would be of benefit to their children's educational opportunities (Harrison et al., 2019; Lowe et al., 2019; The Educator, 2018). The construction of "two-way relationships" required trust and respect, leading to increased teacher effectiveness: "Teachers' beliefs determined their success in the classroom. Teachers often had strong preconceptions about Aboriginal kids and communities even if they had little or no experience in these communities" (The Educator, 2018, para. 14). Teachers' development of skills for cross-cultural communication and teaching in culturally diverse classrooms will be discussed later in this chapter. Constructing a positive 'two way' dialogue between school and family is an important aspect for the

relationship between education and community aspirations, arguably never more so than in a boarding school context.

### 2.1.5. *Aboriginal parents' perspectives*

In the recent *Closing the Gap Report 2019* (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019), only two targets were on track, with positive progress in halving the gap in early childhood education enrolments and Year 12 attainment or equivalent. The *Remote School Attendance Strategy* (RSAS) will be broadened to work with all governments and communities to focus on keeping students in school (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019, p. 65). This is deemed necessary as Aboriginal students have lower school attendance rates than their non-Aboriginal peers, at around 82% compared with approximately 93% respectively (p. 10). However, in very remote areas, Aboriginal student attendance rests at 63%. Between 2014 and 2018, the attendance rate in the Northern Territory declined by 5% (p. 70), with 55% of Aboriginal students attending school for 90% of the time compared to very remote areas in which only 21% attended consistently. The Northern Territory was on track to meet one target, that of halving the gap in Year 9 numeracy, and recorded the lowest proportion of students at or above the national minimum standards (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019, p. 80).

In the Australian Capital Territory, an extensive, strategic literature review by Fox and Olsen (2014) found that parental engagement was a stronger predictor of children's success in school than the family's socioeconomic status. When parents were actively involved in the school community, students were more likely to do well at school, graduate from school and commence higher education. Peer-reviewed literature found that the involvement of parents and caregivers in the school process conveyed to children their support and the value placed on education (Fox & Olsen, 2014, p. 16), thus family-school engagement was an important factor in student engagement. Further, professional development of teachers was found to improve parental engagement and outcomes for Aboriginal students.

In New South Wales, the *Researching Parent Engagement* study conducted focus groups with 31 parents and caregivers and 39 teachers from urban, rural and remote locations to investigate barriers to parental engagement (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth [ARACY], 2020). The research found that the cultural disconnect between parents and teachers in schools with high numbers of Aboriginal student enrolments represented a significant barrier. Teachers' lack of skills and confidence in cross-cultural communication and ability to understand Aboriginal perspectives on learning were preventing parents from feeling included and being involved in the school.

Families, particularly those in lower socioeconomic demographics, can face barriers to their engagement in schools, including instability, family violence, parental illiteracy and time pressures

where parents are working or caring for young children. The *Researching Parent Engagement* study found no significant difference in the way Aboriginal parents and families viewed children's education compared with non-Aboriginal parents and families. There were, however, differences in perspective (ARACY, 2020). The study's findings found that parents focused on strengths and resilience, on seeing opportunities, whereas teachers were perceived to focus on obstacles.

Mander (2015) investigated Aboriginal parents' perspectives of taking up the boarding school option for their children and the subsequent effects of having done so on their children's relationships with family, community, culture and tradition and ultimately, self-concept and identity. Mander (2015) stated: "all participants spoke about the heavy emotional toll that sending a child away to boarding school placed on them as parents (for example feelings of guilt, stress, sadness)" (p. 181). For some participants, this toll did not diminish for many years (p. 176), which indicates the potential lasting effects of parental choice related to this schooling option.

Aboriginal people have historically been expected to integrate with Western society and meet White expectations for academic performance within a "colonizer/colonized [*sic*]" hierarchy (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003, p. 131). Addressing Parliament in 2019, in reference to the disappointing progress in 'closing the gap', Opposition Leader Bill Shorten said, "We should today acknowledge that it's not just the gap in ... educational results or employment opportunities, but the gap between words and actions. ... If this Parliament cannot admit that racism still exists in 2019, then we're just wasting the time of our First Australians today" (Conifer & Higgins, 2019, para. 15, 17). Ongoing issues with racism in schools despite the introduction of standards for cultural responsiveness co-exist uneasily with the "invisibility" of Aboriginal parents (Chenhall et al., 2011) and the low ratio of Aboriginal teachers in schools (Buckskin, 2018). In 2004, 15% of teachers in Northern Territory schools were Aboriginal teachers, with an approximate equivalence of Aboriginal students enrolled in initial teacher education (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2007, p. 39).

Doctoral research on the transition experience of Aboriginal students to boarding school in Western Australia by Mander (2015) highlighted the need for schools to engage parents and families in a constructive and meaningful way. Closer interaction between boarding schools and communities reduced the "emotional dissonance" (Mander, 2015, p. 179) experienced by parents, including in the initial decision-making processes and later, supporting the retention of students in the unfamiliar setting. Implications for effective transitions included: promoting early awareness, engagement and communication; building effective partnerships with parents and communities; supporting parental agency; and prioritising an inclusive school environment (Mander, 2015, pp. 179-181).



Given the inconsistent progress in Aboriginal Education, it is understandable that a way forward for governments, schools and families in practical terms is unclear. Alison Anderson, the Northern Territory Minister for Indigenous Advancement, stated in her address to the NT Legislative Assembly in 2012: “Many people who have been to Indigenous schools in the past generation are so poorly educated they have never had a real job. In employment terms, they are the lost generation. Our schools stole their futures from them. All we can do now is fix the problem for the next generation” (Anderson, 2012, p. 5). Despite acknowledging the “huge challenge” (p. 5), Anderson was of the opinion that educational and economic success relied on the engagement and active participation of Aboriginal people, and the abandonment of their formerly passive role in the process.

Research has found a significant relationship between sources of support and wellbeing variables, indicating that family support is an important contributing factor for wellbeing in Aboriginal students. Dillon et al. (2020, p. 9), citing the work of Bempechat and Shernoff (2012), indicated that learning and wellbeing were “inextricably linked” and therefore, in combination with their own findings, family support was seen to be “robustly associated with wellbeing” (Dillon et al., 2020, p. 9) and interventions should focus on better equipping families to provide this support. In this way, positive educational outcomes may eventuate (Dillon et al., 2020; Dockett et al., 2006) .

The “invisibility” of Aboriginal parents in the school community is not necessarily problematic, as the case study of three schools in the Northern Territory by Chenhall et al. (2011) found. Interviews and focus groups with 48 parents and caregivers, 26 teachers, 9 policy officers and other school staff sought to define the importance, appearance and achievement of parent-school engagement. The study found that parents who were most visible may be present for concerns other than academic, whereas those who were least visible may be highly supportive, through their absence, of the school’s actions (Chenhall et al., 2011, p. 9). Findings revealed a “dissonance” (p. 9) between policy expectations and the stereotype of disinterest inherent in the parental absence at schools, and the actual perspectives of Aboriginal participants, who invariably valued education but could not position the school above family and community priorities, instead trusting schools and teachers to “do the job” (Chenhall et al., 2011, p. 55).

Pedagogical practices can be adopted holistically by schools, by establishing school-wide culturally sensitive policies and procedures, developing cultural competence in teachers through professional development and forging genuinely collaborative relationships with parents and community. When successful, schools are considered to be culturally responsive, meeting performance indicators and standards in the *Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework* (WA Department of Education, 2015). However, the school-community partnership is not necessarily smooth sailing (Gower et al., 2020). Parents, caregivers and families from cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds that differ from those of the dominant culture have been shown to be at “significant disadvantage” in their

relationship with schools compared to those with backgrounds similar to the perceived social ‘norm’ (Saltmarsh et al., 2019, p. 23).

#### 2.1.5.1. Multicultural classrooms

Australia’s classrooms today are not what they once were. Whereas teachers in earlier times might have reasonably assumed that they possessed largely similar beliefs, values and cultural backgrounds as that of their students, due to their shared homogenous “White” heritage (Fylkesnes, 2018), it is now impossible to hold this assumption (Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010). Modern classrooms reveal a changed face, a physiognomy expressive of diverse cultural heritages. Internationally, researchers have voiced concern with the rapidity of cultural and socioeconomic change across the Western world as words, the very names of things which in past times peppered the English language and its literature, are lost (Balmford et al., 2002). As young people are less connected with nature, even dictionaries are deleting familiar words due to poor usage, thus reducing access to what was once considered common parlance (Macfarlane, 2017; Walsh, 2017). The assumption that teachers and students share the same knowledge, values and vocabulary can no longer – to paraphrase the inimitable Jane Austen – be a truth universally acknowledged.

Leaving aside, momentarily and respectfully, Australia’s original inhabitants, the changing mien of classrooms was a direct result of amendments to government policies on immigration and discrimination, which experienced a major shift as the volume of European immigrants increased from 1946 and Asian immigration rose following the renunciation of the White Australia policy in 1973 (Forrest et al., 2017; National Museum of Australia, 2019). Initiatives to encourage temporary skilled workers contributed to further change in population demographics. Whereas in 1947, almost ninety-percent of immigrants were European-born, comprising 10% of Australia’s total population, by 2016 these figures had risen until immigrants provided almost one-third of the total population with half born outside Europe (Wilson & Raymer, 2017). Consequently, the “relatively homogeneous” (Rowan et al., 2017, p. 87) cohort of teachers, mostly female, White and middle-class (Winchell, 2013, p. 19) could no longer assume a shared knowledge or lifeworld with their students.

Managing the increased level of cultural diversity in classrooms represented a difficult challenge for teachers, not only in Australia but globally, where the language, literacy and numeracy needs of students outpaced many teachers’ sense of preparedness (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2015; Rowan et al., 2017). For example, Shepparton in Victoria experienced a loss of local families between 2008 and 2015, causing socioeconomic disadvantage to become entrenched. Coupled with immigration dynamics, this altered the composition of cultural diversity in three of its four public schools. By 2017, fifty-percent of McGuire College’s student

cohort possessed language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE), representing a seventeen-percent increase in less than ten years (McGowan, 2018).

As increased classroom diversity presented new challenges for teachers, the situation did not necessarily equate to academic disadvantage for students. International assessments for problem-solving capabilities of students demonstrated those from migrant families consistently outperformed non-migrant Australians, and showed increased levels of personal growth over time (Sonnemann, 2018). Suggested reasons included pressure exerted by migrant parents, ambitious for their children to succeed, or the enhanced cognitive benefits acquired in the process of learning an additional language (Sonnemann, 2018, p. 3; Vince, 2016). In contrast, socioeconomic status was a greater indicator of academic performance than migration history. Disadvantaged students struggled to gain traction in one study, falling behind their advantaged peers in an accumulative manner with the academic gap increasing from ten months at Year 3 to over two years by Year 9 (Goss & Sonnemann, 2016). Disadvantaged students include those of Aboriginal heritage.

Among other things, this requires programs that recognize and value the diversity of the teacher education student cohort, and which position this diversity as a strength, and not a limitation, of the future teaching profession. This requires teacher educators to also recognize that the ways in which programs are designed and delivered needs to provide support to students who are under-represented in the teaching workforce. This includes paying careful attention to strategies in place to generate sense of belonging amongst students from groups whose underrepresentation can be linked to cultural background, first language or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity. (Rowan et al., 2017, p. 85)

As education is a key determinant of future prospects, it is imperative for Aboriginal students to access equitable educational opportunities, ideally in culturally responsive schools with culturally competent teachers. These concepts are defined, and indicators of cultural competence in the classroom and measures of teacher effectiveness are addressed, in the next section.

## **2.2. Teaching in a culturally diverse context**

This section examines contemporary research associated with teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. Cultural responsiveness in schools and indicators of cultural competence in teachers are described and relevant concepts defined, including cultural difference and causal attribution. Teacher preparedness is addressed with reference to initial teacher education, mentoring of early career teachers and teachers' perceptions of their ability to teach culturally diverse students. Current issues in the profession are examined, such as stress, burnout and compassion fatigue, teacher attrition and

retention and contextually relevant factors, including teaching English as an additional dialect and teaching adolescents.

### 2.2.1. Teacher preparedness

The IRRRRE Report (Halsey, 2018), discussed earlier, identified *teachers and teaching* as one of nine key factors that had have an influence on students' achievements and also, the capacity to provide new opportunities for regional, rural and remote communities. Issues and initiatives, government policy and practice, and key concepts related to teachers and teaching will now be discussed.

Within the IRRRRE Report, a range of supportive and protective practices that boarding schools can implement were clarified as being of particular note for Aboriginal students:

For those who must leave their communities to board, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, strategies were advocated such as literacy and numeracy support, Skype facilities, a buddy system, providing accommodation and/or a travel allowance for visiting parents and cultural language recognition and transition support to assist with the retention and improved educational outcomes of boarding students. (Halsey, 2018, p. 73)

Notwithstanding all efforts to attract and retain “the best teachers” in regional, rural and remote schools, government initiatives have not met with the necessary success and putting exceptional teachers in front of rural and remote students remains a looming and persistent challenge on the “education agenda” (Halsey, 2018, p. 17).

#### 2.2.1.1. Initial teacher education

In the context of Aboriginal Education, the importance of positive, respectful and trusting teacher-student relationships is evident in the literature (Llewellyn et al., 2018; Louth et al., 2019; Webb & Williams, 2018). Teachers are more likely to form meaningful and engaging relationships with Aboriginal students when they are cognisant of the influence of *culture* and *connection to culture* in the classroom, including but not limited to: the positive correlation between student wellbeing and family and community support for education (Dillon et al., 2020); the important notions of modesty, relationship and kinship responsibilities, time management and approaches to problem solving (Perso, 2012); the essential interwoven nature of Aboriginal languages and spirituality, place, law and country (Disbray et al., 2020; King, 2011); and, the necessity for safe and secure relationships to enable students to willingly speak about cultural, social and emotional issues (Franck et al., 2020). This leads toward a consideration of teacher preparedness after graduation, when they are first facing the operational and pedagogical challenges of a classroom.

Preservice teachers, during initial teacher education, are often exposed to opportunities that may cultivate cross-cultural communication skills, perhaps through professional experience placements in remote locations in Queensland (Young et al., 2018), provision of school-based literacy intervention programs in the Northern Territory (Naidoo, 2012), and preservice teacher placement programs in international settings (Jin et al., 2016). Service-learning, where preservice teachers mentor Aboriginal students as part of their initial teacher education, can improve measures of self-efficacy and increase intercultural communication skills (Cain, 2014).

However, questions have been raised concerning the classroom readiness of graduate teachers (Jin et al., 2016) and sufficiency of preparation, particularly in secondary school induction programs and professional development (Rowan et al., 2017). The researcher's cursory investigation of a selection of preservice education undergraduate degrees in Australian universities identified that the amount of coursework devoted to Aboriginal Knowledges, cultures and/or histories is 4.16% of the course duration at worst and 18.75% at best, the latter occurring when a student chooses to study an Aboriginal perspective in a major specialisation set of units. From this cursory analysis, it is possible that the majority of initial teacher education students are likely to only study one unit of Aboriginal perspectives in their degree at worst, or annually at best.

An appropriate university to examine in this study is Charles Darwin University located in the Northern Territory capital city. Three undergraduate education degrees were analysed in January 2020: the Bachelor of Education, covering the teaching levels of Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary. All three degrees included the ten-credit unit EST203 Teaching Indigenous Learners in their list of Core Units (<http://www.cdu.edu.au/>). Two of the degrees then offered further study in one of either Languages Other Than English (LOTE); pedagogies (B.Ed Primary); Yolngu languages (B.Ed Primary, B.Ed Secondary); Linguistic studies (B.Ed Primary, B.Ed Secondary); or Indigenous Knowledges (B.Ed Secondary).

Similarly, at the University of Sydney (<https://www.sydney.edu.au>), the undergraduate Education degrees across Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary only offered a maximum of one major unit (12 credit points) or a minimum of one minor unit (65 credit points), the latter focus available to be studied at each year level, if preferred by the student. Even studying this many units in the degree would only gain the student a 9.37% focus on Aboriginal Knowledges, histories and cultures. A third university was analysed, Macquarie University (<https://www.mq.edu.au>), and this also demonstrated a minimal approach to providing Aboriginal Knowledges to their students. In the Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Education), the undergraduate student could study two units, one on Indigenous Education and the other on the Practice of Teaching: Cultures, which touched on the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures alongside Asian culture, as prescribed by

the Australian Curriculum. The Bachelor of Arts/Primary Education only had one of these units available, the ten-credit point unit on Indigenous Education.

In Western Australia, Edith Cowan University's Bachelor of Education (Secondary) will offer, in 2021, a fifteen-credit unit EDF3203 Aboriginal Contexts in Secondary Education as one of ten Core Units. Thus, initial teacher education students in Australia are generally experiencing only one unit of familiarisation with Aboriginal Knowledges, which is not extensive in the face of the Australian Curriculum requirement to incorporate "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures" content in every subject, at every year level (Australian Curriculum, 2020a) with an assumed relevance to the learning content and not as a 'bolt-on' afterthought.

Interest in improving initial teacher education (Mayer, 2014; McArdle, 2010) and providing better support for graduate teachers (Buchanan et al., 2013; Koenig, 2014; McArdle, 2010) has focused also on policy approaches to accreditation. To that end, Accreditation Standards and Procedures have been developed for initial teacher education programs in Australia that seek to "give confidence in the readiness of graduates" (AITSL, 2018, p. 8).

A study of early career teachers' self-assessed levels of preparedness for teaching diverse learners reflected the difficulty inherent in providing preservice teachers with the skills and self-efficacy to support diverse learners with confidence (Rowan et al., 2017). Respondents, who would in future enter the "relatively homogenous teaching population" of Australia's schools, reported "feeling *less* prepared" (Rowan et al., 2017, p. 87, emphasis in original) to provide students of diverse cultural, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds, including Aboriginal students, and those with a range of abilities or disabilities, with appropriate support. The study indicated that early career teachers believed themselves to be unprepared for the potential rigours of a multicultural classroom, despite inclusive education being part of initial teacher education, and knowledge of diverse students mandated in professional teaching standards and the Australian Curriculum, which includes Intercultural Understanding. This indicates an issue with initial teacher education content, and the classroom preparedness of preservice and early career teachers in navigating the so-called 'third space' of the theory-practice gap (Forgasz et al., 2018). One of the many suggestions for improving exposure of preservice teachers to practical skills that are necessary for teaching in classrooms of cultural diversity is placements in remote locations during initial teacher training (Young et al., 2018).

#### 2.2.1.2. Professional teaching standards and accreditation

Teachers' professional practice is termed pedagogy, defined poetically as "the art of teaching" (Harslett et al., 2000). Good teaching is student-centred or learner-centred (McArdle, 2010; Perso & Hayward, 2015), and good teachers adopt a culturally responsive approach, differentiate resources and apply a modified curriculum (Harslett et al., 2000). Pedagogical practice may appear different for

individual teachers but holds respect and equity at its core, enabling diverse students to learn in ways that meet their needs (Du Plessis, 2019). Knowing students and how they learn is the foremost standard guiding teacher practice (AITSL, 2020a).

Since the McKinsey Report (McKinsey & Company, 2007) used the subsequently widely quoted idiom, “The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.” (p.19), high quality teaching has been adopted as an underlying principle in the development of top performing educational systems. (Call, 2018, p. 94)

Quality teaching as an ‘underlying principle’ is both aspirational and achievable and yet, there is no single definition for *quality teaching*, that is, the professional capability of teachers, nor of *teacher quality*, that is, the personal performance of individual teachers (Churchward & Willis, 2019). While effectiveness has been linked to quality teaching (Connors & McMorow, 2015), “schools are complex organisations” (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999, p. 47) and a multiplicity of factors can obscure the learning effect of teachers such that categorically quantifying their personal performance and effectiveness remains elusive (Rowan et al., 2017) or is devolved to test scores and further complicated by contradictory findings in studies on quality teaching and quality teachers (Graham et al., 2020; Mockler, 2013). However, the conceptualisation of quality in relation to the axiological (values) and epistemological (knowledge) perspectives of the profession, in addition to systemic and pedagogical aspects, has been articulated in educational literature (Bahr & Mellor, 2016; Churchward & Willis, 2019; Darling-Hammond, Campbell, et al., 2017a).

For the purposes of this study, *quality teaching* is defined by the professional teaching standards relevant to the context (i.e., a northern Australian boarding school) and the presence at the research site of such policies and processes as those adopted by high-performing school systems in Australian and international jurisdictions (Darling-Hammond, Campbell, et al., 2017b) that are recognised as contributing toward quality teaching and the development of teacher quality. These include: systemic acknowledgement that teacher professional learning is continual, developmental and essential for school improvement; professional learning is collaborative and contextual, and teachers are allocated time specifically to work with and learn from colleagues; and, appropriate research methods for preparing and evaluating programs are known and understood by teachers, who are capable of drawing conclusions based on evidence (Darling-Hammond, Campbell, et al., 2017b; Mockler, 2013).

*Quality teachers*, in addition to possessing characteristics that are outlined later in this chapter, participate in “continuous professional learning” (Darling-Hammond, Campbell, et al., 2017b, p. 107), acknowledge the contribution that colleagues make to their teaching effectiveness (p. 112) and provide constructive feedback and support during teacher evaluation (p. 105). Quality teachers adopt a collegial approach, have confidence in their “judgement and agency” and exhibit “a strong sense of

purpose” (Mockler, 2013, p. 45). In Australia, the trajectory of a teacher’s professional learning and pedagogical practice is informed by and mapped against the national teaching standards framework.

The *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2015, 2020a) provides a framework against which to measure a teacher’s performance. Exemplary pedagogical practice is articulated and described for every stage in a teacher’s professional development during their career, from preservice and graduate teachers to highly accomplished or lead teachers (NSW Department of Education, 2016; NSW Education Standards Authority, 2018, 2019; Teacher Registration Board of the Northern Territory, 2011, 2019). Teacher accreditation bodies in each state and territory assess the achievements of individual teachers against seven domains within these standards (TRB NT: <https://www.trb.nt.gov.au/>). These Standards represent the official definition of quality teaching practice, specifically what a teacher should do and know, and serves as an organising structure, implemented by State and Territory Governments, that defines the “agreed foundational elements and dimensions of effective teaching” (MCEETYA, 2003, p. 2). This provides an articulation of agreed acceptable levels of professional teacher practice which may be in evidence in schools, and forms part of the criteria for participant selection in this study.

#### 2.2.1.3. Increasing the cultural capabilities of teachers

*Multicultural education* describes a school environment where diverse microcultural groups of students are treated with respect and have equitable access to learning (Banks, 2016). Microcultural groups include students with disabilities, giftedness, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual identity and so forth, and students would readily identify with multiple microcultures. Therefore, multicultural education in its generic form aims to be inclusive and equitable for all students. And yet, those groups who are most underprivileged benefit more from strategies and processes specifically tailored to their unique needs and requirements (Banks, 2016).

Critical multiculturalism, also described as “*transformative* multicultural education” (Banks, 2016, p. 80, emphasis in original) responds to the deeper, more complex needs of individual microcultural groups, such as an ‘ethnic group’, whose members share the same ancestral history, cultures and traditions. Aboriginal students belong to a ‘cultural ethnic group’, usually involuntarily, having identified with their culture from birth and being well-socialised in its values, beliefs, kinship laws and expectations. Other ethnic groups may be economic, political or holistic, the defining feature being one of shared interests and “sense of peoplehood” (Banks, 2016, p. 81).

Teachers most suited to assist students from diverse cultural ethnic groups are those who confidently interact with people of different cultures to their own. While there is no prescriptive list of characteristics or skills to define who may perform best in a multicultural classroom, the appropriate place to begin is to choose teachers who adopt a certain humility and demonstrate a willingness to



share with and to learn from their students, who are at peace with discomfort and the dichotomy of interacting with the known and unknown. Winchell (2013) conducted an ethnographic study of the concepts of culture and identity in the context of a teacher education program in Boston, USA, and concluded that “White teacher candidates need to be exposed to and involved with educational research as a transformational praxis” (Winchell, 2013, p. 273).

In an educational context, culturally competent teachers have “the capacity or ability to understand, interact and communicate effectively, and with sensitivity” (Perso & Hayward, 2015, p. 1) with diverse students. More than just cross-cultural functioning, where one is immersed and engaged with a culture, cultural competence demands effectiveness where actions must be undertaken to achieve a desired purpose. In examining ways to improve Aboriginal health services, the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse defined cultural competency as “a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together [to enable] professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations” (Cross et al., 1989, as cited in Bainbridge et al., 2015, p. 6; Cross et al., 1989). In educational contexts, school policies and teachers’ skills and attitudes must work coherently toward outcomes.

Teacher *self-efficacy*, the ability to produce a desired or intended result, is an important factor in classroom effectiveness. An apt definition in school settings is: “the teacher’s belief in his or her capability to organize [*sic*] and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context” (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998, p. 233). Teacher efficacy is developed from “lifelong experiences resulting in teacher beliefs and perceptions affecting how teachers see themselves individually and collectively” (Gallavan, 2007, p. 7). Research has shown that “teachers with a strong sense of efficacy are more persistent and resilient when things do not go smoothly, tend to set attainable goals for students, are less afraid of student conflict, and are more likely to take greater intellectual and interpersonal risks in the classroom” (Callaway, 2017, pp. 2-3). In a study by Gallavan (2007), a survey of twelve statements was constructed and administered near the end of semester to 65 early career teachers in Arkansas, who were enrolled in a post-graduate multicultural education course. As a result, seven changes were recommended:

- all education courses should commit to a set of cultural diversity proficiencies;
- all practicums should adhere to the same set of cultural diversity proficiencies with mentors who model genuine cultural competence;
- all teacher candidates should complete a course dedicated exclusively to valuing cultural diversity;
- all early career teachers should participate in an induction program that provides frequent opportunities to talk with and observe experienced teachers;

- all early career teachers to be assigned a mentor external to their peers;
- all classroom teachers will receive professional development of mentoring; and,
- all classroom mentor teachers will be provided school time, frequent opportunities, and multiple resources to develop cultural competence while reducing their cognitive dissonance and resistance to diversity, and improving efficacy and mentoring (Gallavan, 2007, p. 17).

The need for developing a specific pedagogy for multicultural classrooms has been raised in international settings (Brace, 2011; Cousik, 2015; Moeller & Nugent, 2014), and strategies to develop teachers' cultural competence examined, including possible correlative relationships between their level of cultural competence and improvements in students' academic performance (Rubie-Davies & Peterson, 2016). Australian researchers surveyed the cultural awareness of teacher education students and measured changes in beliefs about potential factors affecting their teaching in multicultural classrooms (Kilgour, 2013). Following mandated multicultural and indigenous studies, preservice teachers were more likely to consider race, culture, equity and ethnocentrism as factors that may impact their work with diverse students. In New South Wales, a three-year study of action learning in schools found positive benefits to student engagement when teachers increased cultural content in their curriculum and created authentic partnerships with Aboriginal communities (Burridge et al., 2012).

The capacity of initial teacher education to equip preservice teachers with sufficient capabilities has been questioned. Preservice teachers' capacity to make appropriate connections between learning goals, teaching and assessment of outcomes has been called into question in a study by Cavanagh et al. (2019) that found "none of the participants were capable of setting clear, measurable goals, tying these to effective instruction, and then assessing the impact on learning", a situation the authors described as "troubling", particularly when preservice teachers on practicum consistently made connections about learning and assessment that were "disturbingly naïve, even for novices" (p. 79). Effectiveness as a teacher necessarily incorporates the ability to teach diverse students. The key characteristics of teachers identified as effective in teaching Aboriginal students were outlined in the *Quality Schools for Aboriginal Students Project* (Harslett et al., 2000). Cultural competence and related concepts essential for effectiveness in classrooms of cultural difference are examined in the next section.

### 2.2.2. *Cultural competence continuum*

Sensations of discomfort are to be expected when cultures merge or interact. Uncomfortable experiences may occur between individuals of different cultures due to misunderstanding, ignorance or incorrect assumptions. The most extreme form of discomfort is culture shock, when an individual

is consumed by feelings of mistrust for the people and culture with whom they are interacting, usually as a result of mistaken impressions or failed expectations (Barrett, 2019). It has long been known that when non-Aboriginal people interact with unfamiliar Aboriginal cultures without sufficient knowledge to navigate and interpret their experiences, damage can occur, particularly to relationships and trust: “Untrained dominant culture people are a *major* part of the problem. However, appropriately trained dominant culture people are a very important part of the answer” (Trudgen, 2004, p. 232, emphasis in original). The discomfort of unfamiliarity can be alleviated when awareness of diversity is extended, and an appreciation for the variety of cultural mores and customs, ways of being and behaving – which might otherwise be as confronting to one’s sensibilities as the mingled aromas of a Moroccan spice market, simultaneously aromatic or pungent to the senses – is extended. Deficit thinking can also be lessened through the development of close personal relationships, particularly friendships, while living, working or travelling among people of other cultures. Culture shock is necessary to consider from both teachers’ and students’ perspectives. Research has shown that Aboriginal students also encounter “culture shock and identity dissonance” (Macdonald et al., 2018, p. 4) when studying in unfamiliar cultural contexts.

While failure and misunderstandings are inherent where cultures intersect, problems are often resolved with a show of mutual respect, humility and sense of humour. If all parties are operating with a degree of goodwill, resolutions can usually be found, and relationships repaired. Navigating an unfamiliar culture can become problematic when an individual is unable to cope with feelings of discomfort or uncertainty incumbent in the situation. A focus on cultural difference as problematic rather than positive and transformative can result in fractured teacher-student relationships and potentially harmful consequences, as found in research by Mansouri and Jenkins (2010). That said, a focus on similarities without healthy discussions of difference can contribute toward feelings of isolation and exclusion in students. This aspect of cultural interaction is discussed later in this chapter.

#### 2.2.2.1. Cultural difference

Teachers have a prominent role in combatting racism in schools yet some may choose to ignore issues of race and culture, avoid power-related differences in classroom discussions and quell student commentary around injustice and fairness (Partington, 2003), in order to promote the politically correct, non-confrontational idea of “niceness” (Castagno, 2014, p. 52). Some teachers attempt to minimise cultural difference by highlighting aspects of sameness, in an approach termed *colour-blindness* or “cultural blindness” (Gay, 2010, p. 26), yet this only serves to erode cultural identity. Silence or lack of invitation to share regarding students’ cultural knowledge further decreases their engagement. Reliance on stereotypes and assumptions is an indication of culturalism, where culture is viewed as a powerful shaper and determinant of people’s lives.

As a term, *cultural difference* represents differences of culture and language, recognition of the many unique backgrounds and perspectives that students may bring to the classroom, and an acknowledgment of the prism of culture through which we all see the world around us, that may or may not prevent us from seeing differences in the worldviews of others. Recognition of difference is essential to see people other than oneself as they really are, or to commence the attempt to do so. Sameness, consideration of similarities, is not enough (Castagno, 2014) as it fails to account for the uniquely individual influence of culture on people and the fact there is a multiplicity of cultural influences to which each one of us is subjected. Considerations of cultural difference does not necessarily equate to a negative stance on the existence of difference per se.

As one who has continually undertaken school and postgraduate studies externally, often in remote locations, I have always held ‘difference’ to be a good thing. It is healthy. The properties of uniqueness and authenticity are made manifest in the way one moves through the world. But for some, I understand that difference also means wrong, incorrect, inappropriate, inferior, deficient or in some way lacking (Burgess, 2017). Through research and professional experience, I have realised these underlying meanings can be present in the vocabulary used by teachers to describe their students. A brief definition of cultural difference and its related terms and meanings is outlined below.

The level of anathema toward the expression *cultural difference* (Burgess, 2017; Gebhard, 2013) can be explained when it is viewed as symbolic of deficiency or inferiority and, in educational contexts, indicative of the “‘othering’ nature of power relations” in pedagogical practice (Burgess, 2017, p. 739). Accompanying the dominant cultural ideology of Whiteness is the White/non-White dichotomy that necessarily pervades any discussion of indigenous or minority ethnic groups. Historical imbalances of power and knowledge, a remnant of a colonialist past, have resulted in the privileging of White systems and norms. Organisational systems continue to uphold these norms, particularly in schools, where Whiteness narratives can remain unquestioned. Connotations of deficiency feed into the *cultural deficit paradigm* or *cultural deficit discourse*, an unquestioning acceptance of the status quo wherein “educators attribute school failure to what students of color [*sic*] don’t have and can’t do” (Gay, 2010, p. 25) without considering their own contribution or seeking other factors and causes.

A literature review by Fylkesnes (2018) selected 67 articles located in teacher education discourse and revealed that the term *cultural diversity* was not explicitly defined but borrowed meaning from its proximity to other terms, such as race, ethnicity, difference, gender and sexual orientation (Fylkesnes, 2018, p. 29). The term *difference* featured in close proximity to cultural diversity in articles, having an influence on its construed meaning (Fylkesnes, 2018, p. 29) and yet, similarly, was unclearly defined. The researchers posited that this added to the perpetuity of dominant cultural discourse and Whiteness narratives remain in “binary oppositional discourse” to the ‘Other’ while disclaiming the existence of such discourses (Fylkesnes, 2018, p. 30). Critical self-reflexivity on the part of researchers is

recommended, particularly with a focus on language use, as this is an “important counterstrategy for resisting dysconscious allegiances to Whiteness. Such practice can make researcher positionality explicit” (Fylkesnes, 2018, p. 31). The phenomenological researcher is encouraged to adopt a critically self-reflective attitude and an open-minded stance, and this is outlined further in Chapter 4 (see Section 4.6 Data analysis). It is worth noting that educational scholars caution against programs that focus “exclusively on cultural differences” as they are unlikely to result in “positive interracial interactions and understandings” (Banks, 2016, p. 87). A greater appreciation and understanding of all aspects of the student is required of teachers.

Critical reflection of elements pertaining to learning – specifically, an exaggerated focus on *learning styles*, termed a “modern fad” by Hattie (2012, p. 89) – in cross-cultural contexts can be perceived as missing the point of authentic cultural awareness and recognition of culture in the classroom. Viewing learning styles as something everyone possesses can minimise difference between students and produce a *colour blind* effect, which reduces students’ sense of belonging and feelings of value, particularly in how others perceive the worth of their culture (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Alternatively, when teachers are overtly focused on and responding to Aboriginal learning styles as a prescriptive construct in the classroom, the act of perceiving more than the cultural identity of Aboriginal students becomes devalued and the ability to interact with them as “a holistic individual” (Spiers, 2010, p. 221) in the classroom – to see their needs, strengths and characteristics as evidence of individuality rather than indigeneity – is diminished, to the detriment of the learning opportunity (Vass, 2018).

The cultural deficit paradigm in evidence when teachers focus on cultural difference as an imposition or lack, and the deleterious effect of colour blindness in ignoring culture altogether, is certainly not indicative of culturally congruent and welcoming practices. An alternative to these attitudes that perpetuate a dominant culture narrative is to develop teachers’ cultural competence and this concept will be described below.

#### 2.2.2.2. Cultural competence

The term *cultural competence* refers to a non-prescriptive set of personal characteristics, beliefs and attitudes, in combination with acquired knowledge, skills and life experience that enable individuals to work effectively in a multicultural environment: “a set of congruent behaviors [*sic*], attitudes, and policies that come together in a ... professional and enable [them] to work effectively in cross-cultural situations” (Cross et al., 1989, as cited in Brace, 2011, p. 60; Cross et al., 1989). Cultural competence is defined for health practitioners as: “a set of academic and interpersonal skills that allow service providers to increase their understanding and appreciation of cultural similarities and difference ... to draw on a particular community’s values, traditions, and customs in developing effective and

appropriate interventions” (Krajewski-Jaime et al., 1993, as cited in Brace, 2011, p. 60). In educational settings, cultural competence is considered to be demonstrated when teachers are responsive and accommodating regarding the cultural identity and lifeworld of students culturally different to themselves:

[They] hold high expectations for all their students and then work with the students to achieve them. This requires sensitivity to the students’ cultural and language backgrounds and current circumstances. Neither dire circumstances nor cultural or linguistic background should be reasons to lower expectations and standards. (Banks, 2016, p. 257)

Also termed *intercultural competence* (Moeller & Nugent, 2014), it is an extension of *cultural awareness*, which involves a conscious understanding that differences exist in the ways that people interpret and interact with the world, usually prompted by respect and interest in cultures other than one’s own; and its closely related counterpart, *cultural sensitivity*, that involves a consideration of cultural difference and a willingness to adapt such that respectful and participatory, as opposed to didactic (Franck et al., 2020, p. 13), modes of teaching can occur.

An evaluation study of a social and emotional learning (SEL) program for Aboriginal boarding students (Franck et al., 2020) was conducted using pre-post quantitative evaluation with 28 students, aged between 13-15 years; and focus groups of ten students; and episodic interviews with four facilitators of the program. The study identified elements that were critical enablers for effectiveness, including secure relationships between students and program facilitators, participatory modes of delivery for increased student engagement, and sessions organised in single sex groups. Choice of facilitators was considered important, particularly in their ability to foster “secure, authoritative and nurturing relationships” (Franck et al., 2020, p. 13). For the purposes of this study, cultural competence refers to the personal characteristics, beliefs and attributes held by non-Aboriginal teachers and their acquired knowledge and skills with which they create culturally congruent learning environments in classrooms comprised exclusively of Aboriginal students.

To attain cultural competence, it is necessary first to adopt an attitude of self-awareness, incorporating deliberate consciousness of one’s own culture and its place among other cultures. This process is termed *cultural cognitiveness* (Banks, 2016, p. 77), which may involve judgement and an enhanced level of knowing, not necessarily positive. This is perhaps the most important part of the entire process, as a person cannot adequately appreciate another’s culture if they do not recognise the existence of their own and yet, “knowing ... one’s own culture is difficult” (Farmer et al., 2012, p. 244). This is a problem distinctly perplexing for teachers embedded in the dominant culture, who are socially conditioned to view this status quo as the aspiring ‘norm’, and in this way enact a pedagogy of Whiteness (Burgess, 2017, p. 744). Cultural cognitiveness enables an individual to acknowledge

that his or her worldview, or *lifeworld*, is merely one of many equally valid lifeworlds. From this point, an individual can begin to interact in a fully engaged manner, with gradually greater degrees of ease, with or within another culture. This cross-cultural functioning operates at four levels, ranging from superficial encounters of short duration with another culture, through to total immersion at the expense of feeling accepted by one's own (Banks, 2016, p. 59). Most cross-cultural functioning occurs somewhat similarly to an ambassadorial role, in the sense of representing one's culture while respecting another's. High levels of cultural competence result in genuine learning exchanges between people.

The process of acquiring cultural competence occurs over time and is ongoing (Moeller & Nugent, 2014; Yang & Montgomery, 2011). It cannot be attained by professional development in cultural awareness or cultural sensitivity (Yang & Montgomery, 2011), neither by inclusivity and diversity training. Short-term courses do not create long-term personal change of the kind necessary to develop cultural competence. Models of cultural competence are numerous (e.g., Brace, 2011; Klassen et al., 2018), however to illustrate the point, Deardorff's *Process Model of Intercultural Competence* (Berardo & Deardorff, 2012, p. 46) is circular, enabling learners to enter and re-enter at any point as they "learn, change, evolve and transform over time" (Moeller & Nugent, 2014, p. 6). Cultural competence can be measured on a continuum extending from complete lack of intercultural knowledge and skills through to high levels of proficiency (Brace, 2011). Indicators include visible facets, such as a teacher's comfort level with students, other factors including students' engagement and the construction of culturally relevant lessons, and the teacher's personal connections with students and parents (Teel & Obidah, 2008, as cited in Brace, 2011, pp. 62-63).

The construction of cultural competence involves a process of self-reflection, personal and professional experience in other cultures, and skills development in the planning, delivery and evaluation of culturally congruent pedagogical practice (Banks, 2019; Hollinsworth, 2013). When teachers occupy an advanced position on the cultural competence continuum (Cross et al., 1989), this is demonstrated in visible ways in the classroom: confidence with students marked by a personal connection; relationship with parents; high expectations and acceptance of responsibility for students' academic performance; habits of self-evaluation and critical reflection; produce culturally relevant content to enhance students' academic engagement (Teel & Obidah, 2008, as cited in Brace, 2011, pp. 62-63).

Furthermore, cultural competence is not demonstrated by valuing students' unique cultural perspectives (WA Department of Education, 2015) as this may occur in a respectful learning environment without in-depth 'cultural know-how'. Instead, culturally competent teachers extend this baseline level of respect and awareness to show appreciation of cultural difference and demonstrate genuine interest in students' cultural backgrounds. This enhances students' sense of belonging, self-

efficacy and *cultural safety* in the classroom (Rubie-Davies & Peterson, 2016), a concept which is discussed later in this chapter, and within the teacher-student relationship. Concurrently with these strategies, culturally competent teachers enact self-reflective practices, conduct a constant reappraisal of their own values, beliefs, preconceptions, biases and assumptions (Brace, 2011; Cousik, 2015; Yang & Montgomery, 2011), and view the process as a journey, rather than a stepping stone (Perso, 2012).

#### 2.2.2.3. Cultural responsiveness

Cultural responsiveness is defined as “enacted cultural competence” (Perso & Hayward, 2015, p. 1, emphasis in original). Culturally responsive teachers are unafraid to broach culture and cultural difference in classroom discussions and they regularly apply pedagogical scaffolding to allow students to utilise prior knowledge (Castagno, 2014; Perso, 2012). Referencing culture in this way “teaches *to and through* the strengths of these students” (Gay, 2010, p. 31, emphasis in original). The concept of good teaching is inclusive of culturally competent attitudes and approaches, particularly for multicultural classrooms.

Teachers who consistently apply cultural competence in the classroom are using *culturally responsive pedagogy*. There are several core characteristics to the practice, which is described as validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative and emancipatory (Gay, 2010, pp. 31-38). The most crucial aspect is demonstrating through word and deed that students matter, articulating consistent high expectations and belief in their capabilities, which is proven to have positive impacts on students’ performance (Rubie-Davies & Peterson, 2016). These behaviours establish as undoubted fact that “academic success [is] a nonnegotiable mandate for all students and an accessible goal” (Gay, 2010, p. 36), particularly for underprivileged groups.

Thus, cultural competence can be viewed as an applied version of cultural awareness, and cultural responsiveness is an extension of this knowledge in practice through the deliberate fostering of relationships with parents and the wider community. In the *Quality Schools for Aboriginal Students Study*, fifty teachers in primary and secondary schools in urban and regional Western Australia were interviewed to discover their beliefs on the characteristics of effective teachers of Aboriginal students (Harslett et al., 2000). All participants had been nominated by Aboriginal students as ‘good teachers’ and the researchers concluded that: When Aboriginal students have a positive rapport with teachers, their engagement with curriculum is enhanced and trusting relationships are developed. Conversely, if positive teacher-student relationships do not eventuate, the result can be damaging to both students and school (Harslett et al., 2000, Directions & Conclusion sections). Evidently, adopting non-coercive partnerships between school and community benefits the co-construction of positive teacher-student relationships. Mutually agreed decisions about education, modes of communication and high



expectations provide cultural safety and support and assist in managing problems, such as challenging behaviour and low school attendance (Hughes & Hughes, 2012; Sarra, 2012).

The close interactions among ethnic identity, cultural background, and student achievement (i.e., between culture and cognition) are becoming increasingly apparent. So is the transformative potential of teaching grounded in multicultural contributions, experiences, and orientations. ...

This is a call for the widespread implementation of *culturally responsive teaching*. (Gay, 2010, p. 27, emphasis in original)

#### 2.2.2.4. Causal attribution

Humans are meaning-makers (Goldbart & Hustler, 2005) and causal attribution is the process of assigning causes to desirable or undesirable outcomes, eventualities and circumstances. Weiner (1985) reflected on the seeming universal need for humans to seek meaning and causality, often with a functional aim for improving performance or altering future occurrences: “This familiar motivational interpretation is known as the principle of mastery” (p. 2). The following section briefly examines attribution theory with a focus on the formulation of teachers’ attributions in relation to themselves and their own capabilities, and relevant to the teacher-student relationship.

In 1958, Fritz Heider, known as the “originator of the attributional approach in psychology” (Weiner, 1985, p. 5) published *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* which examined attribution theory and presented the first systematic analysis of causal structure. Heider identified two sets of conditions affecting outcomes, namely internal (within the person) and external (environmental), an internal-external distinction expounded by Rotter in 1966 (Weiner, 1985, p. 5). Further to Heider’s work, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, leading social psychologists Edward Jones, Keith Davis, Harold Kelley and Bernard Weiner, among others, examined phenomenal causality, the process whereby individuals ascribe reasons for an event occurring, thus experiencing positive or negative emotions directly related to those ascriptions, which have an effect on their response to the event or future events. Phenomenal causality sought to describe the interconnecting sequence of causal attribution, emotion and action (Rudolph et al., 2004, p. 819).

In the 1950s, Heider’s proposed sets of internal and external conditions were later amended to a *dimension of causality* that defined location, or *locus* of causality: internal-external (Weiner, 1985, p. 5). In the 1970s, Weiner by introduced a second dimension, *stability*, to characterise causes as either stable or unstable, usually in a 2 x 2 categorisation scheme. An example is effort, which can be classified as internal and potentially unstable while task difficulty is considered external and stable. The third dimension of causality developed in the late-1970s, *controllability*, identifies the level of perceived personal control that an individual may have over causes (Weiner, 1985, pp. 5-6).

Investigations regarding *expectancy* and *value* were undertaken by researchers without consensus, relevant to aspiration and chance tasks, hoping to articulate ways in which prior success or failure influences an individual's goal expectation for future outcomes. Expectancy and value are considered complementary to the three dimensions of causality in a positive manner. In the main, "the higher the expectancy, the higher the aspiration level" (Weiner, 1985, p. 11). An individual's aspiration increases after goal attainment. Conversely, their aspiration decreases with failure to fulfill prior aspirations, although there is evidence of atypical responses (Weiner, 1985). The effect of these causal dimensions can be seen in students' engagement with learning and their expectations of success or failure. For the purposes of this study, the students featured in the research example below could be likened, in a brief flight of fancy, to teachers attending a cultural awareness course.

A study by Dong et al. (2013) examined the multiple causal attributions of 156 North American college students attending foreign language classes and found that students make several unique causal attributions for single outcomes, meaning that students had multiple explanations for their performance. The researchers identified these attributions for each student using Weiner's causal dimensions of internal/external, stable /unstable, and personal control/external control (Dong et al., 2013). Findings were notable in that not only did students seek to explain their performance using multiple attributions, but these attributions were uniquely different between success and failure causes. This is an important finding in educational contexts, and one that is pertinent to research related to the causal attribution of teachers, as 'effort' was the top-rated cause of success and failure according to students. Effort is a personally controllable (internal locus of control), changeable attribution, the opposite of causes that are externally controlled (external locus of control) and stable (fixed, unchanging). Almost three-quarters of students making this causal attribution achieved course grades of B or higher (Dong et al., 2013, p. 1597).

From the 1980s to 2004 onwards, attributional theorists extended this investigation of stimulus, thoughts and emotions to focus on actions, seeking to explain behavioural responses derived from personal beliefs or causal ascriptions. The decision of an individual to act with altruism or aggression toward another is a central tenet of attributional theory, forming "the very heart of social psychology" according to Rudolph et al (2004, p. 817). Understanding why individuals may offer help and sympathy to a victim, or respond with blame and aggression, had useful application in health and education contexts. The influence of causal attribution is dramatic. When individuals believe that a victim is personally responsible for their situation, the tendency is to withhold sympathy, not offer help and even act with aggression (Weiner, 1985, 1991). In incidents of classroom conflict, causal attributions relating to locus, where causes are internal or external to the student, and controllability, where the student is blameless or at fault, can either reduce or escalate an aggressive response.

Evidence supports a motivational sequence wherein a stimulus, or event, prompts attributional thinking, where causes are ascribed that elicit emotions, which subsequently affect actions. The actions are either pro-social or anti-social (Rudolph et al., 2004, p. 844). This process is known as the cognition-emotion-behaviour sequence (Rudolph et al., 2004, p. 816). Behavioural strategies, such as excuse giving, seek to influence causal attribution in order to minimise anger. Research examining the development of excuse giving in aggressive and non-aggressive African American boys found that excuses, inferring unintentional and uncontrollable causes, were “a purposeful strategy...designed to shift causal beliefs, and by implication, the emotions and actions of the recipient.” (Graham et al., 1995). The study documented five-year-old children using their comprehension of “cognition-emotion-action relations” to influence the feelings of others, and twelve-year-old students who understood controllable causes elicit anger (Graham et al., 1995). The research demonstrated that teachers need to honour the account, that is, accept the excuse, in order for social bonds to be maintained and that interventions may lead to improved perceptions of transgressors (Graham et al., 1995, p. 16). In an educational context, shifting causal attribution from antisocial dimensions to prosocial may assist teachers to alter previously held negative perceptions of difficult students.

#### 2.2.2.5. Integrating Aboriginal culture in the curriculum

Greater integration of Aboriginal culture within the Australian Curriculum has occurred as a response to calls for inclusivity, equitable education and cultural awareness of teachers, including the Menzies School of Health Research, Centre for Child Development and Education Report: *Cultural responsiveness and school education: A review and synthesis of the literature* (Perso, 2012), and Centre for Cultural Competence Australia (CCCA: <https://www.ccca.com.au/>) publications. The Australian Curriculum mandates the inclusion of Aboriginal culture in the syllabus in all subjects, at all year levels, and international evidence supports the increased inclusion of cultural knowledge and cultural worldview into learning resources, as this pedagogical approach has been found to enhance indigenous student engagement (Darling-Hammond, Burns, et al., 2017). Recognition and reconciliation are more than theoretical aspects of the Australian Curriculum, as when culturally congruent practices are deliberately cultivated in schools, a process of reconciliation can be considered as being enacted. Issues arise in the scholarly literature around the difficulty or discomfort experienced by teachers, including preservice teachers and early career teachers, at the prospect of incorporating Aboriginal cultures in the curriculum (Moodie, 2019). This sense of being unprepared has been discussed in other sections of this chapter.

Teachers may be reluctant to speak about Aboriginal peoples and cultures from an authoritative standpoint in classroom discussion, due to a lack of personal knowledge, fear of tokenism or of reinforcing stereotypes, and a preference for “silence” around difficult themes and issues (Vass, 2015, p. 372). The avoidance by teachers from engaging in race talk tends to serve as a silencing cue for

students and results in preserving racist beliefs and actions (Castagno, 2014, p. 85). Greater sensitivity to the issue of cultural inclusion and exertion, of stepping outside the teacher's comfort zone, is necessary. Feelings of guilt and discomfort (Martin et al., 2017) may cause teachers to be hesitant to speak of race and related issues, such as: Whiteness; denial, of racism and the long-held view of Australia as a proud colonial bastion of the British Empire, once considered *terra nullius*; respect; and an unwillingness to speak of Aboriginal Knowledges, histories and cultures, particularly regarding the home communities of students. Lack of knowledge, fear of being inappropriate or insensitive, and lack of confidence (Bishop, 2020) all affect the ability of teachers to fulfill the mandated requirement of inclusion of Aboriginal cultures in each subject, for all year levels. Research by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics suggests that teachers should adopt "a more purposeful reflexivity, oriented to practice" (Moodie, 2019, p. 746), critically reflect on their own cultures, identity and worldview and be willing to listen to Aboriginal peoples (Bishop, 2020; Burgess et al., 2020). As Castagno (2014, p. 85) stated, "It is important to note that the silence around race is part of teacher practice, but it is not a silence among most students. Many students are keenly aware of race and racism, so when teachers are silent on the topic, teachers end up silencing students as well." The effort to embed Aboriginal perspectives in classroom resources, activities and conversations is highly beneficial to the wellbeing and sense of belonging of Aboriginal students.

As the present study is oriented within the context of a boarding school for Aboriginal students, an outline of typologies is relevant. In psychology, typologies are classifications of a general type (Oxford Dictionary) and in educational settings, where classifications and labels appear to be second nature to teachers, typologies offer a useful insight to meanings and distinctions. Specifically, typologies highlight the terminology and meanings ascribed by people to specific concepts that are experienced, or which pervade their cultural world, revealing distinctions of importance through these "language systems" (Patton, 2002, p. 458) to emphasise distinctions they consider important. For example, "student labeling" may be practised by teachers between peers, perhaps serving as a warning to peers of potential classroom management issues (Rogers, 2003, p. 8). In schools, when teachers ascribe labels to students who exhibit nonconformist behaviour, teachers' attitudes towards students may be altered while yet enabling students to use these labels and meanings to manipulate teachers (Patton, 2002, p. 458). A doctoral researcher in classroom management suggested, "Look at ways that teachers categorised students. Students know how to manipulate these labels. There is a need to understand the labels teachers use" (A.-M. Marias, personal communication, June 16, 2017). Labelling as a typology in a school context can be a window into the school culture, teacher attitudes and teacher-student relationships.

### 2.2.3. Current issues in the teaching profession

Research has shown that the quality of teachers has a direct influence on students' engagement and learning: "A good teacher makes a difference" (McArdle, 2010, p. 60). Therefore, it could be assumed that quality should be measured. And yet, the concept of quality cannot easily be measured. Students' learning is affected by many things, including factors external to the teacher and far outside their control. The concept of *visible learning* espoused by Hattie (2012) encourages schools to foster collaborative, non-blaming practices that support teachers to work together to understand the effect of their teaching, preferably in combination, on students' learning. While not in support of "measuring teachers, ... changing the training, and fixing entry into the profession" (Hattie, 2012, p. 37), Hattie nevertheless explored the notion of evaluating teachers' performance through measuring the learning effect on students to understand how their pedagogical practice influences student learning. In this way, data-driven evaluation can serve as a tool for teachers to improve the surface and deep learning of students, and for schools to achieve academic excellence. While Hattie does not claim that all teachers make a difference nor that they make *the* difference given that "there are as many teachers who have impact on learning below as above the mean" (Hattie, 2012, p. 190), he does assert that this statistic in itself should be enough to prompt change:

We have no right ... to regularly teach in a way that leads to students gaining less than  $d=0.40$  within a year. Clearly, this approach of evaluating the effects of teaching places more emphasis on student learning; often, we have been much more concerned with teaching rather than learning. (Hattie, 2012, p. 37)

Quality teaching and the related issues of raising teaching quality and teacher effectiveness have become a catch-cry for State and Territory Governments responsible for schools and education in their respective jurisdictions, and for the Australian Government, which is ultimately responsible for Aboriginal Education. The seeming consensus around these issues has masked their complexity, and scholarly literature is filled with studies, inquiries, action research, strategic literature reviews and independent reports and reviews purporting to offer 'best practice' for measuring teachers, growing effective teachers, and enhancing students' engagement and learning. Despite this, there is also consensus on the need to 'close the gap' between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students' attendance and achievement, which if achieved would represent only half of the actual gap. The complexity of the problem is mirrored in the complexity of teaching itself: "The complexities of the work of teaching are not easy to articulate, and good teachers make it look easy, to their students and onlookers." (McArdle, 2010); and, "It is important to acknowledge that teaching is '*unforgivingly complex*'" (Cochran-Smith, 2003, as cited in Rowan et al., 2017, p. 73, emphasis in original).

Any discussion on quality teaching and teacher effectiveness must also acknowledge the complexity of schools, and of the teaching profession:

Many researchers have argued that teachers are only one influence of the very many that shape academic performance. Berry, Daughtrey and Weider (2010) for example, note that teachers make countless complex decisions each day, within what are often very different contexts, and with wildly variable support for their work. (Rowan et al., 2017, p. 73)

In cross-cultural settings, particularly in schools with a large proportion of cultural diversity among students, educational research acknowledges the role of quality teachers – those who teach with passion and visibly demonstrate respect for, belief in and high expectations of students, and who are experts in their specialisation (Hattie, 2012), skilled in pedagogical practice and knowledgeable about child development. In such classrooms, the “quality of instruction, not the race of the students, was the significant variable” (Banks, 2016, p. 15). Initial teacher education, school conditions, access to support and other contextual factors influence teachers’ capabilities and their sense of self-efficacy, or belief in their ability to enact change and influence situations in the classroom. While there is “widespread agreement that teachers *matter*”, this is balanced by “considerable disagreement” (Rowan et al., 2017, p. 73, emphasis in original) in how the quality of teachers and teaching can be made visible, evaluated and produced. Learning is nonlinear and does not exist in a linear relationship to teaching (Rowan et al., 2017, p. 73). As a result, it is difficult to prove the learning effect of teachers in the classroom.

In 2013, the classroom teacher retention rate across the Northern Territory Department of Education was 86.3%, contrasted with remote and very remote schools where 27.9% of teachers were currently in their first year at each school, 8.6% had completed 3-4 years and only 2.2% had completed 7-8 years, and 14.8% for 8+ years (Wilson, 2014, p. 191). Attracting and retaining teachers in schools located in regional areas of Australia continues to be a challenge (Buchanan et al., 2013; Marshall, 2013; Sheridan, 2019), and this is similar for international settings, as in Canada where teacher attrition accounted for the departure of 50% of teachers within their first five years (Koenig, 2014), and in the USA, where a 75% attrition rate occurred between the commencement of undergraduate studies and completion of just three years in the workforce (Gallavan, 2007).

In a mixed-method study by Sheridan (2019), in which 135 preservice teachers in regional locations were surveyed on their motivations for entering the teaching profession, expectancy-value theory provided the framework for investigating participants’ values and career motivations. Regional areas have socioeconomic challenges to contend with, including unemployment, low school retention rates, contraction of services and amenities and ongoing issues with anxiety, debt and suicide, coupled with the exodus of young people to urban centres for education and employment (Sheridan, 2019, p. 81).

Therefore, quality teachers are viewed as critical for addressing inequalities in education provision and achievement and yet, little is known of preservice teacher motivations, that is, what may entice them to regional areas and further, keep them there.

Current interest in improving initial teacher education and providing better support for graduate teachers (Buchanan et al., 2013; Koenig, 2014) is reflected in government frameworks for cultural responsiveness in schools. In Western Australia, the Department of Education expressed an expectation that principals would lead each school community's engagement with the framework, in conjunction with all staff, to enhance the quality of learning experienced by Aboriginal students and families. Peter Collier, State Minister for Education and Aboriginal Affairs, stated, "In our multicultural society, it is vital for schools to welcome and be responsive to all cultures ... By committing to working together ... we can improve the education outcomes for each Aboriginal student" (WA Department of Education, 2015, p. 3). Thus, schools are viewed as having an obligation to create supportive, equitable policies and processes, using a 'top-down' approach that will have the desired outcome of greater academic success for Aboriginal students.

#### 2.2.3.1. Stress, burnout and compassion fatigue

Research has demonstrated that teachers are dedicated and deeply committed. However, there are times when they are unable to work effectively with challenging students due to compassion fatigue or burnout (Koenig, 2014). Burnout is characterised by three components: emotional exhaustion, lack of a sense of personal accomplishment, and depersonalisation. Compassion fatigue includes symptoms of psychological stress, detachment from others, avoidance and re-experiencing. Emotional exhaustion (Kulberg, 2019) is a key factor in burnout. Compassion fatigue creates symptoms similar to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and can be seen to "alter people's cognitive schemas about the goodness of people" (Koenig, 2014, p. 11). In coping with these symptoms, highly stressed teachers may be unable to respond effectively to the needs of their students, to "empathetically engage with and empower their students, nor be open to empathy or empowerment from their students" (Koenig, 2014, p. 14). When teachers feel isolated, stressed or disempowered, their ability to create positive relationships in the classroom and contribute to students' sense of belonging and connectedness is diminished.

Studies by Koenig (2014) and Graham et al. (1995) are relevant to this disconnect in demonstrating the application of attribution theory to multicultural learning environments. Although the motivational sequence could be viewed as common sense, it has been successfully applied in diverse contexts from hospitals to combatting teachers' compassion fatigue at a "trauma sensitive school" (Koenig, 2014, p. 12). While these contexts do not mirror the precise educational setting of this study in northern

Australia, the capacity of attributional theory to effect positive change in diverse classroom environments is worth noting.

Classroom management remains as one of the greatest concerns for teachers, and the stress involved can lead to burnout, job dissatisfaction and a possible early exit from the profession (Sullivan et al., 2014, p. 44). Ineffective classroom management practices can lead to student resistance and disengagement with learning and in some cases, school violence (Sullivan et al., 2014, p. 43). While undesirable classroom behaviours are often minor, it is the frequency and repetitiveness of facing unproductive behaviours on a daily basis that leads teachers to expressing exhaustion and eventually “stress and burnout” (Sullivan et al., 2014, p. 45).

Deficit views of students have continued to pervade classrooms and “seem to prevail in schooling systems” (Sullivan et al., 2014, p. 45) where students are considered directly responsible for disruptive behaviours or disengagement from learning, and ‘blame’ attributed without considering factors external to the student that may be contributing to the situation (Sullivan et al., 2014, p. 45). The ecological model presents the classroom conceptually as “an ecosystem with interactions between the physical environment, teacher characteristics, curriculum including pedagogy and resources, and a multitude of student variables” (Sullivan et al., 2014, p. 46). Interaction among all elements of the ecological model will have an impact on classroom management. Sullivan et al. (2014) concluded that teachers should cultivate “a greater understanding” (p. 53) of influential factors operating within classrooms, in order to perceive and utilise these to influence student behaviour and engagement.

#### 2.2.3.2. Keeping teachers in the profession

As mentioned above, high attrition rates of early career teachers in Australia and internationally can lead to disrupted experiences for both students and staff, which have a deleterious effect on student learning. There are a range of current initiatives and programs to improve teacher retention. The Northern Territory Government offers various pay rates and bonus schemes to attract teachers to remote communities, and to assist with relocation costs and family visits interstate. High attrition rates in this jurisdiction and in the profession are not necessarily due to factors controllable by government policy.

Teacher retention in rural, regional and remote schools is impeded by geographic and professional isolation (Marshall, 2013), access to permanent work and professional learning, and community expectations (Sheridan, 2019), in addition to inaccurate portrayals of racial violence and the scrutiny that is part and parcel of living in a small community, akin to “living in a goldfish bowl” (Young et al., 2018, p. 159). Diary entries of 14 undergraduate preservice teachers participating in the *Coast to Country* project, a university and government-organised series of experiential tours of rural Queensland schools with a teaching component, indicated a greater interest in pursuing rural and



remote teaching positions in future (Young et al., 2018). This was attributed to increased awareness of the realities of country life as opposed to assumptions.

Classroom management, in particular teachers' anxiety about violent behaviours, mentioned above as a deterrent for those who might consider a remotely based position, is an important issue in Aboriginal Education. Research has shown the classroom environment has an impact on teaching and learning, and this will be examined in the following studies.

A significant longitudinal study conducted by Angus et al. (2009), and described in Sullivan et al. (2014), asked teachers to rate students on a checklist of ten 'unproductive behaviours' over a four-year period. Unproductive behaviours included: aggression, non-compliance, disruption, inattention, erratic behaviour, being impulsive, lack of motivation, being unresponsive or unprepared, and irregular attendance. Findings included: 60% of students were productively behaved; 20% were disengaged; 12% were low-level disruptive; and 8% were uncooperative. Over the study's duration, 40% of students were consistently productive, 20% consistently unproductive and others fluctuated. Academically, the disengaged group performed only marginally better than the uncooperative group whereas students exhibiting low-level disruptive behaviours were not typically disengaged, that is, although students were "calling out, seeking attention or provoking others" (Angus et al., 2009, p. viii), this behaviour did not necessarily signal disengagement from learning. However, the teacher resource of *time* was expended mostly on the uncooperative group, leaving the quiet yet disengaged students unattended. As a result, teachers missed opportunities for reengaging their interest, allowing students to continue opting out of learning (Angus et al., 2009, p. ix). The researchers recommended increasing a focus on student engagement through policy, pedagogy and resources (Angus et al., 2009, as cited in Sullivan et al., 2014, p. 46).

Despite preservice teachers' anxiety about violence, a study by Sullivan et al. (2014) surveying 1750 Kindergarten – Year 12 teachers in South Australia found that all teachers encountered unproductive behaviours, but most were of a low-level disruptive or disengaged nature. Few teachers reported experiencing violence in the classroom: 74% experienced no verbal abuse; 93% never experienced physical aggression directed at teachers; 94% never encountered extreme violence aimed at teachers or other students (Sullivan et al., 2014, p. 49). The prevalence of disruptive or disengaged behaviours lay "more to do with factors within a teacher's control" (Sullivan et al., 2014, p. 53) than with students' behavioural choices. Improved learning materials and pedagogy would have greater influence on engagement and behaviour than ineffective classroom management practices.

Teachers can focus on effective classroom management when pressures of evaluation and accountability for student achievement are alleviated, and when their performance is not placed under pressure by "blame-the-teacher rhetoric" (McArdle, 2010, pp. 64, 74) and "ill-informed or knee jerk

assessments” (Rowan et al., 2017, p. 73), which can have a detrimental effect. A literature review of effective classroom management studies found discord between theory and practice, a lack of mentoring for preservice and early career teachers, and inconsistent implementation of effective behavioural management strategies (Egeberg et al., 2016). In summary, a collective approach, improved access to professional support and expertise, and greater clarity around what precisely constitutes effective classroom practices would assist with teacher retention.

The alarming rate of teacher attrition in Australia (McArdle, 2010) indicates that the wellbeing of teachers must be considered in conjunction with the wellbeing of students. Research has shown that when teachers consider their work to be meaningful, there is a subsequent increase in their agentic capabilities (Turner & Thielking, 2019) particularly for offering social support to peers and building positive teacher-student relationships. Teacher *agency*, defined as an individual’s belief about their own capabilities, is best promoted by a collective approach in schools (Sheridan, 2019, p. 83).

#### 2.2.3.3. Mentoring of early career teachers

Mentoring is a proven strategy to assist early career teachers to cope with the complex rigours of the profession including, and perhaps especially, in classrooms of cultural difference, due to the higher level of expertise and self-awareness required of teachers in cross-cultural contexts. In the *A Share in the Future* review outlined earlier, Wilson recommended a focused approach, including “more consistent and sustained cultural training for teachers” (2014, p. 179) to enhance Aboriginal students’ engagement at school, emphasising that “everything a school does in its relationship with a student makes a difference” (p. 180). The provision of effective teaching with measurable outcomes and aspirational pathways would enhance the ability of Aboriginal students to construct meaningful futures for themselves and their communities.

In Australia, initial teacher education is comprised of undergraduate (bachelor) degrees, graduate diplomas and master degrees. Alternatively, *Teach for Australia* recruits are provided with thirteen weeks of training and a two-year school placement to gain a Master of Teaching through the Australian Catholic University (Smith, 2019). As a preventative approach, mentoring should model best practice and inculcate preservice teachers on their school placements and early career teachers with attitudes and approaches to teaching and learning that will serve them appropriately in the long-term. This may or may not be occurring in practice. The *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* report acknowledged there was limited evidence of what constituted effective teacher induction practice, describing the quality of mentoring as “highly variable” (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2015). Researchers have challenged providers of induction programs and professional development to “consider whether their support mechanisms are sufficiently robust to support this particular cohort of graduating teachers” (Rowan et al., 2017, p. 84).

The push for raising Australian teaching standards, and thereby teacher education standards, has been on the national radar in recent decades since the *Hobart Declaration*, promoting high quality schooling for all students, and subsequent *Adelaide* and *Melbourne Declarations*, outlined earlier. The *Australian Education Act 2013* also raised quality teaching and learning into the spotlight, expressing the lofty aim of reaching a coveted ‘top five’ position on the PISA league tables by 2025, setting the tone for the Australian Government expectations of effective teaching (Call, 2018). With the advent of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) (AITSL, 2020a), further expectations were placed on teachers. Many primary teachers have a working week averaging 46 hours, of which 23 hours are direct teaching, and therefore have difficulty finding time to engage meaningfully with the Standards (Morris & Patterson, 2013, as cited in Call, 2018, p. 100). Research shows that 60% of beginning teachers did not feel adequately prepared for the classroom (Leech, 2007, as cited in Call, 2018, p. 102) and 63% of pre-service teachers classified themselves as less than knowledgeable of the APST (AITSL, 2014, as cited in Call, 2018, p. 102). This situation certainly requires improvement. Both these groups need better preparation for the classroom and more knowledge and practice of the APST. Release time for professional learning is a proffered solution (Call, 2018) but one that is dependent on schools and school leadership, funding and timetabling priorities, and the will to instigate change.

#### 2.2.3.4. Teaching English as an additional language or dialect

Aboriginal students, particularly those from communities in very remote areas with historically unbroken links to culture and language, may arrive at school with proficiency in Australian Aboriginal English (AAE), an officially recognised dialect of Standard Australian English (SAE), in addition to their traditional Aboriginal languages (Freeman & Staley, 2018). Some students may also speak a creole language, for example, Torres Strait Creole (Shnukal, 1988; State Library of Queensland, 2017). Students are highly capable in making themselves understood in everyday contexts but may require literacy and language support to achieve similar levels of fluency and literacy in SAE. In 2014, Chair of the Prime Minister’s Indigenous Advisory Council Warren Mundine suggested, “All teachers who teach in schools where a significant proportion of students speak an Aboriginal language at home, should also complete appropriate training in teaching English as a second language” (Mundine, 2014, para. 73).

When teachers possess the pedagogical skills for teaching English as a second language or dialect (EALD), they are better able to determine whether a barrier to a student’s learning is due to a language comprehension issue or an unrelated cause, such as disengagement, or cultural sensitivity around the topic or vocabulary. A survey of Victorian and Queensland early career teachers and their principals, conducted over four years, sought to quantify teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness to teach diverse students, including culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Rowan et al., 2017).

The survey revealed a need for teacher educators to “explicitly” prepare preservice teachers for “the *multiple* forms of diversity which characterize [*sic*] modern classrooms” (Rowan et al., 2017, p. 84, emphasis in original), ideally in conjunction with in-school support such as mentoring of preservice and early career teachers.

The “need” for adequate preparation of teachers, to recognise and respond appropriately to diversity, influenced the research by Rowan et al. (2017, p. 73), and particularly those studies indicating that “other teachers *and* school conditions play a role in defining and developing teacher effectiveness” (Rowan et al., 2017, p. 73, emphasis in original). Efforts to improve teachers’ self-efficacy through “an ecosystem perspective” (Marias, 2016, p. 81) can create positive learning experiences not only for the graduate teachers involved but also for students: “When they know they have support, teachers develop resilience and a stronger sense of self-efficacy. For example, the neophyte teachers in the interviews worked in a school where a mentoring system was in place. They acknowledged that, because of the support provided, they had faith in the system and as a result, things never got out of hand” (Marias, 2016, p. 209). Teacher wellbeing, emotional and psychological, can be bolstered when support is readily accessible, either from peers and mentors, or from structured professional development programs and in-school professional learning communities. Teaching is “*unforgivingly complex*” (Cochran-Smith, 2003, as cited in Rowan et al., 2017, p. 73, emphasis in original) and without EALD training, teaching linguistically diverse students adds yet another layer of complexity to the classroom.

Research investigating bilingualism (Athanasopoulos et al., 2015; Vince, 2016) recognised that there may be distinct advantages in how the bilingual or multilingual brain responds to challenges, adopts a different focus and even shapes personal characteristics specific to the language being spoken. Remotely based Aboriginal students grow up in a language-rich environment and many arrive at school with an assured multilingual fluency, including sign language (Alpher, 1993; Simpson & Wigglesworth, 2019). The tailoring of English, or the indigenisation of a colonising language, maintained “certain phonological, linguistic and conceptual features of Indigenous languages” (Malcolm, 2014, p. 5), thereby emphasising the adaptability of Aboriginal cultures and languages despite historical exclusion from classrooms, to the point of recognition in the Australian Curriculum (Disbray et al., 2020). Teachers, generally monolingual, may have “good intentions” (Malcolm, 2014, p. 6) to recognise Aboriginal languages in the classroom and yet without EALD skills, they may have difficulty interweaving these two dialects in meaningful ways to enhance students’ learning. The creation of equitable classroom environments begins with the recognition of Aboriginal-language-speaking students as multilingual learners who may be on “a different English language and literacy learning trajectory” (Freeman & Staley, 2018, p. 180) to their monolingual peers. From a policy perspective, it would be reasonable to expect that teachers practicing in EALD contexts will have

accredited training in this area and access to appropriate professional learning and resources (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014).

Far from being a detraction, multilingualism and bilingualism has its benefits. Aboriginal students are often bringing a language-based strength into the classroom, as bilingualism utilises the brain's cognitive malleability (Athanasopoulos et al., 2015) and strengthens its anterior cingulate cortex, thereby governing concentration while blocking distraction and switching focus with less confusion (Vince, 2016). Such findings shelve the outdated attitude of viewing Australian Aboriginal English and traditional languages and dialects as an unwelcome distraction in the classroom: "Difference, from the point of view of one dialect, may look like deficit, but it is not" (Malcolm, 2014, p. 4). When teachers adapt learning resources to reference students' prior knowledge, the "cultural and language strengths" (Banks, 2010; 2016, pp. x, 15) of their students, engagement improves and academic achievements increase.

#### 2.2.3.5. Teaching teenagers

The importance of carefully managing the transition to boarding school for Aboriginal students has been documented in research discussed earlier in this chapter, and yet it is also critical that teachers are continually mindful of the students' additional identity as *adolescents*. While there is no standard definition, this term is applied to a young person in the process of shedding childhood and becoming an adult (Gentry & Campbell, 2002) through a developmental stage that occurs generally between the ages of 10 to 18 years and involves quite complex psychological and physiological changes. The word itself dates from the late-1700s and is borrowed from Latin (Oxford Dictionary), a conjoining of 'ad' (to) with 'alescere' (grow up), from 'alere' (nourish). While the taxonomic roots of an English word may seem merely diverting in a dissertation, it does however serve as a reminder of the teacher's role in relation to young adults: to grow and nourish those rapidly developing minds and manage the deportment of their swift-growing bodies. Anyone who has taught a child in Year 7 then again in Year 9 will attest that the metamorphosis can be an irregular, awkward and unpredictable business, a blend of bravado and self-conscious introspection mixed with bouts of obstinacy and acquiescence, of seeking company then shunning it, of being willing to please then unaccountably mulish. Yes, we've all been there. The question is, how to make this process bearable in a boarding school context?

In Australia, research has concluded that a poor transition to secondary schooling hinders a student's academic performance and sense of connectedness with school, leading to an increased risk of absenteeism and total disengagement from education (Mander & Lester, 2019, p. 136). Potential long-term effects include vulnerability to anxiety, depression, loneliness, and a decreased capacity to benefit from the protective factors associated with education (Mander & Lester, 2019, p. 137).

Students' sense of identity and self-worth is also negatively affected, and this is a particularly crucial aspect of teaching adolescents.

Adolescents – pre-teens or tweens to age 12 years, then teenagers or teens from 13-19 years – are experiencing significant neurobiological processes, social reorientation, pronounced metabolic and physical changes (Mander & Lester, 2019, p. 137) and the establishment of “a realistic and coherent sense of identity” (Gentry & Campbell, 2002, p. 15). Adolescents have increased motivation and sensitivity towards social connectedness with peers, forging intimate relationships, defining social roles, status and prestige (Mander & Lester, 2019, p. 137). These cognitive changes lead from concrete thinking to pre-abstract and abstract thinking (Dahl et al., 2018, as cited in Mander & Lester, 2019, p. 137), essential for developing a strong sense of identity.

Identity has two conceptual parts: *self-concept*, the set of beliefs an individual carries related to self, their abilities and attributes, interests, values and beliefs, roles and goals; and *self-esteem*, an evaluation related to the whole self (global) or parts of oneself (specific) that is unique and changeable, high or low, stable or unstable throughout adolescence (Gentry & Campbell, 2002).

Adolescents have a strong desire for: competence, the need to control outcomes for themselves and a yearning to experience mastery; autonomy, having agency in their own pathways; and relatedness, the need for connection and relationships (Mander & Lester, 2019, p. 137).

And yet, this can equate to a challenge for the adults around them, as adolescents are a “package deal” (Gentry & Campbell, 2002, p. 5), and their complexity has contextual factors such as family, community and school, and conceptual factors, such as gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality, disability, religiosity and health, including mental health (Department of Health, 2020; Lawrence et al., 2015). In the USA, although 37% of adolescents are from culturally diverse backgrounds, most scientific studies report on White middle-class adolescents, therefore findings must be interpreted with caution for other demographics (Gentry & Campbell, 2002, p. 4). In Australia, studies relevant to secondary school-aged Aboriginal students are available and can be applied to Aboriginal Education and boarding schools.

Teachers and boarding staff do not always have sufficient knowledge to assist students with sensitivity and knowledge during these developmental stages. Mander and Lester (2019) conducted a mixed methods study to investigate the self-reported perceptions, readiness and psychological wellbeing of 15 primary school students prior to their transition to secondary boarding school. The students viewed boarding school positively, seeing it as an opportunity for making friends in addition to new learning experiences. The researchers also reported on several studies that recommended staff in Australian boarding schools should be “more than just mindful” (Mander & Lester, 2019, p. 137) of transition challenges for new students. Comprehensive ongoing training is necessary regarding the

suite of “neurobiological, cognitive, social and behavioural changes” that occur for adolescents (Mander & Lester, 2019, p. 137). Resources existing through peak bodies such as the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA) stop short of in-depth insights for teachers and staff during the vulnerable developmental period (Mander & Lester, 2019).

#### 2.2.3.6. Cultural safety and cultural security

Just as cultural responsiveness can be viewed as “enacted cultural competence” (Perso, 2012, p. 22, emphasis in original), cultural safety as a concept is an extension of cultural sensitivity (knowledge) and cultural competence (skills and attitudes). Cultural safety integrates an understanding of historic inequity with existing power differentials and attempts to address these within institutional settings through the provision of culturally appropriate systems of support, awareness and visibility (Richmond & Smith, 2012, p. 13). Outward indications of respect are not necessarily a given for engendering the confidence, trust and engagement of Aboriginal students, given that Australian schools have been described as “the most common setting in which children and adolescents experience racism” (Mansouri et al., 2009, and Priest et al., 2014, as cited in Forrest et al., 2017, p. 19). Racism involves the discriminatory behaviour or practices that unfairly target groups of people due to their race, ethnicity, culture or religion, and experiences of racism in school can influence disengagement: “Mansouri et al. (2009) found that racist name-calling affected 38 per cent of respondents among high school students in Australia’s east coast states and in the Northern Territory” (Forrest et al., 2017, p. 19).

Culturally safe practices in schools include visual recognition of Aboriginal cultures, as simple and straightforward as displaying Aboriginal art, raising the Australian Aboriginal flag and the Torres Strait Islander flag, and “setting up a Koori room as a teaching and learning environment that was also a welcoming space for the community” (Burridge et al., 2012, p. 44), or more complex responses such as employing staff who are “culturally sensitive and aware” and enacting transparent policies for “racism and behaviour management” (ACER, 2014, p. 2). The implementation of cultural safety and cultural security in educational contexts is important given that “everything a school does in its relationship with a student makes a difference” (Wilson, 2014, p. 180). Various frameworks exist to guide institutional approaches to these concepts and to measure and evaluate their response (Territory Families, 2017; WA Department of Education, 2015).

School initiatives that create safe spaces for Aboriginal students, parents and caregivers to express their views provide a valuable insight into community expectations for effective teacher-student and school-community relationships. From 2011, a partnership between the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and Principals Australia Institute titled the *Dare to Lead* project gathered confidential, evidence-based data from around 5000 Aboriginal students, and 2100 parents

and caregivers, during more than 670 Collegial Snapshots. The data were used to make informed decisions about Aboriginal Education in participating schools. Responses included a desire for schools to demonstrate “aspirational approaches that provide students with career pathways and knowledge about their future destinations” (ACER, 2014, p. 2). This finding dovetails with *A Share in the Future* Review that recommended schools, principals and teachers incorporate “community engagement as an expectation” (Wilson, 2014, p. 18).

Despite these challenges, teachers can have a direct and positive impact on students who are navigating the cultural space of schools. The *cultural interface* (Nakata, 2007) is not so much a navigation of a separate space but the tension between different spaces, often referred to as the *third space* wherein cultures converge and intersect. Learning to function with and within another culture necessarily incorporates *cultural dissonance*, described as “a misunderstanding or lack of understanding between different cultures” (Teel & Obidah, 2008, as cited in Brace, 2011, p. 39). Cultural dissonance precedes the self-awareness and intercultural learning necessary to (co)operate in other cultures and is imbued with discomfort, disequilibrium, confusion and conflict (Allan, 2003). Effort, energy and a certain plasticity of thought is required to move through this discomfort, to acquire the knowledge and understanding for traversing the terrain of cultural difference, in a way that “frees the individual from the confines of an ethnocentric viewpoint and enables a pluralistic perspective, transcending apparent cultural difference” (Allan, 2003, p. 84). Self-reflexivity is essential, accompanied by thoughtful, respectful action.

In a school setting, whole-school policies and processes can assist students to navigate the discomfort of a different culture. The phenomenological study by Allan (2003) analysed narratives from 171 students, aged 11-18 years, in an international secondary school in the Netherlands, in order to articulate an effective intercultural learning program. The study found that the *school culture* was an “important determining factor” (Allan, 2003, p. 105) for students to move successfully from awareness to appreciation and begin confidently functioning in an unfamiliar cultural context. Peer and teacher support, EALD teaching and the inclusion of students’ own language and cultures in the classroom, in combination with induction programs and social activities, were considered by students as helpful for transitioning the cultural interface and gaining a “multicultural identity” (p. 104).

Teacher support is important for students in international schools. Similarly, the quality of the teacher-student relationship is paramount in Aboriginal Education, and is seen to be “a fundamental characteristic of teachers most effective with Aboriginal students [representing] universal principles of good teaching” (Harslett et al., 2000, p. 6). When teachers consciously seek to know their students, to comprehend the rich complexity of their lives, the effect on students is marked, particularly in comparison to the effect of teachers’ ignorance. Doctoral research conducted by Spiers (2010) regarding the learning journey of Aboriginal tertiary students at three case study sites found that



students will eventually reach a “hybrid space” (Spiers, 2010, p. 235) between Aboriginal and Western ways of knowing and doing. However, this process is a challenging and difficult one for students, which entails both formal and informal learning, anxiety and fear concerning loss of culture and identity, and conflict around family and cultural responsibilities. Therefore, educators and institutional staff were viewed as important sources of support, assisting students to “confront and manage the contested space in which they find themselves” (Spiers, 2010, p. 220). But in order to provide the necessary “cultural nurturing” and safety required for Aboriginal students to find success in educational settings, the researcher found that educators must develop an awareness of “potential crises” encountered by students; seek to “lessen the impact” of institutional policies and processes; and make “time” available to assist students to navigate this significant informal learning curve (Spiers, 2010, pp. 220-221).

The consistency of this finding in the literature, that is, the protective and supportive effect of quality teacher-student relationships, demonstrates its importance for prospective teachers of Aboriginal students (Harslett et al., 2000). It is the consciously constructed blending of attitudes and actions that characterises cultural competence, and the intermingling of the professional self and the personal self in conjunction with time given (or taken; perhaps, made) that cultivates the kind of culturally congruent and responsive practice necessary for Aboriginal students to feel welcomed and respected. Pedagogically, this is a worthy enterprise but in a practical sense, the journey to cultural competence is not easy, squeezed amid other pressures of teaching: “School is a place where one learns to mediate between lived time and clock time, ... time for scheduling and completing things, personal time and collective time, beginning time and the sigh of ending” (van Manen, 2016, p. 128). Time, and a collective or participatory approach is required to develop advanced skills. Culturally competent teaching incorporates a process of engaging in ‘two-way learning’ where the teacher recognises value in Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing and being; and secondly, proactively cultivates opportunities for ‘both ways education’ in which reciprocity of teacher-student learning is encouraged (Llewellyn et al., 2018).

Best practice in community engagement with Aboriginal peoples should follow the articles contained in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Hunt, 2013; United Nations, 2007a), which the Australian Government first voted against then later endorsed (United Nations, 2007b). However, the experience of non-Aboriginal teachers in classrooms of cultural difference and their journey toward cultural competence is not widespread in any way in the current body of scholarly knowledge. Research on the perspectives of Aboriginal students has noted that the vast majority will experience cultural difference in their school experience, as most teachers fit the description in critical race theory literature of being mostly middle class, White and female (Forrest et al., 2017; Vass, 2015). In the research setting of this study, Aboriginal boarding students experience

cultural difference in the classroom both between themselves and the teachers, and also in relation to their peers, as Aboriginal cultures across northern Australia are varied and distinct. Cultural competence in the classroom, and cultural responsiveness in the school is therefore essential for the students' continued cultural safety and wellbeing.

There is limited guidance for identifying and recruiting culturally competent teachers, although a recruitment procedure could be developed based on relevant research (Brace, 2011). Assertions that culturally responsive pedagogy is less about cultural knowledge and more about good teaching practice, the art of "being a good teacher" (M. Nakata, October 6, 2016, personal communication), have gained traction in the context of increased cultural difference in Australia's classrooms. Cultural responsiveness, however, is considered to be a deeper and more meaningful attempt to move beyond the focus on Aboriginal "learning styles" and its confusion with cultural responsiveness (Vass, 2018).

And yet, teachers cannot do it alone. As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child and, it could be added, a school to educate a student. Schools, being both micro-cultures within our wider society and singular ecosystems in and of themselves possessing individual traits and traditions, have a responsibility to support and protect teachers from the undue rigours of their profession, just as they have an obligation to protect and support students.

Whilst teachers make up the biggest difference to students learning, pedagogy and curriculum do make up the entire schooling process. Other factors operate in the classroom, school and home/community that impact on student learning. These include school leadership, school policy, expectations and standards ... and community involvement. (Perso, 2012, p. 68)

School and community support, including whole-school policies and processes and community consultation and engagement, are essential for improving teacher effectiveness.

## **2.3. Summary**

This chapter discussed recent literature in the field of Aboriginal Education in Australia and internationally. While some intended government targets for 'closing the gap' appear to be on track, progress on reducing the disparity between Aboriginal students' academic achievements and that of their non-Aboriginal peers was seen to be limited, with government reviews proving the gap is reducing all too slowly. Issues of race and culture were placed in the historical context of social fragmentation and discrimination enacted on Aboriginal communities over decades, leading to their continuing disadvantage, not least exacerbated by discordant funding processes.

Teacher quality is of concern where initial teacher education programs have failed to provide the expected level of classroom readiness in preservice teachers. The introduction of standards for initial

teacher education programs in Australia have aimed to increase teacher effectiveness. In light of the increasingly multicultural nature of classrooms globally, cultural competence and related terms were defined, and culturally responsive pedagogical practices described. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers were outlined as a benchmark for the expected level of expertise at all stages of a teacher's career. Retention of teachers was examined and initiatives to address the persistently high rate of teacher attrition in Australia and internationally were seen to be effective only when coupled with appropriate levels of mentoring and support.

In conclusion, this chapter examined the historical significance of Aboriginal education to the research in relation to schools, but its main focus was examining the research to date associated with teachers' perceived capability in working within culturally diverse classrooms. Access to high quality education is essential in order for young people to acquire the various knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, such that they enjoy life and successfully transition to future pathways of employment, higher education, training and enterprise, therefore enabling them to "participate fully in a dynamic and increasingly complex world" (Halsey, 2018, p. 85). The key challenge is to ensure that, despite living in regional, rural, remote or very remote locations, every young person can access high quality education and consequently, opportunities in life. While the combined Australian and State Governments and non-government sectors have achieved something significant in educating more than one million students who attend over 4000 schools in a landmass of approximately 7 million kilometres-square (Halsey, 2018, p. 85), the school experience of regional, rural and remote students has not met parity with urban students. Over decades, with this situation unchanging, the time is now to level the playing field.

The very real consequences of the issues touched upon in this review of literature are broadly illustrated in Chapter Three describing the context for this study, with examples relevant to schools and communities in northern Australia and more specifically, to the single research site. The issue of racism in schools, the difficult history of discrimination against Aboriginal people in Australia and the long-term impacts of continuing disadvantage provide an introduction to the research context. Health, employment and education as social determinants are explored and my professional teaching experience will be positioned as an advantage to the research. The skills required for cross-cultural communication in classrooms will be articulated, prefacing the methodological discussion in Chapter 4.

# CHAPTER THREE



Urban cityscape, Darwin  
Photo © Megan Spiers

# Chapter 3: Context

*I applied, knowing that I wanted to make a difference. (Isabelle)*

The previous chapter provided the background to the study, outlining current literature in the field of Aboriginal Education including racism in schools and the effects of social determinants on future pathways of Aboriginal students. Relevant discourses on racial discrimination and White privilege and the increasing multicultural nature of Australia's schools were briefly discussed relevant to teachers' preservice training and pedagogical practice. Inequity in the provision of education to Aboriginal students in northern Australia provide an introduction to the research context. This chapter describes the research site, its historical mandate, structure and unique complexity, particularly the osmotic dynamic between the classrooms and boarding houses. Policies and programs that positioned the School as potentially a culturally responsive educational setting will be articulated. In addition, the researcher's professional experience in Aboriginal Education and multicultural settings are positioned as advantageous to the research.

## 3.1. Boarding in the Northern Territory

It is necessary, in introducing the Northern Territory context of this study, to consider the historical background leading to the establishment of boarding schools in northern Australia and the complexity of the educational choices that must be made by remotely based Aboriginal parents because of this context. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students living in remote communities, the choices are stark: either do not go to secondary school at all, or go to a boarding school far from home (Guenther & Fogarty, 2018). The first choice clearly limits future pathways to employment and tertiary education, and the second choice entails long periods of separation from the people and places beloved, familiar and known.

Thus, it is no easy decision to make and parents and communities have grappled with the problem for decades. Governments are reluctant to invest in locally-based secondary school options for Aboriginal students in remote communities (Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2016) usually due to small student numbers and wide geographic dispersion. Boarding schools in the Northern Territory and interstate are therefore presented as the most reasonable option. The 'good' presented in the decision for students to attend boarding school is seldom questioned, as pointed out by Guenther and Fogarty (2018) but instead, is taken as a given. Indeed, belief in the 'good' is reflected in the significant investments made by Federal and State Governments in scholarship programs, hostel infrastructure, transition support services and ABSTUDY programs, aimed at encouraging the somewhat weighted decision to send students away to school once they reach secondary schooling age.

In 2015, figures indicated that 228 students from 44 very remote communities were enrolled in Northern Territory and interstate boarding schools but this was considered an incomplete count (Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2016). A policy briefing on behalf of the NT Department of Education in 2016 suggested that 1097 students were approved for ABSTUDY funding: approximately 350 interstate enrolments and roughly 747 Northern Territory boarding school enrolments, with enrolments apparently declining from 800 students in Year 7 to 120 students for Year 12 (Considine, 2016; Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2016). However, based on indicative numbers from communities, schools and government, there is a plausible suggestion that the Northern Territory does not have sufficient places for boarding students “if even half of those secondary aged young people who are not enrolled, were to transition to boarding schools” (Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2016, p. 8). The estimated capacity required “for very remote Aboriginal students in Northern Territory boarding facilities is about 885” (Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2016, p. 5). A compendium of best practice compiled by the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, and launched by Prime Minister Tony Abbott, suggested:

The need for more and larger Indigenous education programs at boarding schools across Australia is evidenced by the appetite for opportunities. Schools with existing programs can hardly keep up with the demand from Indigenous families and communities. (AIEF, 2015, p. 127)

Two models for the provision of boarding school opportunities for students in remote communities exist and these can be described as: scholarship-based funding agreements of placements in high-cost independent schools in major urban centres, and local or regional boarding schools for students living in very remote areas (Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2016). Scholarships in the first model are funded primarily through ABSTUDY and also through other smaller programs such as the Indigenous Youth Leadership Program (IYLP) and the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF). The advantages from attending a boarding school include opportunities for wide ranging academic experiences and achievements; the building of social capital, particularly in social groups that might otherwise not occur; and reconciliation in action (Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2016).

In response to *A Share in the Future: Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory* (Wilson, 2014), the NT Department of Education made an investment in new boarding schools with a rationale based on low retention rates of students through to Year 12, and difficulties associated with providing quality secondary education in remote communities (Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2016). As part of this strategy, a Transition Support Unit was established to assist families to make decisions regarding secondary school options and to re-engage students who had disengaged from boarding school. While there is a dearth in scholarly literature on the subject, a small albeit increasing number of qualitative studies reveal the contemporary boarding school experience of remotely based

Aboriginal students and their families (ACER, 2017; Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2016; Mander, 2012; Stewart, 2015).

Prominent Aboriginal spokesperson, Noel Pearson, has promoted boarding schools as an option for Aboriginal students in preference to under-performing secondary schools in remote communities: “The allegation that indigenous children attending boarding schools represents a repetition of the stolen generations [*sic*] is just silly. A more serious fallacy is that you can provide quality secondary education in remote communities” (Pearson, 2004, p. 2). Pearson’s belief that boarding schools can contribute positively in the future pathways of Aboriginal students is reflected in his statement that, “Well-educated Indigenous people are not afraid to take their place in Australian society” (Martin, 2006, as cited in Hyde et al., 2017, p. 89).

Within the Northern Territory, there have been a variety of boarding school options for Aboriginal students from remote and very remote communities (grouped throughout this dissertation as ‘remote’). This study has as its single research site one of these boarding schools, in fact, the largest boarding school for remotely based Aboriginal students. This school, having been in existence for almost fifty years, contains several models of boarding, one of which replicates a model more closely resembling family life in having House Parents while another encourages independent living skills.

Successful boarding models developed by these schools include family style houses with house ‘mothers and fathers’ replicating responsible family environments for small groups of students. (Hughes & Hughes, 2012, p. 35)

However, the study’s focus is not about boarding but about the teachers and staff, and their pathway to becoming culturally competent in an Aboriginal Education context.

### **3.2. The School context**

As mentioned above, this study is located at a single research site, an Independent School, situated in Darwin, capital city of the Northern Territory, hereafter termed ‘the School’. Students are enrolled from Transition (Kindergarten) through to Year 12. The syllabus offers the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme and the Northern Territory Certificate of Education and Training at the senior level.

Being both a Day and a Boarding School, the student population numbers approximately 700, of which 33% are remotely based Aboriginal students from upwards of thirty-five different communities in northern Australia. This specific student cohort is accommodated in the boarding complex on campus during term time. All Aboriginal boarding students study at the secondary level, Years 7–12. That is to say, no boarding students are primary-school aged. On acceptance, Aboriginal students are

assessed both academically and socially by appropriate qualified school staff in liaison with their home communities. The net result is that the 200+ students of this demographic are initially placed in Aboriginal Education classes, a policy developed in response to consistently low NAPLAN literacy results and differing levels of school readiness. The learning program emphasises foundational life skills and literacy and numeracy skills with the aim of eventual placement in mainstream classes. The School uses the term Indigenous Education or IE to describe this specialised program. In contrast, urban based Aboriginal students, non-Aboriginal students and international students are placed directly in mainstream classes. These mainstream classes can be accessed by Aboriginal boarding students at any stage when they are academically and socially at a level to achieve success, a wellbeing-oriented policy designed to maximise positive learning experiences for Aboriginal students while being protective of their self-efficacy and self-esteem.

The School has been in existence as an educational institution, in various forms, for almost fifty years. An urban-based Western education often represents a vast change for Aboriginal<sup>2</sup> boarding students, who arrive at the School from their home communities, each with its own “rich and diverse cultural identities, unique knowledge systems, and enduring connections to lands and seas” (Butler et al., 2019, p. 138). The lifeworld of Aboriginal students – the prior knowledge and experience of ordinary life – has encompassed the social, cultural and spiritual fabric of landscapes as diverse as a tropical floodplain beribboned with crocodile-inhabited rivers, forested woodlands and wide coastal reaches, or arid desert encircled by spinifex-dotted mountain ranges.

In order to assist students with their transition to boarding school, the School has implemented a range of strategies and processes. Aboriginal students are accommodated onsite in boarding houses that, like the School sporting houses, have names derived from local Aboriginal dialects, and are managed by Heads of House and House Parents, in genders appropriate for the students accommodated. Boarding is managed by the Head of Boarding and Assistant Head of Boarding, reporting to the Principal. Boarding staff are responsible for the wellbeing of students during term and often continue to monitor their progress during intra- and inter-semester breaks, through personal communication with parents and caregivers or members of their home communities.

In Aboriginal Education settings, the wellbeing of students ideally encompasses a holistic and multidimensional approach involving both students and their community, with Aboriginal-oriented perspectives that consider connectedness with country and strong elements of culture, spirituality and identity (Butler et al., 2019, p. 153). To support the wellbeing and academic aspirations of Aboriginal students at the School, teachers work in partnership with boarding staff and other non-teaching staff,

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<sup>2</sup> Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders are proudly discrete. In this thesis, both terms are abbreviated to the group noun *Aboriginal*, with respect and without implying homogeneity.



for example, health practitioners, and several not-for-profit or non-government organisations (NGOs) based onsite, such as IYLP and the Clontarf Foundation (<https://clontarf.org.au/>). Aboriginal staff are regularly consulted, as are community members, in both formal and informal settings.

These school-wide processes of collaboration enable a multifaceted approach to student wellbeing to be enacted between the classroom and boarding houses. The involvement of staff with sport, art and music expertise in conjunction with EALD-qualified teachers in activities and excursions has helped to ensure that emphasis is placed on the pre-existing strengths brought to the School by all of the Aboriginal students. This approach is supported by research: “Literacies involving music and film production were seen as positive for developing an Indigenous sense of self and cultural identity” (Butler et al., 2019, pp. 151-152). Other aspects of students’ lifeworlds are embraced in different ways, including room decoration, care of pet animals linked to totems, cooking traditional food sources, and the supervised use of a fire-pit. The School is proactive in increasing the cultural responsiveness of its policies and procedures. To this end, several key policies have been implemented for both boarding and classrooms that embody the following premise:

In order to accurately assess and measure wellbeing, it is critical to consider the cultural contexts in which people live. (Butler et al., 2019, p. 153)

School policies include cultural awareness training for all teachers arriving from interstate or overseas, a formal mentoring or ‘buddy’ system for graduate teachers and early career teachers, and invitations for teachers to volunteer in boarding, assist with homework supervision and accompany boarding staff on remote community visits. The core intention underpinning these policies is to increase the cultural and contextual understanding of teachers in order to enhance their ability to support the wellbeing of Aboriginal students and their transition to boarding school. This whole-school approach is in line with the recommendation that Aboriginal Education teachers ought to have specialist training “developed in partnership with senior Indigenous teachers and leaders, teachers of English as a second language, cross-cultural and behavioural experts, health experts, and sporting, music and art advisers” (Menzies Foundation, 2010, as cited in Perso, 2012, p. 81).

### *3.2.1. Curriculum*

In the Primary and Middle Schools, the School teaches the Australian Curriculum within the pedagogical framework of the IB Primary Years (IB-PYP) and Middle Years Programmes (IB-MYP). Senior students have the choice of studying the two-year International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IB-DP) or the Northern Territory Certificate of Education and Training (NTCET). Mainstream classes at senior level are comprised of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students who possess literacy and numeracy levels proficient for the academic rigour required to achieve an

Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR). This score is the number which determines the students' entry into university courses. In the year prior to this study taking place, fifteen Aboriginal students completed their NTCET, with two Aboriginal students achieving ATARs on par with their non-Aboriginal peers. As mentioned earlier, most Aboriginal students are initially placed in Aboriginal Education classes, having arrived at the School in early secondary with differing levels of school readiness, but they can enter mainstream classes at the appropriate time.

In mainstream senior years, the available NTCET pathways include EAL-prefixed subjects, also studied by non-Aboriginal students for whom English is an additional language or dialect, and Vocational Education and Training (VET) Competencies and full Certificates. The School offers alternative and achievable pathways to future employment for Aboriginal students intending to return to their home communities, based on detailed demographic data compiled for each community. These pathways include such options as: certified employment programs with life skills (Batchelor Institute, 2019); health worker training; aquaponics ('The School', 2016, p. 22); and, a ranger training program (Charles Darwin University, 2014).

The School's approach to curriculum and student placement has been developed in response to the "unequal starting points" (Perso, 2012, p. 30) experienced by Aboriginal students due to, for example, location, low quality early childhood and primary schooling, experience of trauma, and health issues.

One problem for many potential boarding students ... is that they do not necessarily meet the entry requirements for boarding schools, for example minimum attendance levels and minimum literacy and numeracy standards. (Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2016, p. 7)

Readiness to learn is a "multidimensional construct" (Dockett, et al, 2010, paraphrased by Perso, 2012, p. 30) underscoring the relationship between the student's lifeworld and personal characteristics, and ways in which these influence learning and knowledge acquisition. Streaming of the student cohort, undertaken initially on enrolment then regularly revisited during the student's time at the School, was a considered response to a recognised challenge for boarding schools.

The School represents a dichotomous blend of what might be considered quite disparate ideologies. Specifically, its distinctly urban setting means that Aboriginal students are boarding in an environment positioned firmly within dominant Western cultures and the Whiteness narratives of a post-colonial society (Perso, 2012). This, however, is precisely what the parents of boarding students have desired, expressing the view<sup>3</sup> that they want their children not just to grow in one world but to be

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<sup>3</sup> Anecdotally, this conversation had occurred at a recent IYLP Graduation and was recounted by a focus group participant. Respected Aboriginal academic and Professor of Australian Indigenous Studies, Marcia Langton,

able to manage their life in both cultures. Thus, the School approaches the complex reality of having many language and cultural groups represented in the boarding houses in a strategic and responsive way.

Situated on Larrakia land, the School invites the Larrakia Elders to welcome students and talk with them about treating the School as a little community on their land and respecting it in the same manner as visiting another community. Families of students are welcome to stay onsite for up to a week, on condition that they attend classes with their child, to support their learning. The School has developed a program to teach the skills necessary for urban culture, such as navigating public transport and shopping, while yet respecting the home culture of each student, without being community or language specific. Aspects of Aboriginal heritage have imbued its classrooms, halls and meeting spaces with a unique indigeneity drawn from the art, sculpture, crafts and visual oeuvre of communities. These strategies attempt to bridge the gap between communities and school.

Furthermore, it was apparent to the researcher in time spent at the School that an equitable attitude pervades the School's activities, including a deliberate intention not to favour Aboriginal students over non-Aboriginal students and vice versa. For example, when the student cohort votes for a House Captain or School Captain, it matters not if they are Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal; the ethos and philosophy of the School encourages participation and seeks to give merit where merit is due, so representation of Aboriginal cultures and voice is visible and integrated. This lends a distinctive pluralistic aspect to the School's identity which is highly valued by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, their parents and the wider community ('The School', 2016), sentiments that were evident in the participants' responses and the researcher's personal experience at the School.

By tangibly embracing its historic mandate to educate Aboriginal students from remote communities in a residential setting, the School has sought to fulfill a purposeful intention. With core values that espouse reconciliation, partnerships with families and communities, integrity and accountability, the School promotes a service-learning approach within the boarding houses that includes volunteering with local charities and representation at significant community events, such as the Bombing of Darwin Day commemoration, ANZAC Day commemoration and Barunga Festival.

The Indigenous Education Strategy ... recognizes the need for choice, but consistent with Wilson's [Review], suggests that boarding is a better option for quality education. (Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2016, p. 7)

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stated: "It's quite wrong to refer to ... a new stolen generation, because Aboriginal parents willingly send their children to these schools, they want their children to have a good education" (ABC Lateline, 2013, para. 7).

The School has fostered strong working partnerships with local and interstate universities to support the pedagogical development of teachers and to assist Aboriginal students with the transition to higher education including through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) at Charles Darwin University. Industry and university partnerships increase the relevancy of education for boarding students by increasing choice and offering achievable options for further study or employment in urban and remote locations. The availability of visible, tailored pathways relevant to their individual and community aspirations can assist students to remain engaged with school.

Currently there are no studies tracking the outcomes of First Australian students who drop out of boarding, but anecdotal evidence is that most do not re-engage with school when they return home. That means if a young person leaves home in Year 7 or 8, and ... spends less than a year at boarding school, there is a serious risk that might be the last they see of the secondary education system. (O'Bryan, 2018, p. 4)

The relationship between boarding and school is a complex one. The two components of the School operate concurrently or separately, for example, the health clinic operates specifically for boarding students. In this aspect, the School was responding to the known interrelation between healthcare provision, wellbeing and educational engagement of Aboriginal students in boarding school (McCalman et al., 2020). Teachers are able to volunteer at the boarding houses, or in boarding more generally, such as playing sport with students or accompanying boarding staff and students on excursions. Current teachers and retired/on-leave teachers can also be employed in boarding for limited hours, especially on weekends when it is seen as a positive stance to have continuity in the adults working with boarding students.

### *3.2.2. Leadership*

The School is a complex organisation with strong interconnectivity between leadership tiers (see Appendix I, the School organisational chart). As an independent school co-owned by two Protestant denominational churches, the Principal holds the position of Chief Executive Officer and meets regularly with the School Board, which is composed of the Chairman and Deputy Chair and at least five members of the educational and religious fraternity. At least one of the members must self-identify as Aboriginal, and at least one person is required to be from interstate.

Within the School, the foremost tier of leadership is known as the Senior Management Team (SMT), and is comprised of the Principal, Deputy Principal, Director of Risk, Health and Safety, Director of Curriculum, Business Manager and Heads of Primary, Middle and Senior Schools. The philosophy behind the composition of the SMT is that each area of the School will be represented by a member of

the team. Aboriginal boarding students and staff are represented by the Head of Boarding with any Aboriginal Day student concerns being raised by the Director of Curriculum.

Most of the SMT hold a teaching role and as a result, the group as a whole is functionally embedded in the challenges and rewards of the classroom, having pedagogical knowledge of students and an ability to respond with personal nuance to issues and concerns. School leadership has a pivotal role and therefore a responsibility in establishing the tone of parent-school relationships and engagement with families, as reflected in embedded practices (Saltmarsh et al., 2019, p. 24), and community consultations initiated by the SMT that are described in the next section. Boarding staff operate under a standalone hierarchical structure of leadership (see Chapter 4, Figure 1) and yet, due to a presence on the SMT, maintain a strong interconnectivity with teachers and the classroom.

The boarding complex is expansive and positioned at a distance of several minutes' stroll from the main administration buildings, classrooms and the undercover multi-purpose area. Campus facilities include ovals, gymnasium and basketball courts, swimming pool, homework centres and specialised classrooms such as a recording studio, and VET facilities. At the time of the study, boarding houses catered for 200+ students with a firepit, aquariums, pet crocodile and murals bringing a sense of the outdoors into the interior. Surrounding the boarding houses, large spreading trees shade tables and benches where a range of activities, small gatherings and one-on-one conversations are held.

Boarding has had several models over the decades, the most recent being a set of independent living units, arranged in a circle, each housing twelve students. This arrangement represents the most recent manifestation of the School's evolving philosophy of boarding. Students in independent living units are all senior students (Years 10-12) with their own room and shared kitchen, lounge and laundry facilities. Care and advice are provided by a live-in supervisor. Overall, the boarding houses hold a gender-balanced ratio of 50:50. Younger students are housed in dormitory-style accommodation so they can be with their friends, often housed in family rooms with siblings and cousins. In the junior years, many elements of boarding life are communal (e.g., meals), whereas the senior students are given individual responsibility for themselves and their possessions, thereby acquiring useful life skills and community skills.

As stated earlier, each boarding house is named in the local Larrakia dialect. On arrival, students are allocated to a boarding house and room respective of their gender, year level and kinship connections. One dormitory-style building, situated closer to the School buildings, had previously accommodated student boarders but had been deemed too old for this specialised purpose and is now reserved for visiting family and community members. This practice forms part of the School's policy to support the cultural safety and security of students and to conduct community consultations. Aboriginal students represent upwards of thirty-five different communities in the boarding houses and the School

maintains a complete demographic profile of every community. This enables teachers and boarding staff to tailor the students' choice of studies based on future employment possibilities in their home communities, and to ensure an awareness of circumstances and events in those communities relevant to students' wellbeing and continued engagement.

Formal handovers between teachers and boarding staff occur daily when Heads of House commence their shift at 3pm, repeated again at close of shift next morning. Briefings enable relevant staff to be informed of issues, incidents or achievements and adapt their interactions with students accordingly. Supervised after-school activities involve teachers and support staff, including sports and leadership activities with the Strong Girls Academy, developed by the School to support girls, and the Clontarf Academy, an external provider embedded in the School to support boys. Music teachers assist students to record original songs in the fully-equipped studio. Dinner in the large cafeteria is often attended by teachers and executive staff in order to ensure informal liaison and relationship building occurs between various levels of staff in the School. For example, when student achievement awards are hosted, a celebratory atmosphere fills the cafeteria with loud applause and beaming faces. Homework supervision in the Boarding Houses occurs four evenings per week, often voluntarily supported by teachers. Boarding staff, teachers and executive staff work alongside each other in formal settings, annual community consultations and informal settings such as special events and excursions. In this way, though the boarding complex is physically distanced from the classrooms, there is a constant interplay of interactions among all parties for the safety, engagement and wellbeing of students.

### *3.2.3. Wellbeing*

The School applies a Restorative Justice approach to student wellbeing and classroom behaviour management in conjunction with a raft of culturally appropriate policies and procedures that support the interrelationship between students, school and community. Several policies of especial pertinence to Aboriginal Education in a boarding school setting are briefly outlined in this section.

Restorative Justice is particularly suited to multicultural schools due to its core values of reconciliation and repairing relationships harmed by damaging behaviour. Implemented in Australian schools for several decades (Payne & Welch, 2013), Restorative Justice is defined as “a process whereby parties with a stake in a specific offence [who] collectively resolve how to deal with the aftermath of the offence and its implications for the future” (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2010). Three common practices are victim-offender mediation, conferencing, and circle and forum sentencing (ALRC, 2010). In educational settings, these practices seek to “shift the focus from punishment and isolation to reconciliation and community” (Payne & Welch, 2013, p. 2). The School devotes one whole week per year to a well-planned, multidisciplinary program of professional

development for staff ('The School', 2016), in which Restorative Justice training is offered to staff interested in building skills for positive behaviour management. Restorative Justice is best delivered by individuals who possess empathy and mediation skills, in order to avoid the accidental antagonism of either party during the process. Restorative Justice and restorative practice (McDonald, 2010, pp. 122-126) are implemented at the School immediately following any incident, to "rebuild and restore a sense of dignity and community" (Curran, 2019, para. 3) and reengage students with their learning as soon as possible.

Culturally responsive organisations are defined as incorporating systematic involvement of key stakeholders and communities, employing staff that are culturally competent "who understand and respond to the communities in which they operate [and] policies, procedures and structures that promote such culturally competent interactions and ways of working and support its staff to act in this way" (MCEECDYA, 2010; Perso, 2012, p. 23). The School has a coordinated approach to formal consultation, viewing it as an essential component of a suite of culturally responsive policies and practices (see Chapter 5, Sections 5.3.2. & 5.4.1.; Appendix J). In order to engage with Elders and family members of boarding students, the School holds annual community consultations to generate *authentic two-way dialogue* (What Works, 2012, p. 28) on academic and operational matters, including policy guidance.

Contributors to the consultation process are not necessarily the Elders in a given community or parents but can be culturally appropriate relatives of boarding students. Each of the twenty-plus (20+) annual Aboriginal graduates from Year 12 are permitted to select two parents or family members for the consultation and each year, around August, the School invites them to attend the campus in late November for a whole week. The School funds their travel and provides accommodation in the aforementioned boarding house, on the proviso that no other children in the family are brought other than those who may require parental care (e.g., children under 12-months). This is intentional, in order for the School to have *quality time* in conversation with parents. Community uptake has meant that between thirty and forty parents will respond to the invitation each year.

On commencement of the week-long consultation period, the School articulates an expectation that family members will reciprocate the School's investment by giving some of their *time*. In doing so, the parents and/or caregivers can contribute to a discussion of their views on the education of their child over the years of attendance and suggest any improvements for boarding and the School. The Principal and Head of Boarding, Head of Aboriginal Education and several staff related to Aboriginal Education and boarding attend the meeting, equipped with a number of questions related to Boarding or Day school. Upon presenting these questions, in recognition of Aboriginal cultural protocols, the School gives family members time to sit and talk amongst themselves, often in language, followed by

the provision of morning tea. Only after this does everyone re-group and the Principal and staff members return to the discussion.

It is the policy of the School to ask, “Give us your thoughts on any of the education aspects for this year, or previous years.” Attendees respond accordingly, with statements such as, “We don’t like the PE classes mixed. We want the PE classes to be single sex.” Then the group will talk about what this means. In order to be certain of the meanings entailed in feedback, staff clarify with the Elders and family members what they are actually saying to avoid any misunderstandings. After each suggestion, staff assure the group that they will look at adapting their practice in specific areas of concern for the following year. The meetings are recorded, giving accountability to the School and family members.

The consultation process raises both curriculum and operational matters. For example, parents might say, “The holidays are too long. We’d like to bring them back to school a bit earlier so they can get ready.” As students begin travelling on Day 1 of term and if their journey takes several days, some end up missing a large portion of the first week. In response to this actual concern, the School liaised with relevant government bodies to allow students to travel back to boarding school on the preceding Thursday or Friday, or weekend prior to the first week of term: “So, we changed how we did things” (Gil).

The School allows students to attend the consultation meetings if they wish. Sometimes students will make the request because they feel, in circumstances where families are not proficient in English, that they might convey the message more effectively. After families have attempted to make their point, the students express it to the staff in English. This is not the only approach to language preservation, cultural safety and security in the meetings. The School also encourages *language time* and does not only ask questions in English but will request a known staff or community member fluent in English and language to explain the concept in language to ensure that everyone understands precisely what the School is asking.

As a result of this adaptive and flexible approach, consultation became quite a drawn-out process. Yet, in the words of the Principal, having attended the annual consultations for ten years, “It gave us the feedback we needed” (Gil). Generally, as boarding students commence their ABSTUDY-organised travel homeward, often in Week 10 of Term 4, feedback from the consultation is formally provided to Aboriginal staff, Aboriginal Education teachers and Aboriginal Teacher Assistants during this uninterrupted period during which they do not have a teaching role. As the School holds a philosophy of excellence in education and promotes high standards in Aboriginal Education, teachers are given autonomy to negotiate a pathway between the prescribed curriculum and the requests of the families. This approach is supported by research that considers the tailoring of formal schooling to



meet “local cultural values, needs and understandings” as an “ideal condition” (Butler et al., 2019, p. 153) to support the wellbeing of Aboriginal students.

By conducting annual consultations in a respectful manner, the School enacts cultural responsiveness at a “systemic, organizational [*sic*], professional and individual” level (Perso, 2012, p. 22) which supports the ongoing growth and development of staff and students. The School also meets the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework for relationships (WA Department of Education, 2015, p. 6) and its approach to community consultation is perhaps best expressed by the Principal:

Because it was always viewed as a triangle – with the family and the student and the School in that triangle. There were always arrows going left and right between those three parties, to make sure that we weren’t doing anything that would cause offence. (Gil)

Community consultation and other whole-school approaches to cultural safety and security are viewed by the School as essential for supporting Aboriginal students. The unique complexity of the School requires culturally responsive curriculum, leadership and wellbeing. The next section describes the researcher’s professional experience relevant to the study’s context.

### **3.3. The researcher context**

In this section, the researcher’s professional experience in Aboriginal Education and multicultural settings is positioned as advantageous to the research. The researcher’s relationship to the research site, location and participant groups is acknowledged and clarified. In recognition of the study’s theoretical framework, the concept of cultural difference is defined and contextualised with regard to the researcher’s experience in cross-cultural learning environments.

#### *3.3.1. Authorial voice in the text*

The study is situated within the theoretical framework of two qualitative inquiry traditions: phenomenology and ethnomethodology. Salient aspects of these traditions in relation to their application in the study are explained in Chapter 4 Methods, with a summary of the theoretical perspective of interpretivism, including hermeneutics, which guided the analytical process. As a result of being partially ethnomethodological, the study incorporates certain ethnographic interpretive procedures. The autoethnographic technique of drawing upon the researcher’s own experiences as a primary data source helped to inform and support the data collection process and later, interpretation. Ethnographic fieldnotes, or jottings, were completed with a view to connecting both macro and micro levels of analysis (Patton, 2002, p. 89).

Qualitative inquiry and ethnography in particular, strongly emphasise the “first-person active voice” (Patton, 2002, p. 88) in reporting. Personal story is a creative literary device performing the dual purpose of engaging the reader and enhancing the analytic process through reflection. In response to this literary dimension of phenomenological writing, the dissertation is presented in the third-person, with hints of first-person perspective, and contains textual elements that are self-conscious and somewhat emotive, having a tone of voice that is by turns “expressive, reflective, searching, academic, or critical” (Patton, 2002, p. 88) when interpreting and describing the phenomenon.

### *3.3.2. “rich with personal significance...”*

The qualitative researcher ought, according to researchers inspired by Moustakas (Moustakas, 1994; Turner & Thielking, 2019), to select a topic “rich with personal significance and social meaning” (Rudestam & Newton, 2001, p. 69). This ensures that the researcher remains passionately engaged in exploring and understanding the nature of the problem and is able to draw upon insights gained from the prism of personal experience. Culture, Aboriginal history and cultural difference in the classroom is, for me, a very personal topic and one on which, from the outset, I have thought deeply about during twenty years of contributing to multicultural education.

Having previously worked in the urban setting in which the research site is located, I was able to approach the research question with an understanding of the complexity of Aboriginal Education, a spirit of collegiality with and empathy for teachers, and an awareness of the complex ecosystem of schools. Having lived and worked overseas, and taught in multicultural classrooms in western Sydney, I have firsthand knowledge of the skills and characteristics necessary to navigate different cultures and to manage cultural difference. As a teacher, my experience of classroom management necessarily led me to develop culturally appropriate strategies for deescalating conflict and a range of interactive strategies to place the focus on learning.

In order to clarify existing interconnectivities, the researcher’s “relationship with the group to be studied must be fully acknowledged and described” (Rudestam & Newton, 2001). Therefore, what follows articulates the researcher’s relationship and professional history:

As a young adult, I lived in a remote community in the Northern Territory and taught Vocational Education and Training (VET) certificate courses, travelling to outstations in Kakadu National Park and communities in southwestern Arnhem Land to teach literacy, numeracy, information technology and office skills to mature-age Aboriginal students. I developed learning resources and assessment tasks with a strong emphasis on equity, validity and diversity. After teaching in the UK for two years, I worked at a distance education school in Darwin, teaching VET courses to remotely based secondary-school students. I visited remote communities with my colleagues on a regular basis, travelling by road or small chartered aircraft, to teach and assess students and meet community

members. Each visit was vital for building relationships with Aboriginal teachers and staff and their non-Aboriginal colleagues. Attending community and cultural events was a privilege and I have witnessed strong roots to an ancient culture in communities such as Gapuwiyak, Umbakumba, Jilkminggan, Angurugu, Gunbalanya and Yirrkala, among others.

These experiences led me to appreciate the influence of culture in the classroom and ways in which language, knowledge and expectations have an impact on accessibility to learning. I also began to fathom the influence of family relationships and kinship, of place and country inside the classroom, and the need to build rapport and demonstrate a willingness to learn within a complex interchange of social and cultural expectations and obligations. Seeing a need for specialised training and support for non-Aboriginal teachers in remote schools, I applied for and received Australian Government grants to conduct a mentoring program focused on culturally appropriate pedagogy, flexible learning (including interactive distance learning using satellite technology) and the essential role of the teacher in bringing a sense of place and belonging into the learning environment (Perso, 2012).

Bookended by these experiences with Aboriginal students, I taught in London, Oxford and Cambridge as a teacher in high schools, community education colleges and English language schools. Working with ethnically diverse students only accentuated my belief that every teacher-student interaction is a learning opportunity for both teacher and student and should be valued as such. In one of my Business English classes, students from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Turkey, South Korea, Mongolia and Ghana would often hold friendly debates on issues of cultural sensitivity. Encountering such a vast range of cultural difference in the classroom made me appreciate that one's conception of the 'right' way of being in the world merely reflects the culture and society in which one has been raised and must necessarily be flexible in its expression when transposed to other cultural settings.

After living and travelling in the Middle East for a year, I completed a Master of Teaching (Secondary) at the University of Western Sydney and worked for five years as a casual (relief/supply) teacher in Western Sydney high schools. I found that my Trinity College London certificate in teaching English as a second language (TESOL, or EALD in current parlance) had prepared me well to manage classrooms of ethnically and linguistically diverse students. EALD training emphasised the need to reduce 'teacher talking time' and increase 'student talking time' while using a range of pedagogical approaches (Kostadinovska-Stojchevska & Popovikj, 2019). Research described in Hattie (2012) found that teachers in the main have a didactic approach, most often using closed questions and waiting less than one second for an answer, thus creating classroom conditions that are difficult or unsuited to EALD learners. Around 15 percent of teachers never ask an open question and of 200-300 questions asked per day, the majority are low-level cognitive questions (Hattie, 2012, p. 83), which does not encourage dialogue between teachers and students. Only about 5–10 per cent of teacher-talk triggered a dialogic exchange, leading Hattie (2012) to observe, "Teachers love to talk ... The more

important task is for teachers to listen” (p. 81). The Trinity College London course had involved a rigorous assessment process with real students, observed by tutors and fellow teachers, and a short immersion in a foreign language and, expected high standards. Peer-assessment in that context is not a process for the fainthearted. As a result, I have always valued the legacy of EALD training in my teaching practice, particularly in creating a dialogic learning environment and being comfortable for peers to observe my teaching practice.

In Australia, the dominant culture is usually monolingual and in my role as a casual teacher, I sometimes observed that teachers without EALD qualifications had difficulty discerning when a barrier to learning was caused by a language comprehension issue. Instead of empathy and “intercultural communicative competence” (Moeller & Nugent, 2014, pp. 7-8), teachers would provide the answer and quickly move on. Open-ended questions, listening and actively checking student understanding in addition to teaching key vocabulary at the outset are preferable strategies. When teachers do not have a dialogic approach, some students risk being labelled as uninterested or disruptive, possibly lacking in academic ability and unable to learn (Hattie, 2012, p. 89). This discord in perception can result in reduced rapport between teachers and students, leading to frustration and disengagement.

From my professional experience, I realised that an understanding of behaviour is enhanced greatly when positioned within the context of a student’s culture and language. Students may be unwilling to admit unfamiliarity with key words, particularly if ignorance might elicit shame or teasing by peers. If teachers are better able to determine when a barrier to learning is language-related, differentiation can occur and tasks modified accordingly without a cultural deficit paradigm being unwittingly enacted.

In the next section, the researcher’s professional teaching experience will be positioned as advantageous to the research.

### 3.3.3. “...and social meaning”

While every teacher arrives in the classroom with their own reasons for being there, I have found teachers that I have worked with and alongside to be, on the whole, dedicated to the social good of education and passionate about making a difference to students’ lives. The concept of *giving back* is frequently vaunted, including in interviews conducted as part of the study and which are examined in a later chapter of this thesis. Teaching, as a profession, is viewed by many in a vocational sense, as a ‘calling’ or lifelong commitment (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015). I am not immune to this view. I too share the deep-felt care and concern for students as expressed by my colleagues and have felt at different times the perplexity, dismay, joy or satisfaction that teaching can evince. As teachers, we share in our students’ problems, quirks, goals and dreams, and our hopes for them are high. Stories of encountering unexpected challenges or difficulties, discussions of how to respond or recover, what

advice or support is required for a student's best interest and wellbeing, are all conversations that occur on a daily basis in schools.

What happens in a school is influenced by the world outside its boundaries. Schools are social places and humans are social beings, representing "microcosms of society" (Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010, p. 95) in educational contexts. As such, they are "places of great influence, [contributing] to an overall understanding of social structure, attitudes and changes" (Mansouri et al., 2009, as cited in Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010, p. 105). Schools have an exclusivity about them, taking on the shape of a group that naturally develops a distinct culture. Over time, traditions are formed that govern the behaviour, language, values and expectations of members within the group. This has the effect of providing safety, shared identity and discipline for members. However, membership is undertaken with the proviso, or threat whether overt or implied, that loss of membership will ensue if those traditions are ignored. Through shared patterns of behaviour and ethos, the school culture is strengthened. Without the group consenting to uphold these traditions, culture would be eviscerated, dishonoured or devalued.

The problem for teachers in a multicultural society is that they are often representatives of the dominant culture in an educational setting (Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010). Artefacts of this culture, such as curriculum, professional standards and disciplinary procedures, have been constructed by members of the dominant culture in the wider society. Schools determine the agreed behaviours, values and expectations to be enacted onsite, based on these top-down directives, and enforce compliance for members of the group, which in this context comprises teachers, students, parents and community, thereby establishing the culture of the school.

As described previously, the study's focus encompasses the experience of non-Aboriginal teachers teaching classes of Aboriginal students in a boarding school. This educational context is hereafter described as teaching in 'classrooms of cultural difference' or teaching 'culturally different students', terms derived from Gay (2010). In discussing cultural self-awareness in teachers, Gay argues that without cultural awareness training, teachers "may misread some of the behaviors of their culturally different students and, as a result, mistreat or disempower them, personally and pedagogically" (Gay, 2010, p. 71).

Cultural difference is distinct from the "cultural deficit paradigm" (Banks, 2010, p. ix), which asserts that any disparity from the dominant cultural 'norm' is negative, thereby inferring a lack or deficiency in the ethnically diverse *Other*. Proponents of this way of thinking focus on "what students of color [*sic*] don't have and can't do" (Gay, 2010, p. 25), implying an automatic lessening of potential and capability in students, and a reduced social value, due to differences in cultural identity.

Throughout this dissertation, the term *cultural difference* describes the circumstance of teachers with a cultural identity distinct from that expressed by Aboriginal students in the classroom. The term is used without prejudice, judgement or insinuation, possessing no racial overtone nor sense of superiority. The researcher merely acknowledges the dissimilarity of cultural heritage, ethnicity and socialisation existing among these parties, a result of their having acquired skills, knowledge, language and social mores that are at variance with, and not necessarily transparent to, each other. The concept of cultural difference to me, as researcher, has neither positive nor negative connotation but offers recognition of the existence of the equally valid, richly complex heritages we all bring to the classroom.

### **3.4. The essence and nature of the phenomenon**

The thesis is written using an evocative method to convey the essence of the phenomenon, recording the ‘lived’ or ‘lived through’ experiences of participants, often using their choice of words, turn of phrase and unique use of language, with experiential descriptions set within the context of the phenomenon. Participants’ voices will be interspersed with insights drawn from the researcher’s immersive experience of the phenomenon. Anecdotes from interview transcripts illustrate ways in which participants have approached, at times withdrawn from and returned to, the phenomenon.

Personal pronouns are used to denote participants and to encourage engagement with their voices in order to “pull the reader in” (van Manen, 2014, p. 256). The first-person pronoun, when used, refers to the researcher. This narrative approach was chosen in response to the need for phenomenological researchers to interpret data and seek to convey its essence from an insider’s perspective, and thus to: “Remain constantly oriented to the lived experience of the phenomenon” (van Manen, 2014, p. 256).

The thesis is written using authorial devices that attempt to “find expressive means to penetrate and stir up the prereflective substrates of experience as we live them” (van Manen, 2014, p. 240). A sense of immediacy and authenticity is sought through the use of such literary effects as adjectives and alliteration, and participants’ voices are quoted verbatim throughout, including colloquialisms: “Sometimes experiential descriptions are so well narrated that they already have the narrative shape of an anecdote” (van Manen, 2014, p. 251).

### **3.5. Summary**

This chapter has described the Northern Territory context of the research site, followed by a description of the School, its mission, structure and the unique complexity as a Boarding and Day School, outlining the osmotic dynamic between the two. Pertinent policies and programs that positioned the School as a culturally responsive educational setting were articulated. The researcher’s

professional experience was positioned as advantageous to the research. Cross-cultural communication in diverse educational settings was described, prefacing the methodological process in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER FOUR



Northern Australian seascape  
Photo © Megan Spiers



# Chapter 4: Methods

*Teachers need to be assertive enough to encourage high expectations but at the same time, bring to the class an individual approach whereby they will work hard to use the data that we produce ... to identify the gaps in learning for all of our students. And it's been particularly useful for our Indigenous students. (Gil)*

Chapter 2 provided an examination of literature in the field of Aboriginal Education and outlined current studies of cultural competence in teachers, the learning experience of Aboriginal students in boarding schools, building culturally responsive schools, and government policy related to practice in Aboriginal Education. Consistent failure to ‘close the gap’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017a, 2018, 2019) between the academic achievements of Aboriginal students and their non-Aboriginal peers has been described by the Prime Minister, Hon Scott Morrison, as “unforgivable” (Conifer & Higgins, 2019, para. 4). In providing the background to this study, the literature review demonstrated gaps in the research wherein teachers’ voices and their lived experience had not yet been recorded as evidence of a need for further research. Chapter 3 provided the context for the study and an introduction to the unique complexity of the research site. In this chapter, the central research question is articulated and its three components, presented as sub-research questions, are examined. The theoretical framework underpinning the study is outlined and research processes contextualised for the research site, including ethical considerations and limitations to the study.

## 4.1. Purpose of the study

This study investigates the central Research Question:

What are the causal attributes for cultural competence in teachers and boarding staff (paraprofessionals) working effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?

Four components are extrapolated from the central research question to become three sub-research questions, and it was anticipated that these would inform the intention of the study:

*Sub-Research Question 1:* What factors, such as prerequisite skills, knowledge and understanding, are the best predictors for the long-term success of teachers in classrooms of Aboriginal students?

*Sub-Research Question 2:* What relationship exists, if any, between causal attribution, motivational variables and attainment of cultural competence?

*Sub-Research Question 3:* How can this relationship be leveraged to effectively develop cultural competence in teachers and non-teaching staff who are inexperienced or feeling overwhelmed by the challenges inherent in a multicultural environment?

The dominant focus of this study can thus be expressed in two parts. Firstly, to explore actions and attitudes that assist in the acquisition of cultural competence, with reference to pedagogical practices and teacher perspectives. Secondly, to review teachers' strategies for cross-cultural communication, in order to discover ways in which the findings may contribute toward improving teacher effectiveness.

The study sought particularly to reveal the causal attributes and motivational variables underlying participants' lived experience of the phenomenon. Qualitative data collection methods enabled participants to reflect on their pedagogical practice and provide authentic accounts of how teachers and boarding staff resolved classroom incidents, challenges and issues specific to the unique context of the research site. Qualitative analytical methods were applied in order that a leverageable relationship between cultural competence, causal attribution and motivation might be revealed, with potential applicability across broader educational contexts.

## **4.2. Approach to the study**

The study investigated the perceptions of non-Aboriginal teachers in a boarding school in northern Australia. Initially, a mixed-method approach was planned, incorporating a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection tools and action-learning elements. However, as fieldwork progressed, it became clear that external and situational factors affecting the research site would not support an action-learning inquiry. An adaptive or flexible approach was therefore applied, and the study modified to a single method qualitative inquiry. The selection of a phenomenological method, with aspects of naturalistic-ethnomethodology and interpretivist responses incorporated in the research processes, was deemed to be most appropriate for producing "*interested knowledge*" (Greene, 2010, p. 70, emphasis in original) regarding the phenomenon.

Research processes for data collection included semi-structured interviews and focus groups, classroom observation and the immersion of the researcher in the natural setting of the participants, that is, in the field (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, pp. 133, 287) or more precisely, the School. The research processes could remain adaptive (A. G. Spiers, 2017, p. 71), evolving according to circumstances through a process of reflection and engagement with all aspects of data collection and analysis, as naturalistic-ethnographers require a certain flexibility in planning: "The naturalistic enquirer has to go with the flow of social action, so to speak. The design of a naturalistic enquiry unfolds as the study progresses" (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 133). Data analysis utilised an inductive approach within an interpretivist framework to discover emergent themes, using the analytical software packages of

Leximancer and NVivo. Initially, it was planned that the descriptive phenomenological method (Giorgi, 2009) would be used but, on reflection, hermeneutic phenomenology best suited the study's context. Qualitative methods, limitations and issues relevant to the study are detailed later in this chapter.

The primary intention of this study was to explore, and appreciate what is involved in, the acquisition of cultural competence by teachers, who self-identified as culturally different<sup>4</sup> from their students. In addition to describing teachers' experience of the phenomenon with a "rich understanding" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 63), the study aimed to uncover revelatory aspects of teacher practice in order to reveal how teachers acquired and applied their skills, knowledge and understanding to support the wellbeing and academic aspirations of Aboriginal students. Further, the study sought to identify factors that were considered by participants to have contributed to their longevity in Aboriginal Education.

The perspectives of successful teachers were sought in the hope that their experiences might lead to the development of findings applicable for a wider educational context. In this study, *successful teachers* are defined as those who: demonstrate excellent preparation and planning; create positive, culturally safe and secure classroom environments; and, set high expectations. In addition, the successful teacher described by Gribble (2002) in Perso and Hayward (2015) derives lesson content from the prior knowledge and "cultural experiences" of students and applies a teaching pedagogy that prioritises "student-centred learning" (pp. 160-161).

As mentioned, the study sought to reveal the journey towards cultural competence undertaken by teachers and boarding staff (paraprofessionals). To appreciate in detail what is entailed in that process, a predominantly phenomenological method was used. Using specific research processes, the study aimed to reveal key factors considered by participants as essential for longevity in the phenomenon. The findings have the potential to assist early career teachers to develop self-efficacy in multicultural learning environments. A brief summary of the research site and the criteria for selecting the study participants are now described.

### 4.3. Research site and participants

The research site is an Independent School (hereafter termed, 'the School') in Darwin, capital city of the Northern Territory. The School had a historical mandate to educate Aboriginal students from remote and rural communities across northern Australia and this responsibility, along with core

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<sup>4</sup> The term *cultural difference* (see definition in previous chapter), is used throughout the thesis. It indicates dissimilarity in the cultural positionality of non-Aboriginal participants and Aboriginal students. Its use implies no judgment or deprecatory inference that may otherwise be connoted in the word *difference*. Rather, one of the cornerstone values in the study was recognition, respect and appreciation of difference.

values, leadership hierarchy and relevant processes, was described in Chapter 3 Context. The School's population comprised 67% non-Aboriginal students and international students and 33% Aboriginal students, predominantly from remote communities. While some Aboriginal students attended the School from urban or regional centres in the Northern Territory, many commenced their educational journey from rural, remote or very remote locations scattered across the vast tropical and arid reaches of northern Australia.

As described more fully in the previous chapter, Aboriginal boarding students at the School were accommodated in onsite boarding houses, managed by Heads of House, led by the Head of Boarding and Assistant Head of Boarding. Boarding staff and other support staff including counsellors, health practitioners and sports organisers interacted with students outside of school hours. The cohort of Aboriginal students was not homogenous, arriving as they did from upwards of thirty-five different communities and possessing an array of languages, family and community relationships, and diverse cultural, spiritual and religious identities.

As a result, the School represented a blending of what might otherwise be considered a quite disparate dichotomy. Specifically, this meant that the School and its mission had a flexible orientation, combining the Whiteness narrative of Western democracies with the geographically isolated yet culturally rich landscape inherently brought to the School by the remotely based students. In a physical display of both lifeworlds, the School's classrooms, halls and meeting spaces were decorated with a unique indigeneity. This distinctive aspect to the School's identity was highly valued by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, their parents and the wider community.

#### *4.3.1. Recruitment of the participants*

The study aimed to investigate the teachers' journey toward cultural competence, and to explore key factors of that process, through the prism of participants' experience in culturally different classrooms. The theoretical framework of the study is detailed in later sections; however, a brief outline of the participant selection criteria now follows.

##### *4.3.1.1. Assumed knowledge and accreditation*

All teacher participants held full registration with the Teacher Registration Board of the Northern Territory (TRB NT), indicating that each had completed the appropriate professional development and qualifications expected for quality teaching (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2018; Teacher Registration Board of the Northern Territory, 2011, 2019) and were considered proficient in their profession according to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers:

Proficient teachers meet the requirements for full registration through demonstrating achievement of the seven Standards at this level. These teachers create effective teaching and learning experiences for their students ... know the unique backgrounds of their students and adjust their teaching to meet their individual needs and diverse cultural, social and linguistic characteristics ... develop safe, positive and productive learning environments ... work collaboratively with colleagues ... communicate effectively with their students, colleagues, parents/carers and community members. They behave professionally and ethically in all forums. (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2020a, p. 7)

As revealed in the next chapter, no graduate teachers were involved in the study, due to the School's policy of not allocating teachers in their first year of teaching to Aboriginal Education classrooms. This student-wellbeing-oriented policy ensured that only teachers with an appropriate level of cultural knowledge and pedagogical experience were placed in classrooms comprised of Aboriginal students.

#### 4.3.1.2. Informed consent

All participants held Ochre Cards (Working with Children and Vulnerable Persons). Potential participants, identified through criterion sampling, were invited to participate by personal communication or email using work contacts provided by the gatekeepers. If an individual expressed interest in participating, a meeting was held, at a time of their choosing, to discuss the study and the anticipated extent of their contribution. Potential participants were provided with a Participant Information Letter (see Appendix A) and an Informed Consent Document approved by the ECU Human Research Ethics Committee. The purpose of the study, requirements and processes for participation, confidentiality and privacy of data and ethical considerations, including data storage and sharing results were detailed and explained verbally. Participants were given opportunities to ask questions and clarify the extent of their involvement and level of commitment required. Contact details for the researcher and university were provided. Participants were asked to return a signed Informed Consent Document prior to inclusion in the study.

#### 4.3.1.3. Participant selection criteria

In phenomenology and ethnography, purposeful sampling allows for the deliberate selection of participants using a precise set of parameters for inclusion and exclusion. Criterion sampling limits the selection of participants to individuals with experience of the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998, p. 112). In the study, this was considered to be an effective method for refining a broader group of potential participants, generated by theoretical sampling, into a concise set of sub-groups wherein identified school positions were well-placed to provide an insider's perspective of the phenomenon. As ethnographic elements were applied in the study, the researcher was entitled to "rely on their [her] judgement" and make decisions on the selection of individuals for each sub-group "based on their

[her] research questions” (Creswell, 1998, p. 120). Teachers and boarding staff were invited to participate in the study if their current role at the School included a direct pedagogical involvement with Aboriginal students.

#### 4.3.1.4. Participant sub-groups

In a phenomenological inquiry, data collection occurs largely through interviews of between five and twenty-five individuals (Creswell, 1998). In total, eighteen participants provided permission for their voices to be transcribed as sources of data and included for analysis in the study. While the study’s focus was on the teachers’ journey to cultural competence, a rich description of the phenomenon required a holistic view of the School and therefore, boarding staff and executive staff were needed to provide their perspectives on the phenomenon.

Participants in the study comprised two groups, Teachers and Boarding staff, within which there were four sub-groups:

1. Proficient or Lead Teachers with varying levels of cultural awareness and professional expertise, currently teaching Aboriginal Education classes at the research site;
2. Provisional or Graduate Teachers with varying levels of cultural awareness and teaching experience, currently teaching Aboriginal Education classes at the research site;
3. Boarding Staff: qualified youth workers and graduates of cultural awareness training, currently employed in a paraprofessional capacity in Boarding at the research site; and,
4. Executive Staff in senior leadership and middle management roles, with experience in engaging with Aboriginal students, parents and communities.

The above sub-groups included individuals from different hierarchical strata within the School. As outlined in Chapter 3 Context, the structure of the School was complex and the relationship between management, classroom and boarding is illustrated in Appendix I. For brevity, the boarding hierarchy is indicated in Figure 1 below. This hierarchical structure may be explanatory of differences between participant Sub-groups 3 and 4 regarding their preferred method of contributing their voices to the study. The Executive Staff, the Head of Boarding and Assistant Head of Boarding preferred to be interviewed only and to act as *gatekeepers*. They did not participate in focus groups, to ensure that staff would speak freely in the focus groups.

Thirteen participants (Sub-groups 1, 2 and 4) contributed to semi-structured interviews: the Principal, whose duties included a teaching role at the school; two Heads of Department, colloquially known as ‘HODs’, responsible for managing staff in a key learning area (KLA) in addition to a teaching role;

eight teachers with a current teaching load of Aboriginal Education classes; the Head of Boarding, and the Assistant Head of Boarding, jointly responsible for the operational management of boarding at the School, including staffing and the enrolment and engagement of Aboriginal students.

The Teachers focus group involved five proficient and lead teachers (Sub-group 1), including one current Head of Year, responsible for the wellbeing of a single year-level cohort (e.g., Year 7) of students. The Boarding focus group consisted solely of boarding staff (Sub-group 3), all Heads of House, each managing the wellbeing of students and staff within a single boarding house.

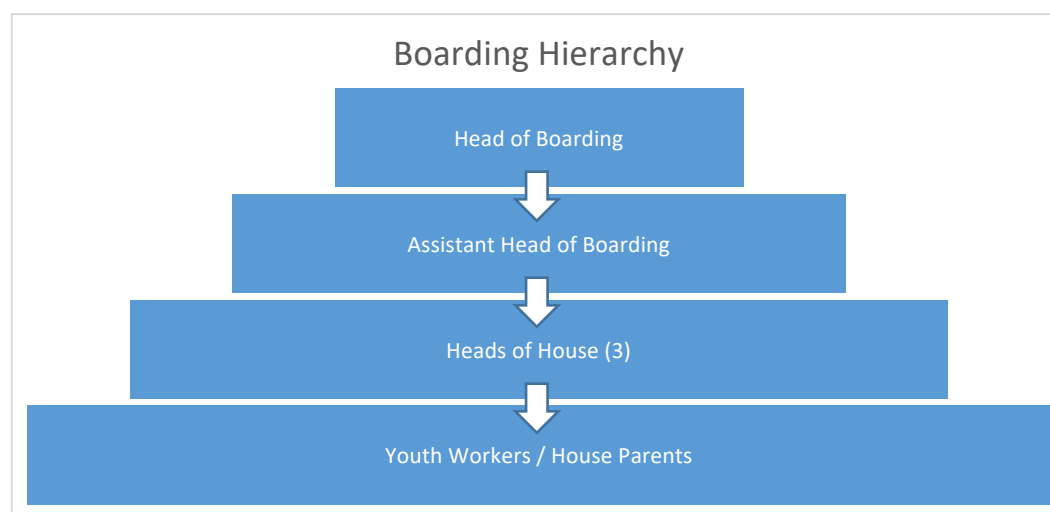


Figure 1. Boarding management structure

The Executive Staff (Sub-group 4) comprised the Principal, Assistant Principals, Head of Boarding and Assistant Head of Boarding who either participated in the interviews, as mentioned above, or acted as *gatekeepers* and *key informants* for the study, enabling entry to the research site and providing information and insights regarding the context (Creswell, 1998, p. 60). Within this sub-group, one staff member withheld permission for a recorded interview yet provided commentary and historical background to the School, which enhanced my contextualisation of the findings.

#### 4.3.1.4.1. Modifications to proposed participant sub-groups

It was originally intended for Aboriginal Teacher Assistants (TAs) to be interviewed at the research site, to gather an alternative view of the classroom experiences described by teachers. However, on reflection and *in situ*, this did not answer the main focus of the study, that of investigating non-Aboriginal teachers' experiences of the phenomenon and their journey toward cultural competence. Other studies have documented the influence of Aboriginal Education Officers on levels of Aboriginal student engagement (e.g., Craven et al., 2014).

As described above, criterion sampling was applied in determining participation in the study, resulting in four participant sub-groups. These sub-groups incorporated non-Aboriginal teachers and boarding staff in a boarding school. With its strong phenomenological and ethnographic focus, the research design addressed ethical considerations for human research, specifically research related to Aboriginal people, and this is discussed in the next section.

#### *4.3.2. Participant recruitment process*

The researcher visited the School on numerous occasions. An introduction to the research, its purpose and potential benefits was given in person at a meeting of combined Middle School and High School staff. The researcher spoke briefly about the inquiry using language and terminology appropriate for the audience as well as highlighting the voluntary nature of participation and positive aspects of contributing to research and most notably of the potential for their experiences to assist other teachers in similar contexts. Being aware of the School's ongoing commitment to educational research, and of a visible learning research project taking place onsite, the researcher had confidence that teachers would be accustomed to the presence of researchers and would be comfortable engaging on that basis.

After the staff meeting, invitations were emailed to potential participants, using the criteria outlined below. On acceptance of the invitation, potential participants met with the researcher in person to receive further detail in accordance with ethical standards, including information on research protocols, ability to withdraw from the research, data collection and storage, confidentiality protocols, and the assurance that participation or withdrawal would not affect their position at the school. All contact occurred during school hours. Phone, email and face-to-face communication was effective and appropriate for all participant groups, and visits in person to classrooms was the preferred method for arranging and confirming classroom observations. The school setting, timing of site visits and teaching schedule of participants was respected at all times.

Recruitment of participants was planned within a theoretical sampling approach. Theoretical or purposive sampling ensures that all potential participants belong to a homogenous group, that is, those who have experienced the phenomenon (Rudestam & Newton, 2001). This approach enables “experientially relevant” (p. 93) concepts, themes and categories to be discovered. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are now discussed.

##### *4.3.2.1. Inclusion criteria*

In the participant selection process, criterion sampling was used as a purposeful strategy to refine the larger group of potential participants, generated by theoretical sampling. Criteria for inclusion were developed to ensure that the relevance and richness of collected data remained applicable to the “complexity” (Nakata, 2007, p. 198) of Aboriginal Education. Only those individuals who were



currently employed by the School in roles with direct pedagogical involvement with Aboriginal students were invited to participate. For the purposes of the study, *direct pedagogical involvement* was defined as those interactions that might reasonably be expected to contribute toward a measurable and positive influence on student learning within the framework of school-approved syllabus and curriculum. Teaching, tutoring and homework supervision were included in this definition.

The ‘direct pedagogical involvement’ parameter for inclusion ensured that all individuals invited to participate had current experience of the phenomenon. Of these individuals, the majority were employed in full-time teaching positions, held current teacher registration with the TRB NT, and taught classes of Aboriginal students. Several teachers held additional roles of authority in the school, such as Head of Faculty or Head of Year. A smaller sub-group of individuals having close interaction with Aboriginal students occupied non-teaching roles, namely boarding staff. The final sub-group of potential participants incorporated executive staff at middle and senior management levels, namely the Principal and Assistant Principals, selected for their ability to contribute toward developing a “thick description” of the context, a “rich, detailed, and concrete” (Patton, 2002, p. 438) portrayal of the School and its people.

#### 4.3.2.2. Exclusion criteria

Exclusion of participants was determined by their experience of the phenomenon. Teachers without Aboriginal students in their classes were excluded, as were teachers who had past experience teaching Aboriginal Education classes but no current contact (teaching) time with Aboriginal students. Teachers in permanent full-time positions were preferred, as involvement in the study was to occur over several semesters. Staff employed in pastoral care and health management roles (e.g., nurse, psychologist, chaplain) and other activities such as sport and community volunteering, while supporting Aboriginal students’ learning, did not have direct pedagogical involvement with students and so were considered outside the study’s scope and not invited to participate.

A further criterion for exclusion involved Aboriginal students. Although my original research proposal had suggested inclusion of ex-students, reviewers with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage considered that this participant sub-group would not materially contribute toward the study’s aims. Other research has already documented the boarding school experience of Aboriginal students in Western Australia (Mander, 2012; Stewart, 2015).

In addition to the criteria outlined above, an informal sampling criterion was suggested by executive staff involving perceived level of cultural competence and classroom effectiveness. In their role as *gatekeeper* (Rudestam & Newton, 2001, p. 94), the Senior Management Team provided access to the School, facilitated contact with staff and arranged for in-kind support under the terms of the industry engagement partnership. While their support was essential, of perhaps greater significance was their

capacity to supplement the researcher's observations with social awareness otherwise unattainable by an 'outsider', enriching the data with deeper insights into the complex working environment in which the inquiry was situated. Without gatekeepers, access to "the full complexity of the individual's experience" (Rudestam & Newton, 2001, p. 92) would be limited so their advice was welcomed at pertinent times.

Prior to providing participants' contacts, executive staff suggested that only teachers perceived by their peers as highly competent be invited. Their reasoning was that this may produce data of greater benefit to prospective audiences than less experienced teachers. However, as the criterion sampling approach did not discriminate on perceived levels of cultural competence, the researcher requested that no contacts be withheld concerning individuals who met the inclusion criteria.

#### 4.3.2.3. Consultation fatigue

Initially, it was anticipated that teachers of Aboriginal heritage may comprise a further sub-group in the study. One teacher self-identifying as Aboriginal participated in a focus group but preferred not to be interviewed or recorded. In hindsight, and upon seeking advice on the matter from the aforementioned key informants, the researcher realised that invitations to participate may be interpreted as a request for the contribution of an 'Aboriginal person' rather than of a 'teacher' *per se*. This would be an understandable perception, considering that upwards of one-third of NT Public Service employees self-identifying as Aboriginal felt an expectation to represent and provide advice on issues affecting Aboriginal cultures and peoples, regardless of whether they felt qualified to do so (Ganter, 2016).

Being seen as "the reference point for all things Aboriginal" (Ganter, 2016, p. 90) can be a source of inner conflict and tension for Aboriginal people in the workplace, implying "a weight of responsibility" (Ganter, 2016, p. 2) that some would prefer to be able to refuse. Such conflict and weariness were characterised as *consultation fatigue*. References to this concept indicate that Aboriginal people are willing to contribute with "honesty and integrity" (Stonhill, 2019, para. 14) to consultation processes, hoping to effect "positive meaningful change in the community" (Stonhill, 2019, para. 14). However, the near-constant demands can result in "Traditional Owners [having] almost a full-time unpaid job" (Stonhill, 2019, para. 9) in providing advice and attending meetings. Ideally, requests for contribution from Aboriginal staff is governed by the four core principles of community engagement: integrity, inclusion, deliberation and influence (International Congress on Engaging Communities (ICEC 2005), as cited in Hunt, 2013, p. 5). International best practice for Indigenous community engagement is articulated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Hunt, 2013; United Nations, 2007a), articles first rejected then later endorsed by the Australian Government (United Nations, 2007b). Associated implications are outlined in ethical

research guidelines and study protocols involving Aboriginal peoples, including the right to define the benefits according to their own values and priorities (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012; Gower, 2012; McAullay & Hayward, 2012; National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003, p. 10; 2005).

The internationally acknowledged need for inclusion of Aboriginal voices in decision-making has led to a focus on the indigeneity of Aboriginal employees (Burgess, 2017; Ganter, 2016). In schools, Aboriginal teachers can feel their identity is viewed as “primarily ... Aboriginal rather than teacher” (Burgess, 2017, p. 742), a situation derived from the “over-determination of Aboriginality” (Reid & Santoro, 2006, as cited in Burgess, 2017, p. 742) amid binary discourses related to whiteness and normalisation (Burgess, 2017). Subjective assumptions are made regarding the capabilities and expertise of Aboriginal teachers and the cultural responsiveness of school leadership is a correlative for Aboriginal teachers to feel supported in developing their professional identity, as self-efficacy is dependent on “how the relationships of power are experienced within the school hierarchy” (Burgess, 2017, pp. 748-749).

As mentioned above, whilst the researcher extended invitations to Aboriginal staff to participate, their input was peripheral by choice due to other commitments and responsibilities at the time. This is understandable, given the pressure to provide a voice that many Aboriginal people feel. However, their input was not viewed by the researcher as peripheral. When combined with conversations with interested Aboriginal educators and researchers during the life of the study, their input was considered pivotal for understanding the context. In the study, Aboriginal perspectives have been incorporated in the literature review and elicited through personal communications with Aboriginal educators and researchers.

As described in this section, participant selection resulted in four participant sub-groups. These sub-groups incorporated non-Aboriginal teachers and boarding staff through a criterion sampling process. With its strong phenomenological and ethnographic focus, the research design and data collection is described in the next section.

## **4.4. Data collection**

Research processes from two qualitative approaches, phenomenology and ethnography, were applied in data collection. In a phenomenological inquiry, data collection consists of long-form interviews with less than ten individuals. Ethnographic studies adopt an immersive process using multiple forms of data including fieldnotes, interviews and participant observation (Creswell, 1998, p. 113). In this, phenomenology and ethnography differ from other forms of inquiry such as grounded theory in which interviews of up to thirty individuals initiate the coding and revisiting of data, followed by testing

with other individuals, until all concepts are saturated prior to developing substantive theory. In contrast, the study would describe the phenomenon from the voices of a small group of participants and portray shared experiences, with inductive theory emerging from data generated by semi-structured interviews, focus groups and observational protocols.

#### 4.4.1. Sources of evidence

The focus of a phenomenological inquiry is to capture the essence of an experience as voiced by participants and to discover how they interpret their world, the significance they place on an event, and the meaning they make from their experience. Phenomenology seeks to elucidate *deep understandings* of the nature or essence of a shared experience (Patton, 2002, p. 106). In adopting a phenomenological perspective, the researcher attempts to understand the experience through the words of their informants.

Humans are natural storytellers. From the earliest indigenous cultures through to modern day social media, we have shared knowledge and learning through the use of narratives. As expressed in Altrichter and Holly (2005), “people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives” (p. 29). Thus, the phenomenological researcher attempts to collect and record the experiences of participants as they themselves describe the experience. This practice affords not merely an objective retelling but the opportunity to develop a subjective, richly described, deeply insightful portrayal. Research protocols were chosen to capture participants’ stories in context through their authentic use of language and expression, in order to reveal the underlying essence of the phenomenon.

Although less popular as a single approach than other research methodologies, ethnomethodology is the study of how people understand and interpret their worlds, and their role as “*meaning-makers*” (Goldbart & Hustler, 2005, p. 16, emphasis in original) in constructing and working effectively within these cultural worlds. The decision to incorporate elements of an ethnomethodological approach arose chiefly from its emphasis on participant observation, reflexivity and gaining access to members of a culture-sharing group through a *gatekeeper* (Creswell, 1998). The single research site, a boarding school, would be considered under ethnomethodological interpretations to be a community in its own right in which various microcultures or subcultures exist. For example, teachers would represent one microculture while the entire student body represented another, within which the larger group of Aboriginal students would be comprised of microcultures of family or community identified by “shared patterns of behavior” (Creswell, 1998, p. 225), as would teachers in different departments.

As detailed in the previous chapter, the inquiry was designed as a phenomenological inquiry using naturalistic-ethnographical data collection methods. Data were sourced from interviews, focus groups and participant observation carried out at the boarding school. Transcripts of interviews and focus groups were analysed using descriptive phenomenological methods and two software packages,

Leximancer and NVivo. Other sources corroborated these data, including ethnographic fieldnotes and a research journal (see Appendices G & H for samples), handwritten notes from interviews, maps and notations made during classroom observations (see Appendices E & F), and other ephemera from the School, such as Annual Reports, resources, yearbooks, photographs and Aboriginal artwork.

#### 4.4.2. *The nature of knowledge-making*

The purpose of qualitative inquiry is to develop theory grounded in data. The phenomenological researcher seeks to reveal the lived experiences of “everyday social contexts ... from the perspective of those who experience them” (Titchen & Hobson, 2005, p. 121). As a result, the researcher attempts to generate and interpret data drawn from participants’ perspectives, unfiltered by preexisting beliefs or assumptions, using processes that aim to reduce the potential of being “guided by a predefined theoretical formulation” (Corbin & Holt, 2005, p. 49). In the modified Husserlian approach espoused by Giorgi (2009), notions of *epoché* and the *eidetic reduction* are applied.

The *eidetic reduction* brings focused attention to the essential features of the experience (Kaufert & Chemero, 2015, p. 47), while the *epoché* attitude identifies the researcher’s preconceptions and past knowledge related to the phenomenon. Following this, concurrently or as a separate process of *bracketing*, the researcher attempts to suspend beliefs and prior knowledge so as to attend to the voices, meanings and “everyday experiences” (Titchen & Hobson, 2005, p. 125) of participants, unfettered by subjectivities or “bias” (Creswell, 1998; Giorgi, 2009; Greene, 2010; Maxwell, 2010). Frequent returns to the data source can help to validate emerging theories and generate ‘grounded knowledge’ (Greene, 2010, p. 68). Thus, knowledge accumulation positioned within interpretivist perspectives is bound by time and place, is context-centric with an emphasis on *stories*, and is therefore “pluralistic, divergent, even conflictual” (Greene, 2010, p. 68). Immersion in the research setting is essential to the process of describing the phenomenon and achieving *transferability*, where findings are perceived or demonstrated to be applicable in wider settings (Greene, 2010).

#### 4.4.3. *Description of data sources*

Although a mixed-method approach was considered appropriate in the planning phase, this was modified as fieldwork progressed, and predominantly qualitative inquiry methods were used for data collection. Qualitative research protocols included semi-structured interviews and long-form interviews, focus groups, classroom observation and immersion in the natural setting, which is viewed as minimally intrusive but conceptually rigorous (Giorgi, 2009, p. 72). Qualitative data were supplemented by quantitative data in a “dominant less dominant” relationship (Rudestam & Newton, 2001, p. 42), specifically using one demographic information survey (see Appendix D).

Data collected on-site took the form of audio recordings, handwritten notes of unrecorded interviews, ethnographic fieldwork jottings (see Appendices E, F, G & H), hard copies of surveys, photographs of empty classrooms and the research setting, and transcripts of voice recordings. Data were non-identifiable, being either not labelled with individual identifiers or having identifiers permanently removed. All audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher. Identifiers were removed in the transcription process.

Interviews provided a deep understanding of participants' views, beliefs and experiences in their own voices. The semi-structured format enabled participants to guide the conversation into areas of greater personal and professional interest. Interviews formed the basis for developing an interpretive framework around this "rich and subtle experiential detail" (van Manen, 2014, p. 302) in the analytical stage, to discover what informs their positions, point of coherence and other interdiscursivities. Through their words, the way in which teachers spoke of the phenomenon indicated advanced levels of cultural competence. As will be discussed in a later chapter, this was in part a result of the School's policy pertaining to the selection process for allocating teachers to Aboriginal Education classes.

#### 4.4.3.1. Interviews

In a phenomenological inquiry, data collection protocol consists mainly of long-form interviews about a specific experience (the phenomenon) which, in this study, is the participants' lived experience of teaching Aboriginal students. Another important element of phenomenology, from the standpoint of the researcher, is the act of suspending all judgements prior to the data collection phase. This process is undertaken in order to ensure the resultant findings and developing theory are firmly evidence-based. This approach is critical for discovering the authentic voice of participants. It has particular relevance to individuals of Aboriginal heritage, whose voices should arrive unfiltered by dominant-culture interference.

Where possible, face-to-face communication was used in preference to other forms of non-verbal communication. Utilising strategies from ethnographic inquiries, this preference supported my aim to build rapport with participants and enter into the microculture more fully as a peer and fellow journeyman of culturally different classrooms, and thereby establish trust in the researcher-informant relationship, in an attempt to hasten progress along the continuum from outsider to insider (Creswell, 1998, p. 123). The study is partially located within the interpretivist paradigm and thereby has a strong emphasis on participant perspectives. Interview protocols enabled participants to relate their 'truths' unfiltered and unalloyed by preconceived theories of the researcher. When applying a phenomenological approach, questions must attempt to elicit the participant's own truths and ultimately seek to reveal their experience without the added layer of their interpretations of their own

experience. In other words, in the view of van Manen (2014), questions should seek only “lived experience descriptions” or prereflective-experiential moments: “Aim to capture experiences as they are lived through. Avoid asking for opinions, beliefs, or perceptions” (p. 298).

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher within a single academic year (Semester 1 and 2, 2017). Interviews ranged in length from one hour, to fit within a single ‘free’ (non-teaching) period, up to three hours, when participants expressed interest in continuing the conversation beyond the allocated timeframe of a double period. Open-ended questions aimed to elicit chronological, experiential and evaluative accounts (Santoro et al., 2011) of the lived experience. The list of proposed questions was thematic yet adapted to the narrative direction taken by participants: chronological details included prior experience in cross-cultural settings and early impressions of the phenomenon. Evaluative, narrative-driven aspects included pedagogical approaches to the unique context, cross-cultural communication strategies and advice for early career teachers or those new to the phenomenon. (Questions approved by the ECU Human Research Ethics Committee are listed in Appendix B). Themes raised by participants themselves guided tangential portions of the conversational exploration and were interrupted only with clarifying questions or to prompt interviewees to provide examples (Luttrell, 2010a). For instance, when a teacher spoke of respecting cultural sensitivities in the classroom, the researcher asked for an example, thus they might speak of making a decision that may have appeared to be acquiescing or permissive, but which was in fact derived from an understanding of the context at the time.

In the study, the phenomenological approach sought to capture authentically voiced recollections, for the express purpose of understanding the phenomenon as it is experienced by teachers. Questions were flexible and open, deliberately devoid of overt influence by the researcher in order to encourage participants’ authentic voices for, as Bogdan and Biklen (2010) aptly point out, “approaching people with a goal of trying to understand their point of view, while not perfect, distorts the informants’ experience the least” (p. 33). Interviews, as a form of data, can draw insights and revelations that may not be brought to light if the researcher relies only on surveys or structured questioning with little opportunity for participants to tell their stories: “What people actually say and the descriptions of events observed remain the essence of qualitative inquiry.” (Patton, 2002, p. 457).

Data collection techniques were modified in some circumstances. For example, one interviewee did not give approval for audio-recording so, in accordance with ethnographic methods, handwritten notes captured many statements verbatim, ensuring the transcript incorporated this individual’s eloquent turn of phrase, adding authenticity to the analysis.

#### 4.4.3.2. Comments about the interviews

Use of purposeful sampling reduced the potential for exclusion to have a negative connotation. For those who fitted the criteria, participation in the study could be readily explained to peers at their own discretion, and any subsequent involvement in research protocols would be accepted.

Semi-structured and long form interviews contained proforma questions, usually open-ended, in order to guide the interview in thematic directions yet flexibly, so as to convey a conversational tone throughout. In phenomenological interviews, questions are intended as a guide to draw out participants' personal experiences of the phenomenon with an emphasis on respect, empowerment and self-expression. So, while a hard copy of the questions list lay before me at every interview, conversation necessarily diverged from direct pathways onto uncharted trails of reflection or opinion, humour, worry or contemplation based on the thoughts and ideas of participants. I, cognisant of the slowly revealing and "inductive nature" (Patton, 2002, p. 176) of qualitative methods, steered the interview through unmapped terrain, at times returning to marked waypoints, all the while hoping for discursive revelation.

The interview process encouraged participants to consider their experiences in a reflective light, particularly learnings and adaptations made during their time at the School, and any advice for early career teachers embarking on a similar journey. Semi-structured questions were amended according to the direction and content of each interview as is appropriate in phenomenological research (Rudestam & Newton, 2001, p. 95). Long form interviews uncovered participants' views and all opinions were respected, respect for others being a tenet of humanistic values and one of the principles underpinning the study. Humour, understanding and empathy were expressed in the interview process.

Teachers and administration staff who were excluded from the study, that is, they did not meet the sampling criteria for inclusion, nevertheless often adopted the role of gatekeeper in offering advice and insight regarding the phenomenon and educational setting. While this source of information was relevant to building the researcher's contextual knowledge of the site, all commentary was excluded from analysis.

#### 4.4.3.3. Teacher focus group

Although mentioned earlier in this chapter, in relation to participant contribution, the two distinct focus groups will now be described in more detail.

All teacher participants were invited to attend a Teacher focus group, planned midweek around lunchtime with a flexible window of one to two hours. Focus groups are ideally held at local, safe and generally comfortable venues (Luttrell, 2010b, p. 320). In the study, the main staff room was considered convenient for the purpose, being centrally located and furnished with comfortable cane



chairs and tables, photocopiers, toilets and kitchenette. Its oft-used familiarity diminished hierarchical cues within the group. Several participants arrived late. In each case, conversation was briefly halted to remind participants of pertinent research protocols, including respect and confidentiality, ability to withdraw from the study, and the right to request statements to be deleted from the transcript. HODs were invited to participate but chose not to attend. Four teachers attended: all male, one lead teacher and three proficient teachers from Mathematics, Science, Art and Physical Education departments.

#### 4.4.3.4. Boarding focus group

All boarding participants were invited to attend the Boarding focus group. The staff room of one Boarding House was chosen by participants as their preferred venue, being convenient and situated away from the converging halls, offices and storerooms near the main entrance. Three Heads of House attended: one female and two males. All were very experienced and long-term employees of the School.

#### 4.4.3.5. Comments about focus groups

Focus groups required a greater focus on logistics than interviews. A three-hour window was arranged to suit teachers' schedules for non-teaching periods, report writing and meeting attendance. The Boarding focus group was slightly less complex, scheduled prior to the commencement of shifts, as preferred by participants.

Focus groups were semi-structured with guidance from the researcher based on a list of themed open-ended questions (see Appendix C) and audio-recorded with consent. Transcription of audio recordings ensured that participants' voices could be quoted verbatim. Questioning techniques were drawn from the indirect approach of existential phenomenology, in which questions are open-ended, semi-structured or unstructured and applied in a conversational manner with the aim to elicit stories in everyday language that have significant meaning for the participants and reveal issues that matter to them (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 126). Interactions were reflected upon in the ethnographic fieldnotes (see Appendices G & H for samples) and during transcription by the researcher, based on handwritten notes made at the time. Focus groups as a data source have direct relevance to the interpretivist perspective of "*storytelling*" (Greene, 2010, p. 63, emphasis in original) and data analysis is described later in this chapter.

#### 4.4.3.6. Direct observation

Classroom observations were arranged during site visits with details negotiated with teachers to suit their schedule and preference. On critically reflecting about appropriate observation protocols, the researcher scheduled classroom visits to follow the interview of the teacher involved, to enable the building of rapport and increase their level of comfort with my presence in class. Classroom

observation of teachers with various year levels and key learning areas (KLAs) occurred on each site visit, to verify and observe practices previously related to the researcher by the teachers in interviews.

Observations began with the researcher arriving shortly before the students. This practice enabled the teacher to prepare the students outside for the presence of a visitor inside the classroom. The teacher's preferences guided the protocols in the classroom, with the researcher taking a seat at the rear of the classroom in one instance and circulating the classroom with the teacher in another. Teachers usually introduced the researcher as a fellow teacher 'just seeing what we're doing today.' I have observed teachers in other schools using this technique to transfer equivalent status to any visitor to normalise the situation and I encouraged participants' use of this approach so as to avoid "disturbing too much the social processes through the obvious presence of the researcher" (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 132). Appropriate permissions were acquired for classroom observations. Photographs of empty classrooms, taken on a passcode-protected phone, served as visual prompts and contextualisation of the data and research setting. No students were photographed or interviewed. Photographs are not intended for publication, however, sample pen sketches made during classroom observations to indicate the relative positions of teachers and students are to be found in Appendices E and F.

## **4.5. Role of researcher**

The role of the researcher is pertinent for the success of the study. The following section explains the multi-faceted aspects of the researcher's role during data collection and analysis.

### *4.5.1. Prior knowledge of the phenomenon*

In this study, having adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, I have not attempted to bracket my prior knowledge of the phenomenon. Bracketing, as a primary component of Husserlian phenomenology, features in the five-step process described by Giorgi (2013), whereby a researcher seeks to identify and describe their cultural milieu and subjectivities in order to reduce interference in analysis. Hermeneutic phenomenology, in contrast, borrows from the Heideggerian branch of philosophy which permits researchers to draw upon personal experience in the hope of better translating meaning from the data. As van Manen (2014) succinctly asserts: "While Husserl steps out of the world to grasp the meaning from above, Heidegger stays in the world of beings to understand their modes of being from within the world" (p. 220). That said, the hermeneutic phenomenologist still reflects on their preconceptions and assumptions prior to undertaking data analysis.

### *4.5.2. Reflexivity and knowledge accumulation*

Reflexivity is an important skill for the qualitative researcher, one that moves beyond identifying socially- and culturally-constructed beliefs and theoretical assumptions toward an awareness of how

these may position the researcher in relation to the context and research site, whether posing a restraint or strength relative to the inquiry, and how much of a stake is invested (Luttrell, 2010b). In this manner, the hermeneutic phenomenologist must be prepared to orient themselves, to account for or to revise their worldview, and to enter into “a kind of dialogue” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2010, p. 40) with participants, in order to describe another’s perspective of the phenomenon. In other words, to resist assuming that one’s own views and perspectives are commonly held truisms, to be comfortable standing in a place of not-knowing, in which the moment requires *pedagogical tact* or the art of knowing what to do when you don’t know what to do (van Manen, 2016).

Critical self-reflection is a strategy adopted by many teachers in the ordinary execution of their profession and I am no exception. Reflexivity enables one to reconsider values and assumptions in two ways. Firstly, to acknowledge that beliefs arise from the heady mix of life experience, education and cultural heritage to which we are all subject and that, while these may define our character, they are not embodied in the individual per se. Thus, if one encounters a moment of cognitive dissonance, in which long-held beliefs are confronted by contradictory information, instead of viewing this as a personal affront or an attack on core values, I intend to see it as an opportunity for learning and growth. Secondly, I undertook to approach the study with an attitude of attentive openness, to be flexible and willingly question the so-called truth of my preconceptions, recognising that all foundational beliefs must be carried lightly in case of new evidence to the contrary.

Being a non-Aboriginal researcher in the field of Aboriginal Education, I adhere to the practice of reflexivity, an inherent value in ethnographic inquiry and suggested practice for developing authenticity and addressing researcher subjectivity in phenomenology. Ethnographers recognise they are part of the social world and are therefore wary that their preconceptions may filter authenticity from the voices of participants (Goldbart & Hustler, 2005). To maintain veracity of data and increase its potential to mirror as faithfully as possible their informants’ worldview, researchers use reflexivity to limit unintentional interference. Having professional experience in teaching Aboriginal students both in urban settings and ‘on country’ – a privileged experience – I have a strong and sustained interest in Aboriginal issues, including culture, identity, historical disadvantage and disenfranchisement. I have always supported the contemporary creative expression of this ancient, complex and evolving cultural heritage by Aboriginal students. I respect difference and acknowledge the challenges and complexity of the phenomenon, having experienced many facets of cross-cultural communication.

#### 4.5.3. *Experience informing the study*

As the chief investigator, I was actively involved in participant recruitment to the study and data collection in the field. With twenty years’ professional experience in various educational settings, my

qualifications include a Master of Teaching (Secondary) with Distinction, University of Western Sydney; Graduate Diploma in Education (Adult/Vocational), Charles Darwin University; and Bachelor of Design (Illustration Design) with Honours, University of South Australia. Non-refereed publications written or co-authored include a review of adult literacy and numeracy best practice in the Northern Territory with commentary on innovative practice; and a report on Interactive Distance Learning satellite technology in remote communities for the national flexible learning framework.

I understand the challenges and complexities faced by teachers having worked in high schools and community education colleges across London, UK; high schools in Western Sydney; a distance education school based in Darwin; and remote communities across northern Australia. Further to this, I can fathom the dichotomous thrill and fatigue of cross-cultural communication after living and travelling for a year in the Middle East and working in private English language schools in London, Oxford and Cambridge. Gaining a Certificate in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) from Trinity College London provided crucial insights and foundational skills for supporting EALD students and was complimentary to the learnings that I had gleaned from completing the Cultural Awareness Program: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People at Charles Darwin University as an early career teacher.

#### *4.5.4. Researcher as participant*

I considered my position – as researcher and fellow teacher – as one of privilege when conducting fieldwork. I hold full professional registration with TRB NT and this enabled participants to permit a level of engagement in their “everyday experiences” (Titchen & Hobson, 2005, p. 125) that may otherwise have been limited, and this authenticity and trust allowed deeper insight into the lived experience. The study was partially positioned as an ethnographic inquiry in which immersion in the research setting contributes toward an insider’s perspective. Therefore, I adopted a *participant-observer* role in accepting a short-term engagement as an English language tutor for international students in the School. As described in the previous chapter, the School was uniquely complex. In addition to accommodating Aboriginal students from remote communities, the boarding houses regularly catered for visiting school groups, international students and residential camps with an academic and sports focus. Like all schools, it also required casual/relief teachers to fill positions at short notice. When I was asked to fill a vacancy for an EALD teacher in the final weeks of an English-language course for international students, I viewed the opportunity as a prospect for “prolonged immersion” (Rudestam & Newton, 2001, p. 42) wherein I might develop “thick description” (Greene, 2010, p. 70) of the context, observe shared behaviour patterns within the School’s microculture and form a deeper understanding of the teachers’ lived experience of the phenomenon.

Data analysis is augmented by self-reflection on the part of the researcher (Creswell, 1998, pp. 54-55; Finlay, 2012) and similarly to naturalistic-ethnography, the researcher's experience of and immersion in the phenomenon aids in the interpretation and rich description of its essence (Titchen & Hobson, 2005). In a phenomenological inquiry, the relationship between researcher and participants is characterised by empathy and a shared knowing (Titchen & Hobson, 2005), therefore the short-term teaching position represented an ideal opportunity to gain insights from the research site and to apply reflexivity in fieldnote jottings and journals. I ensured all relevant permissions were obtained for data collection and immersion in a boarding school setting, including my full registration with TRB NT and a working with children clearance (the Ochre Card) similar to working with vulnerable people (WWVP) registration in other states.

#### 4.5.4.1. Immersion as a data source

Ethnomethodology is noteworthy for its capacity to highlight the researcher's own cultural framework, perspectives and bias, and encourage consideration of how these may affect data interpretation. Hermeneutic phenomenology rejects the concept of a purely objective researcher and instead approaches data collection in a contextualised way, viewing the data as a situational event involving people, place and circumstance. From this theoretical position, data analysis undertaken by humans necessarily produces a subjective reading of the data, that is to say, it is an "inevitably prejudiced viewpoint" (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 115). This is not considered to be a negative outcome. In contrast, the purely rational aim of seeking an objective truth is understood to be an illusory pursuit. As a result, the study used reflexivity and personal experience in the research setting as a data source, with the researcher adopting the role of participant observer.

#### 4.5.4.2. Notes on the participant observer role

As noted earlier, due to a shortage of EALD teachers leading up to the inter-semester break, I was invited by the School to tutor international students for several weeks. This immersive opportunity provided me with an insider's perspective of the school, its routines and processes, and privileged moments in which to observe staff interacting at morning teas, meetings and special events. I experienced some of the issues raised in interviews, hitches with technology, maintenance problems and the like, which can interrupt the flow of a planned lesson. I also experienced the satisfaction that occurs when students are fully engaged with the learning task, when the interactive teaching techniques are successful, and when an atmosphere of enthusiasm and positive growth pervades the classroom.

Two international teachers attended the lessons with their students, participating in the learning and discussing pedagogical practice after each session. A fellow EALD teacher at the school requested permission to sit in on our classes for a double period to observe my teaching strategies. Although we

had attained the same rigorous certification in teaching English, I had completed my training in London, so he was interested to see if there were differences in our teaching practice. As always, I welcomed the presence of peers in my classroom and enjoyed the collegial discussions that followed.

These professional exchanges were an indication of the fellowship, for want of a better word, that existed within the School. Teachers, including international visitors, felt willing and able to observe classes and exchange advice on teaching and learning with peers. This spirit of collegiality is a carefully cultivated attitude, not occurring in every school, that must be driven top-down from the Executive level to teachers and boarding staff: “A school needs to have a culture of no blame, a willingness to investigate what is not working” (Hattie, 2012, p. 140). From interviews, I learned that parents of boarding students are also encouraged to attend classes with their children and contribute positively to their learning.

#### 4.5.4.3. Ethnographic fieldnotes

Writing is a way of reflecting upon and discovering patterns or theory from the data. Fieldnotes can be a rich source of additional complementary data. Handwritten notes may describe place and people and contain an eyewitness account of behaviour, mannerisms and speech, often quoted verbatim in hastily scrawled cursive across lined journal paper. Fieldnotes assist with the analytical phase, being “ripe with meanings and analytic implications” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 198), particularly where meanings depend on contextualising the data. Ethnographic fieldnotes were written during participant observation and classroom observations (see Appendices E & F) and after interviews and focus groups. On the single occasion that an interviewee refused permission to record, fieldnotes were used as a transcript source for capturing the participant’s authentic ‘voice’. Research journals (Appendices G & H) documented the development of the researcher’s thoughts, reflections and emerging theory.

As described above, qualitative data collection incorporated the values and processes expounded by the hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Research processes utilised aspects of naturalistic ethnomethodology, particularly fieldnotes, journals and immersion in the research setting. Principles of respect, cultural safety and security, and humanistic values were inherent in data collection. Data analysis is described in the next section.

## 4.6. Data analysis

Data analysis incorporated the hermeneutic phenomenological approach and utilised aspects of ethnomethodology, which is discussed in detail below. Principles from interpretivist theory, attribution theory and critical theory informed the research design and are outlined later in this section.

Data analysis followed a phenomenological approach, including the intention to apply the *epoché-reduction* approach. Husserlian phenomenology encourages the researcher to suspend beliefs and assumptions and bracket prior knowledge of a phenomenon such that “unprejudiced attention” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 10) can be directed toward the object of focus. The five-step process advocated by Giorgi (2013), based on Husserlian philosophy for existential phenomenology, was initially considered for the study. However, on reflection, hermeneutic phenomenology best suited the study’s context as it seeks to reveal the meaning making of participants concerning the phenomenon.

Therefore, in data analysis, the researcher planned to adopt an open-minded attitude while remaining cognisant of possible frames of reference, expectations or inclinations that might, if left unexamined, have an impact on data collection and interpretation. The researcher kept a research journal (see Appendices G & H) in which to critically self-reflect and attempt that “attentive turning to the world when in an open state of mind” (van Manen, 2014, p. 218) required of the phenomenological researcher. In doing so, the researcher was positioned for a stance of “radical openness” (p. 224), or thorough readiness, awaiting meanings to be revealed.

Data analysis consisted of two stages. Firstly, after adopting the “phenomenological attitude” (Patton, 2002, p. 485) of hermeneutic *epoché-reduction* described above, the researcher used two software packages to comprehend the phenomenon both in its constituent parts and in its entirety without judgement, also termed the “hermeneutic circle” (Patton, 2002, p. 485). Throughout this process, the researcher remained cognisant of existing bias or preconceptions yet maintained an openness to the phenomenon as revealed through the data (Patton, 2002). Secondly, the researcher applied an interpretive process in which layers of meaning related to the phenomenon were analysed and described. This descriptive stage is the “eidetic reduction” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 90), a process that reveals the essence of the phenomenon. Interpretations are presented textually with reference to the socio-cultural context and historical lens in which the phenomenon exists, references to the lifeworld, that is, the “common, everyday world ... a world of ordinariness” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 10) inhabited by the researcher and participants, and reflections on “co-creating” (Finlay, 2012, p. 22) or building the relationship between researcher and participants. Patterns, themes and concepts are discovered from participant interviews, focus groups and classroom observations in a non-prescriptive way, starting first with *inductive analysis* and concluding with *deductive analysis*, where theory develops from the data (Patton, 2002).

The phenomenological researcher attempts to discover the essence of a phenomenon and this is reflected in the writing process, a “vocative expressivity” (van Manen, 2014, p. 20). Data must be understood in the context of participants’ circumstances and lived experience, and be richly described through fieldnotes and reflective writing with this process being essential to constructing “thick description” (Greene, 2010, p. 70) of the phenomenon, and writing being “a reflective process of

phenomenological method” (van Manen, 2014, p. 20). This conscious reflexivity is intended to evoke the “experience-as-lived” (van Manen, 2014, p. 221) and derive hidden meanings from participants’ voices. The co-created interplay between researcher and participant must also be addressed, and a propensity for the unknown embraced: “The game is worthwhile insofar as we don’t know what will be the end” (Foucault, 1988, as cited in van Manen, 2014, p. 20).

Data analysis was undertaken in the knowledge that as the researcher is human and therefore a cognising, experiencing being, it may not be feasible to attain complete objectivity since “forgetting one’s preunderstandings is not really possible” (van Manen, 2014, p. 224). Phenomenological researchers attempt to arrive at a description as close to the lived experience as possible while yet remaining somewhat aloof to ensure the discovered essence is unshackled somewhat from the researcher’s worldview. Bracketing and reduction were outlined earlier, however in brief, the researcher adopts a reflexive and open-minded or nonjudgmental stance toward the data. This stance, in the moment of contact between researcher and data, is referred to by van Manen (2014) as the “phenomenological gesture” (p. 220), an attitude of openness and being attentive and receptive to what may be revealed.

#### *4.6.1. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach*

This study therefore adopted the hermeneutic phenomenological approach to data analysis (Finlay, 2012; Friesen et al., 2012, pp. 134-135). In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher’s own life experience is permitted to inform the interpretation of data, unlike the Husserlian approach advocated by Giorgi (2013), which stresses the importance of separation between researcher and data. As described above in an earlier section, the concept of researcher-as-participant was applied in fieldwork and the researcher adopted a participant-observer role in order to observe lived experiences and the “every-day classroom interaction” (Friesen et al., 2012, p. 134) of participants. In utilising immersion, the researcher developed an “involved, connected observer stance” (Titchen & Hobson, 2005, p. 123) that sought to reveal the otherwise undisclosed meanings and stories of significance, the sense-making (Kaufer & Chemero, 2015) and nuanced values “between the words and in the practices” (Titchen & Hobson, 2005, p. 123) of participants.

Both during, and subsequent to, fieldwork, the researcher personally transcribed every interview and focus group recording, thus being fully immersed in the data (Finlay, 2012). The researcher intended to apply an indirect phenomenological approach during analysis of these textual data to understand participants’ lived experience. The process of constructing a rich description of the phenomenon would involve a written interpretation using authorial devices, discussed later in this section: “Direct description of the phenomenality of human experience sometimes requires a certain indirectness” (van



Manen, 2014, p. 46). Prior to constructing the description, a three-stage process of analysis was undertaken, which will now be described.

#### 4.6.1.1. Leximancer and concept-thematic maps

Data analysis was performed using three processes: Leximancer, NVivo and researcher interpretation. The researcher first applied an automated process using analytical software package, Leximancer, to identify key themes and key word frequency within transcripts. Transcripts were imported into Leximancer (<https://info.leximancer.com/>) and the settings amended for random or extraneous terms. Leximancer is capable of producing a theory-free reading of interview and focus group transcripts through a process of generating concepts and themes based on the percentage use and proximities of certain words by participants and presenting the relationship between concepts and themes as a visual graphic. In providing a thematic frame for further analysis using other processes, Leximancer revealed the initial “pivot point” (D. McKinnon, personal communication, October 6, 2016) for meaning making by participant sub-groups, which may not have been generated through quantitative data tools. Leximancer was used because it removes the “veneer of interpretation” or subjectivity (D. McKinnon, personal communication, October 6, 2016) that may otherwise exist when a researcher unwittingly applies bias or the preferencing of evidence to support a preconceived hypothesis (Maxwell, 2010).

Concept maps were generated for single participants, that is, concepts and themes used by an individual; for multiple participants, such as each focus group; interviews as a group; and, all transcripts as a group. The concept-thematic map for all transcripts is provided (Figure 2) to show the recurring themes and their relationship to each other as revealed by the software package.

In this example, the concept-thematic map of all transcripts (see Figure 2 below) was generated in a single analysis by Leximancer. The software package removed the veneer of interpretation and produced a thematic frame of all textual data from interviews and focus groups, displaying overarching themes and interrelated concepts in an unbiased, systematic, theory-free reading of the data (D. McKinnon, personal communication, October 6, 2016). As shown in Figure 2, these are arranged in a graphic interpretation, with capacity in Leximancer to zoom in to word-level interrelationships or view the highest-ranked themes by prevalence of concepts. Researcher remarks were excluded from this phase of data analysis to avoid the words used by the researcher from being captured as concepts by the program.

Of five highest-ranked themes, four are depicted centrally in Figure 2 in large circles: *Students*, *People*, *Time* and *Kids*. The most frequently occurring concepts are shown in a web-like structure. *Students* as a theme contains the concept of *students*, which is related to *issues*, *expectations*, *classroom*, *need* and *staff*. The word *staff*, in turn, appears in proximity with *whole*, which can be

interpreted as a reference to holistic, all-staff or whole-school approaches. Leximancer depicts the concept *support* in close proximity to *having*, which is a gerund or present participle verb, indicating that when participants referred to support, it was usually in the context of accessing, having/possessing or experiencing support. *Teachers* as a concept was relevant to two themes, *Students* and *Time*, and appeared in the data in close proximity to multiple interrelated concepts: *teacher, class, behaviour; class, teach, teaching; Indigenous, training, important, cultural*. Other interrelated concepts included *school, community, communities, different* and *culture*. *School* as a concept was linked to *learning* and proactive concepts of *feel, talk* and *doing*.

Figure 2. Leximancer concept-thematic map for all transcripts

fragments of textual data. This was the beginning of the second, immersive stage of analysis, described below.

#### 4.6.1.2. NVivo and “meaning units”

In comparison to Leximancer, the analytical software package NVivo (QRS International: <https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home>) did not require researcher remarks to be removed as individuals were coded and imported separately as cases. *Coding* is the process of identifying concepts, patterns and themes within the data. Beginning with *inductive analysis*, open coding enables the researcher to identify “specific analytic dimensions” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 175) and categorise them without preconceptions, merely responding to what is contained in the source data in an open-minded manner. Thus, significant statements in the data are treated initially with equal worth, resulting in “horizontalisation” (Creswell, 1998, p. 147) as a wide-ranging list of discrete statements about the experience is compiled. Focused coding in ethnography seeks to identify patterns within and between emergent themes (Charmaz, 2010, p. 193), for example, all statements including or referring to *students*, a Leximancer-identified theme and concept, were grouped. Through coding, interrelated conceptual and thematic patterns emerged as the researcher discovered core themes and subthemes in statements about the phenomenon. Relationships between themes, subthemes and participants’ narratives were identified, forming “*meaning units*” (Creswell, 1998, p. 150, emphasis in original) that revealed the textural description (*what* was experienced) and structural description (*how* it was experienced) of the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998).

Thus, the first analytical process informed the second analytical process. For example, *students*, identified in Leximancer as a concept related to *expectations* and *issues*, prompted the researcher to reflect on these concepts and to apply the code ‘behaviour management’ in NVivo to discover any underpinning relationship between these concepts and themes and teachers’ lived experiences. Codes or nodes of highest prevalence in NVivo included: attitude toward students; behaviour management; complexity awareness; school policies and procedures; responsibility; teaching practice; cultural awareness; and, peer support. Subthemes included: beliefs about teaching and boarding; issues of cultural sensitivity and participants’ responses; reflective teaching, mentoring of early career teachers, access to support and professional development; positive learning, related subthemes of time, community visits, applying ‘second chances’ for disruptive or disengaged behaviour; personal satisfaction/dissatisfaction, and subthemes indicating how participants managed workplace stress or feelings of sadness or disappointment. *Classroom* and *expectations*, two closely related concepts in Leximancer, were applied during focused coding in NVivo and revealed a group of statements that described a suite of whole-school policies to establish and maintain high expectations in Aboriginal Education classrooms. *Class* and *behaviour*, *teaching* and *Indigenous*, identified as prevalent and proximate concepts in Leximancer, provided a thematic framework for interpreting teachers’ attitudes

and beliefs about students and teaching, with insights related to motivations and causal attribution disclosed during focused coding in NVivo. In the third and final analytical process of researcher interpretation, described below, these concepts and themes contributed toward a description of the “essential constituents” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 209) of the phenomenon.

When using NVivo, the researcher applied an iterative process to determine the veracity of the themes and to have confidence that all themes were identified. Once the themes were identified, they were categorised with particular attention paid to data relating to classroom practice, teachers’ lived experience, feelings and attitudes, specific contextual challenges and pedagogical approaches to resolve or mitigate these. These data were reflected upon and analysed further to identify underlying attitudes, beliefs and personal characteristics, and thus deeper meanings, inherent in their statements. An example is where the experiential detail provided by participants revealed resilience, patience and flexibility in the classroom (see Chapter 5 Results, Section 5.3.2.2 Managing cultural sensitivities), and from these coded statements, the researcher identified various subthemes implied by their visible actions, such as an attitude of humility, forgiveness, willingness to learn and seek support, which were considered by the researcher to be indicative of teachers’ self-efficacy and sense of personal control.

#### 4.6.1.3. Researcher interpretation

The use of the two software packages, Leximancer and NVivo, to analyse participant discursivities, or narrative stories, contributed toward a multi-layered, “thick description” (Greene, 2010, p. 70) of the phenomenon. Analysis was undertaken and meanings emerged that aptly represented, in the words of Giorgi (2013), a “philosophical anthropology that does justice to human reality.” A third process of analysis was then undertaken by the researcher, through reading and reflecting upon all sources of data, with a focus on prereflective-experiential material such as teachers’ narratives which recounted actual classroom incidents unshaded by opinion, judgement or perception, that is, the “concrete lived situations [that] reveal the complexity of life” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 204). In this way, the researcher was able to draw recurrent themes from the participants’ voices in an iterative process while also looking for “rich and subtle experiential detail” (van Manen, 2014, p. 302) that gave access to the lived experience behind the stories. This enabled for the triangulation of data, adding depth and confidence to results: “Phenomenological work is not completed with the identification of themes. The themes are only abstractions of the interpretive descriptions that must be constructed at the hand of the themes” (van Manen, 2014, p. 302).

The researcher’s embeddedness, and prior experience in the shared phenomenon, informed the insights drawn from the data and allowed for the construction of a *reiterative circle* wherein data were viewed in a holistic manner from *inside* the precognitive background of the phenomenon, the whole being related to the parts, and the parts being related to the whole (Titchen & Hobson, 2005). From

these insights, the researcher's perception of the "extensive and rich" individual data (Giorgi, 2009, p. 210) led to a description of the generalisable "structure" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 198) of the phenomenon. In ethnography, the three analytical processes are termed: description, of *what* is experienced; analysis, or sorting with regard to patterns; and interpretation, or transforming the data (Creswell, 1998, pp. 152-153).

In summary, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used in the thematic data analysis, with close attention paid to emergent themes related to teachers' experience in the classroom. The following sections describe the theoretical basis for the interpretation of study data.

#### 4.6.2. Interpretivist perspective

As noted in Chapter 3 (Section 3.3 The researcher context), the analytical process for this study was guided by an interpretivist perspective. Interpretivism has been likened to "*storytelling*" (Greene, 2010, p. 63, emphasis in original) and it is this aspect of the research process that the researcher intended to capture through interviews and focus groups, all semi-structured and conducted in a spirit of respect and empathy in order to encourage the impulsive and free-flowing nature of the narrative, as recounted in participants' voices. Qualitative researchers are cognisant that truth-seeking is only possible insofar as the meaning making of participants is revealed through their voices. As a result, discursivities produced by phenomenological researchers often "make use of poetic and literary language" (van Manen, 2014, p. 45), which serves to evoke the essence of the phenomenon described. Thus, data filtered by the researcher's subjective experience and worldview, albeit bracketed, and examined in a process of reflective writing, generated inductive theory (Greene, 2010).

Interpretivist approaches are considered *value-laden*, imbued by the values and interests of the researcher, not with the aim to elicit judgement but "to enrich human discourse" (Greene, 2010, p. 71) through heightened understanding. In this study, the researcher's professional experience of the context was considered advantageous for interpreting the data. Inductive theory is considered grounded theory having been drawn from context-specific perspectives and firsthand observations during fieldwork. The notion of researcher subjectivity, also referred to as bias (Maxwell, 2010), may affect the analytical process if conclusions are drawn specifically to fit preconceived ideas or hypotheses. However, qualitative inquiry allows for, and even encourages, the informed interpretation of results by the researcher (Maxwell, 2010, p. 281).

##### 4.6.2.1. Attribution theory

The conceptual framework of attribution theory is pertinent to this study due to its examination of phenomenal causality, or the "beliefs about why a particular event or outcome has occurred" (Rudolph et al., 2004, p. 816), and will be outlined below.

In social psychology, attribution is the process by which individuals explain the causes of behaviour and events (Dong et al., 2013; Graham et al., 1995; Heider, 1944; McQuade, 1992; Weiner, 1985, 1991, 2008). Causal attribution has the capacity to empower individuals and promote a proactive stance on issues or circumstances, enhancing a sense of personal control. Alternately, attribution has the potential to curtail positive actions and lead to a negative state of mind, inducing a sense of reduced personal control. Therefore, the causal attribution used by teachers to explain incidents or events in the classroom matters.

Although literature offers different explanations for events related to human behaviours (Heider, 1944; Weiner, 2008), Heider found it useful to group explanations into two categories of attribution: internal (personal) and external (situational). In practice, these two types of attribution lead to very different perceptions, by others, of an individual engaging in a behaviour. Where attribution results in the placing of blame upon an individual, negative responses toward that individual can ensue. In educational contexts specifically, this can result in teachers applying deficit thinking, lowering their expectations and blaming students for “internal deficiencies or shortcomings” (Constantine & Sue, 2006, as cited in Brace, 2011, p. 27). Attribution retraining can assist teachers to distinguish between “maladaptive” attributions, and “instrumental” (Yang & Montgomery, 2011, p. 14) or “adaptive” attributions (Dong et al., 2013), potentially enabling teachers to use a strengths-based approach with students and to apply multiple causal attributions to explain academic success and failure.

Attribution, preferably adaptive and unassociated with the placing of blame, is important for attaining a proficient level of cultural competence. Yang and Montgomery (2011) recommended that future research seek to “determine the causal-comparative effect of causal attribution and attribution retraining on cultural competence” (p. 15) indicating that an understanding of the relationship between attribution and cultural competence is worth pursuing, and potentially expanding. Nonetheless, that a relationship exists is indisputable (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2012; Brace, 2011) and the interconnectivity of attribution and cultural competence is clear. The existence of cultural competence has at its core personal characteristics such as tolerance, self-awareness and reflexivity, and a willingness to learn (Cain, 2014, p. 222). Attributions that are adaptive in nature, unlike blame attributions, are also required for teachers to display advanced levels of cultural competence.

The researcher applied Attribution Theory during transcript analysis to explore ways in which teachers perceived themselves and the students in this unique educational context, as revealed through words – narrative stories, recounted incidents or events, reflections – and observed actions. Maladaptive thought processes, briefly described above, were not apparent and the labeling of students by participants did not occur in data collection processes, such as when teachers were observed in the classroom and in focus groups. This was notable, as ‘student labeling’ may be practiced by teachers between peers as a warning of potential classroom management issues (Hattie,

2012, p. 88; Rogers, 2003, p. 8) and are indicative of deficit thinking. This practice was not evident among the studied cohort in the collected data. Therefore, analysis focused on causal attributions applied by teachers in relation to their pedagogical practice and in perceptions of their capability when teaching in culturally different classrooms. Evidence of causal attribution was sought in several ways by examining: key words, concepts and themes for negative emphasis; examples of incidents and events, in which a sense of personal control was either expressed or felt to be lacking; actions and attitudes; and philosophies of teacher quality, purpose and meaning making expressed by teachers and related specifically to the context.

#### 4.6.2.2. Critical theory

The study is partially situated within the theoretical framework of critical theory, in particular, critical race theory (CRT), being positioned in an Aboriginal Education context and exploring the experience of non-Aboriginal participants. Relevant to the analysis of teachers' attributions, attitudes and pedagogy in the classroom is a need to consider their cultural worldview and how they position themselves in relation to students as representatives of the dominant culture (Burgess, 2017; Vass, 2018), and their cultural worldview and subsequent actions, which in turn affects attitudes and pedagogy in the classroom.

Critical race theory seeks to draw aside the curtain of dominant culture 'normalising' that occurs through the prevalence of systems and policies, which preference Western ways of knowing and doing, to reveal the 'hidden' influence of culture and its impacts on those in less powerful positions, especially relevant for educational settings with students of diverse cultures: "CRT now has a substantive body of scholarship that traces how racism itself has moved beyond the obvious, explicit codes of colour-conscious organization associated with slavery, colonialism, imperialism and apartheid to a more implicit coded discourse of racial differences that are less often named than implied" (Collins, 2015, p. 50). There are various branches to critical theory, including critical race theory and critical theories based on gender, identity, feminism (Bogdan & Biklen, 2010, pp. 40-41).

Critical race theory seeks to articulate the power imbalances that exist in societies that have emerged from historical colonisation processes, and to redistribute the economic, social and political privileges that accrue to those who are part of the dominant culture. Critical race theory explores, through a discussion of race, "how and why power and influence are distributed in ways that privilege White interests, while concurrently and relationally discriminating against non-White interests" (Vass, 2015, p. 377). As outlined in Chapter 2, critical race theory critiques schools as places that replicate the dominant culture discourse through the actions of teachers, mostly "middle class white female teachers" who often unwittingly maintain "dominant patterns of white hegemony" (Forrest et al., 2017, p. 19). These recursive iterations of inequity in power and knowledge create "learned

helplessness” (Gay, 2010, p. 26) in students. Conversations, critical race theory urges, need to be had regarding “Whiteness”, “ideologies of Western ‘supremacy’ and the impact of colonialist processes” (Taylor, 2009, as cited in Vass, 2015, p. 377). Acknowledging, understanding and empowering the ‘Other’ is a vaunted purpose, one which researchers of critical race theory consider is worthwhile enacting in educational contexts:

It requires vigilance and strategic engagement to ensure that equity drives our work. With equity driving our educational policies and practices, we would be staunchly committed to every child in our schools. ... Only by educating against whiteness and investing in equity can we expect change. (Castagno, 2014, p. 175)

Coupled with the very real experience of racism in schools (Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010), the underlying concept of Whiteness in Australian society is as clearly a drawback in classrooms as storms on heavy seas, through which we all tack against headwinds. Such racial hierarchies permeate the “everyday practices and relations in Australian schools” (Burgess, 2017, p. 739) and are an inheritance from past colonisation and historical attitudes. In this dissertation, usage of colour-based terms adheres to their application in existing critical race theory discursivities without implying agreement with their use. As explained previously, the term *culturally different* describes the classroom or circumstance in which a non-Aboriginal teacher is teaching Aboriginal students. Schools are a “microcosm of society” (Perso & Hayward, 2015, p. 3) representing the multicultural nature of Australian cities and towns and yet there is hardly any situation more potent for discoursing on Whiteness, culture and the arguably outdated notion of race than the context of this research.

#### 4.6.2.3. Notes on reporting results

Various authorial devices have been employed in the study, and resultant thesis, including use of the first-person pronoun and endowing important words and phrases with their “full value (through metaphor and poetic devices such as repetition and alliteration)”, as recommended by van Manen (2014, p. 249). These devices and interpretive approaches were adopted in order to portray as authentically as possible the meaning making behind the lived experience of participants. Results are expressed in subsequent chapters using the evocative method, a style of writing best described as “a perceptive address”, and one in which layered meanings assist the reader to experience the “living meaning” emerging from a text strongly imbued with “reverberative meanings” (van Manen, 2014, p. 249). In short, when describing and discussing results, the phenomenological researcher applies literary effects that seek to convey an authenticity and immediacy to the reader not usually found in scientific writing.



I considered capturing the authentic *voice* of participants to be the most important consideration in data collection. The process of transcribing the semi-structured interviews and focus groups in effect occasioned a ‘second hearing’ for the participants, as the process is an intimate one – nothing but the participant’s voice in one’s headphones, the screen and the keyboard. Transcribing allowed for a revisiting of these voices, a deeper experience of cadence and breath, word choice and rhythm, which provides further insight into the state of mind, comfortability and emotions of the participant.

Aside from being a privilege to be entrusted with their thoughts and experiences, the act of recording and transcribing each conversation began to resemble in my mind a French door to their soul, where the rich and fertile grounds beyond lay clearly visible, the view neatly bounded by a framework (in this case, of words, sentence structure, pattern of speech), ostensibly reachable and yet, if locked, unobtainable. In transcribing their words, now to be immortalised on paper, to be pored over, to be analysed and articulated, I felt a closeness to the emerging data and these voices filled with passion and authenticity resonated with me, eliciting at times an emotional response to their content. This required a withdrawal from the data to refresh, revive and then re-immense.

#### 4.6.2.4. Notes on naming participants

Participants expressed no preference in how their anonymity would be protected in the reporting of findings, so I have ascribed names that bear no relation to their actual name. In the transcribing process, alphanumerical tags were used for labelling interviews, e.g. TM2 (teacher, male, second interview). However, in the writing process, names were adopted to provide greater descriptive impact within the text and to convey a sense of their character, which may enable the reader to form an impression of them, albeit hazy or indistinct, as individuals. Participants are people, after all.

The next section describes issues and approaches to ethical considerations for this study.

## 4.7. Ethical considerations

This section describes ethical considerations including issues related to the research site and research context. Culturally sensitive approaches to data collection and analysis, storage of data and dissemination of the research findings are addressed.

### 4.7.1. Access to the site

Ethnographic research protocols require prolonged observation of a single social group or system. As outlined by Creswell (1998), this model of qualitative research often incorporates *participant observation* wherein the researcher is immersed in the daily lives of participants and collects their voices through interviews, after having first negotiated with *gatekeepers* to gain access to the group. *Key informants* are located who can provide contacts and “useful insights into the group” (Creswell,

1998, pp. 58-60). In this study, the boarding school was the single social group or system; executive staff (the Principal and the SMT) acted as gatekeepers who approved entry to the research site and private interview spaces; and executive staff, lead teachers and boarding staff in leadership positions were key informants who interpreted shared behaviour patterns and school processes, and provided contacts for potential participants. It is important to note that the boarding school is a complex structure with separate Day School and Boarding House(s) staffing structures, each with middle and senior leadership positions.

Within the industry engagement partnership, the study's foundational support, expectations of in-kind support were fulfilled by the School through provision of research spaces and meeting rooms during site visits, access to technology including printers and photocopiers, and use of facilities such as the main staff room for focus groups. School executive staff, in their role as gatekeeper, provided work contact details during criterion sampling in order to expedite the emailing of invitations to participate.

#### 4.7.1.1. Equitable access

Issues related to English language, literacy and access to technology were not expected to arise. Proficiency in these areas were an existing requirement for employment at the School and registration with TRB NT. Technology, if needed for research protocols, was provided by the School.

#### 4.7.1.2. Protecting confidentiality

Strategies for protecting confidentiality of data are outlined later in this section. Confidentiality of participants was protected in several ways. There was no disclosure of individual participation among fellow participants or other staff, except within focus groups, unless participants chose to divulge their involvement to peers. As the School is "a social world" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2010, p. 23), it was expected that participation in the study may be noted by staff not involved in the study. Therefore, the researcher's presence on campus was announced to all staff, as is usual for visitors to the School, and in accord with ethical standards for ethnographic research (Creswell, 1998, p. 60) in which deception regarding purpose or intent is avoided. Visitor protocol, including the wearing of a temporary name badge and signing in, was undertaken by the researcher. Although most participants were comfortable to be seen contributing toward educational research, any possible discomfort was mitigated by the use of private meeting spaces located within the main administration building where participants may have other plausible reasons for attending if they preferred not to divulge their involvement in the study. Exceptions occurred when interviewees requested alternate venues, including a faculty space and a classroom.

Private contact details of teachers and boarding staff were not supplied or used at any time unless by request of the participant. At all times, appropriate methods of communication and level of contact

were established and negotiated, in accordance with the School and government privacy and confidentiality policies, and ethical standards for research involving humans.

#### *4.7.2. Risk of harm*

Risk of harm to the School, participants or researcher was considered a very low probability, although hazards existed from external sources, such as natural disaster or equipment failure, for example, breakdown of air-conditioner or technology failure. However, in the event of harm occurring, normal School policies and procedures to minimise further risk to staff and students were applied. As a visitor to the school, I received information relevant to workplace health and safety practices and emergency procedures.

**Risk of discomfort:** Data collection was not expected to cause discomfort to participants. However, it was recognised that alternative views or opinions may be expressed by participants in focus groups. It was also understood that critical reflection on pedagogical practice or behaviour management may occur in interviews or observations. Care was taken to ensure that conversations were expected to remain professional and appropriate. In the event of expressing difficulty with coping or experiencing a triggering event during data collection, participants might be compassionately invited to withdraw from the study. The School Principal indicated that support in the form of private counselling was available in the instance of an extreme response to involvement in the study.

**Risk of inconvenience:** Research protocols were designed as part of the usual responsibilities of participants and their ongoing professional obligations, that is, focus group involvement can contribute toward their ongoing professional development. Research protocols were to be conducted with a minimum disruption to participants' normal schedule, in school hours and on school premises. Communication was limited to work hours, by phone, email or in-person. Interviews and focus groups occurred in the participants' allocated non-teaching times, except in the case of classroom observations, which were negotiated according to the teacher's preference.

**Dependent or unequal relationships:** There were no dependent or unequal relationships with participants. The Human Research Ethics Committee advised that an existing relationship with the School in the form of a family link and past preservice placement at the boarding houses required no disclosure, having no impact on participants. Both the Informed Consent Document and Participant Information Letter reiterated that a participant's involvement would have no adverse effect on their relationship with the School.

#### *4.7.3. Student privacy*

Students were not a data source in the study, and interactions occurred incidentally and under supervision. The study was conducted in accordance with school, university and government policies

for working safely with children and vulnerable people. School policies and procedures for student privacy and safety were observed at all times. No recordings were made during classroom observation, and professional standards were maintained. Student names were not used by participants. All interviews were de-identified during transcription and all stored data was non-identifiable. Fieldwork photographs of classrooms did not contain students.

#### *4.7.4. Cultural safety and cultural security*

Values of survival and protection, equality and responsibility were incorporated in the study, in accordance with the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies (AIATIS, 2012). Aboriginal staff were potential participants in the criterion sampling process and therefore, values of equality, respect and reciprocity were considered when planning data collection, such as flexibility with the venue if preferred for cultural safety reasons. Aboriginal students were not an explicit focus of the study. However, it was anticipated that data collection may indirectly reveal aspects of their boarding school experience.

##### *4.7.4.1. Values of survival and protection*

Values of survival and protection were inherent in the research protocols. Professional expectations were established at the outset to reduce any potential for discrimination or erosion of cultural integrity and respect. Where indicators of racism or discrimination might be apparent, such as cultural blindness, this would be discussed in the context of a professional development opportunity.

##### *4.7.4.2. Values of respect and reciprocity*

Respect was an integral value of the study. Underpinning values adhered to ethical guidelines for research related to Aboriginal peoples, in particular: “Principle 11 Indigenous people involved in research, or who may be affected by research, should benefit from, and not be disadvantaged by, the research project”, and “Principle 12 Research outcomes should include specific results that respond to the needs and interests of Indigenous people” (AIATIS, 2012, pp. 15-16).

Respect for Aboriginal people and protecting cultural safety emerged as significant themes in the study and these are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. The study may affect Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders insofar as teachers’ self-efficacy and cross-cultural communication in culturally different classrooms were explored, and benefits and outcomes for schools and community relate to the potential for increased student engagement through improved teacher-student relationships. Values of respect and reciprocity are considered in the dissemination of results to the wider community.

#### *4.7.5. Protecting different forms of data*

This section outlines the research protocols related to storage and disposal of data, and access to data.

##### *4.7.5.1. Storage and disposal of data*

All electronic data generated by the study, including photographs, voice recordings and transcripts, were stored on a password-protected phone, laptop and desktop computer with regular backups to personal external drives and two separate password-secured cloud locations. Data collected in electronic and hard copy format was stored in the researcher's locked home office based in Canberra or in lockable rooms at the single research site. On submission of the thesis, electronic and digital data will be kept for a minimum of five years in accordance with university protocol, before being securely deleted.

Paper documentation (e.g., surveys, interview notes, handwritten journal reflections) and hard copies of electronic data will be securely shredded on completion of the study or in the event of a document being the only extant copy, will be kept for a minimum of five years before being securely shredded. Copies of original data will be securely deleted on completion of the study. The data are not considered to be of heritage value. All paper documentation was stored in a locked filing cabinet at the School or in the researcher's home office. All research spaces on-site were lockable with designated keys requiring a signature. Other staff had limited or no access except in emergencies. In practice, I often carried my notes and technology with me when moving around the school to ensure security and integrity of data and to prepare for interviews or observational processes prior to storage in locked accommodation overnight.

##### *4.7.5.2. Access to data*

Stored data was only accessible by the researcher. I transcribed audio recordings personally, therefore access to source data by external transcribers was not required. A request by the School to access data was not anticipated and did not occur. Access to preliminary findings may have been granted if required, for example, non-identifiable summary for reporting purposes to the School Board. However, this was not requested. Participants could retrieve their own data on request for revision, approval or withdrawal but none availed themselves of this option. School and participants were informed in the study introduction of ways to access the findings, for example, ECU's online repository or emailed copy. The intended presentation of findings to staff and participants was not possible, given the School's closure (addressed in Section 4.8.1.4. School closure). The data will not be preserved for possible future use in another research project.

## 4.8. Limitations of the method

This section describes the potential limitations to data collection, including staff availability, reliability and validity of the data, the potential impact of cultural responsibilities and community issues on staff participation in data collection processes, and the risk of School closure.

### 4.8.1. *Staff availability*

High turnover of school staff has a direct impact on teacher effectiveness, the ability of schools to apply consistency in the classroom, and the ability of early career teachers to build the relationships, reflexivity and resilience necessary for longevity in the profession (Buchanan et al., 2013).

In practice, participants left the school for a variety of reasons, often without notice, and while I was made aware of some departures between site visits, it was not appropriate for me to contact them. Several participants invited me to use personal email communication for follow-up questions and while I respected their offer, data collection was confined to school hours and specific site visits, as detailed in the application approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee, in order to limit the impact of participation on informants.

Staff turnover contributed to the loss of five participants from the study, four of whom had completed semi-structured interviews prior to departing the school. Their experiences were considered relevant for inclusion in data analysis as they had not formally withdrawn from the study and their departure was indicative of the high levels of transience in the Northern Territory population. The loss of five participants represented 29.4% of the total number of participants, and 45.4% of classroom teachers, including participants in leadership roles as Heads of Department. While this rate cannot be applied to other settings, the attrition rate of Aboriginal Education teachers during the study appeared substantially higher than the Northern Territory's teacher attrition rate of one-in-six teachers or 15.94% (Aisthorpe, 2016; Wilson, 2014).

Conversely, retention of 54.5% of teachers from participant Sub-groups 1 and 2, while again limited in application to mainstream teachers, is significantly less than a comparative rate within the Department of Education, where classroom teacher retention rates were 86.3% in 2013 (Wilson, 2014, p. 191) and three years later, approximately 84% (Aisthorpe, 2016). External factors affecting the boarding school may have contributed to the low retention rate of its Aboriginal Education teachers. Possible factors affecting teacher retention were examined in the previous chapter with references to current literature.

#### 4.8.2. Reliability and validity of the data

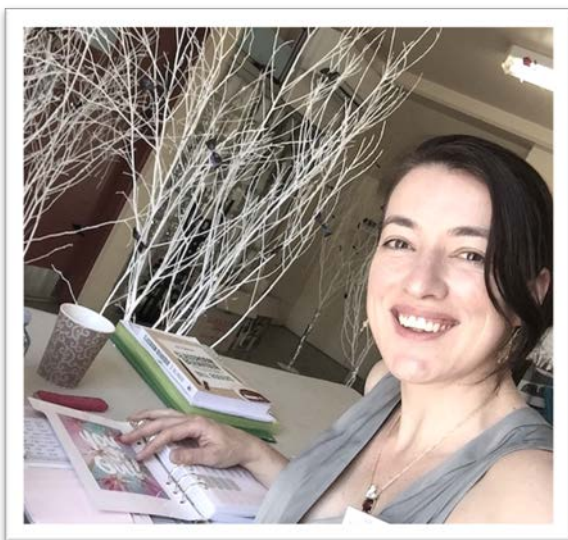
In this study, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach was adopted, incorporating three distinct yet co-constructing analytical processes (described in Section 4.6 Data analysis). Firstly, a theory-free reading of the data was undertaken in Leximancer, which generated concept-thematic maps. These maps informed the open coding and focused coding that occurred in NVivo, revealing further themes and subthemes. The final process, researcher interpretation, enabled the researcher to draw on her personal experience of the phenomenon to form insights that contributed towards its description. In hermeneutic terms, these analytical phases are: textural description (*what* participants experienced); structural description, also termed imaginative variation (*how* participants experienced the phenomenon); and the overall description or “essence” (Creswell, 1998, p. 150) of the phenomenon, producing the “essential constituents of the structure” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 209).

While inclusion of the researcher’s personal experience and insights is an integral part of this approach, reliability is established through an emphasis on collecting data of “rich and subtle experiential detail” (van Manen, 2014, p. 302), the application of multiple analytical processes and the consistent production of descriptions during all phases of data collection and analysis, including the researcher’s personal experience and reflections in fieldnotes and research journals. Neither phenomenology nor ethnomethodology professes to discover ‘truth’, nor do they deal in absolutes. However, both allow for interpretation and transformation of data such that potentially revelatory insights and descriptions may be revealed by different researchers of the same data set: “The same meaning is noticed but is expressed in different words” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 203). This enables generalisable descriptions of the phenomenon to be developed from individualised experiences, from which “significant and complex findings can emerge” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 210).

The study adopted an interpretivist theoretical framework and therefore supported knowledge production that served to “enrich human discourse” (Greene, 2010, p. 71) using “thick description” (Greene, 2010, p. 70) and inductive theory drawn from lived experiences of a context-specific phenomenon. Validity in phenomenological research is measured by the plausibility of findings (Creswell, 1998) and this is increased through triangulation (Maxwell, 2010, p. 284), whereby data are collected from:

- a diverse range of individuals – in the study, demographic data showed diverse gender, age, and experience; interview responses indicated a range of cultural backgrounds;
- a variety of methods – data sources included demographic survey, interviews, focus groups, classroom observation, immersion and reflexivity during fieldwork; and,

- diverse settings – although the study involved a single research setting, data collection occurred in multiple venues: classrooms, various staff rooms and meeting rooms, and on one memorable occasion, an under-stair storage room filled with seasonal decorations for the upcoming Year 12 formal, which was commandeered in order to conduct long form interviews uninterrupted in air conditioned comfort (see image below).



Triangulation reduces the occurrence of “systematic biases due to a specific method” (Maxwell, 2010, p. 284) and increases the ability to draw generalised findings from inductive theory. Threats to validity are minimised in the presence of evidence, rather than a specific methodology (Maxwell, 2010). In the study, immersion in the research setting and classroom observation assisted in substantiating the lived experience of participants, and in providing contextual insights.

Validity can be enhanced when the values of reciprocity and authenticity (Luttrell, 2010a) are considered, particularly through the integration of participants’ perspectives in social critique generated by qualitative inquiry. These values, and others embedded in the concepts of cultural safety and cultural security, were enacted in the study.

#### *4.8.3. Cultural responsibilities and community issues*

Students attended the School from upwards of thirty-five communities. Therefore, the community roles and responsibilities of students and the flow-on effect of issues arising in home communities had a known influence on classroom dynamics, student attendance and engagement, and potentially, in relation to the study, the focus of teachers and boarding staff. Cultural responsibilities would “always take precedence over school” (Perso & Hayward, 2015, p. 209), and in such circumstances, the School had policies and procedures developed specifically to address the complexity inherent in comingling cultural sensitivities and Western educational expectations. To offset possible interruptions to data collection, multiple visits to the research site were planned.

#### *4.8.4. School closure*

Risk of permanent closure was not initially apparent as a potential threat to the study achieving its objectives. As external factors began to impact staff morale, leading to media speculation, this became a “potentially difficult field issue” capable of causing “a premature exit” from the site



(Creswell, 1998, p. 111). Fieldwork annotations noted the fraught atmosphere. Throughout, executive staff and teachers at the School remained committed to the study. In accordance with the industry engagement partnership with ECU, the School continued to provide in-kind support for the study and participants continued to contribute, expressing commitment to educational research despite their personal uncertainty regarding their future in the profession. From the researcher's perspective, this potential threat was minimised due to the professionalism of the participants.

## **4.9. Summary**

In this chapter, the central research question and its three sub-research questions were stated. The theoretical framework underpinning the study was outlined and research processes contextualised for the research site. The methodology including participant selection, data collection, data analysis and the role of the researcher were described. Research protocols, including the inclusive and exclusive nature of criterion sampling and observation protocols, were described. Ethical considerations and limitations related to the research process were defined.

Results of the data collection and analysis, particularly the interview transcripts generated in the research, are presented in detail in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER FIVE



Kapok (*Cochlospermum fraserii*) is edible; seeds and pods are used for ceremonial costume  
Photo © Megan Spiers

# Chapter 5: Results

*What you have to do is, you have to put the classroom as the focus of the school. (Gil)*

This chapter investigates the *lived* experience of non-Aboriginal teachers involved in teaching classes wholly comprised of Aboriginal students. Specific challenges and barriers inherent within the phenomenon are described along with the ways in which cultural difference in the classroom adds an intangible yet potentially transformative layer of complexity to the teaching and learning process. The voices of participants provide stories and critical incidents that enable the researcher to explore the definition of a culturally competent teacher, their concept of ‘good teaching’, and ways in which they managed professional relationships, conflicts and accessing peer support.

Participants’ anecdotes were at times disarmingly honest and articulated their attempts to make sense of the phenomenon. The broader context of Aboriginal Education is referred to in this chapter where specific policies or processes have been directly referenced by participants. Data collection revealed participants to be generally both capable and critically reflective teachers who were confident in their teaching practice and held attitudes and approaches to the context that had been formulated individually in response to the phenomenon. Their journey to cultural competence involved finding and developing effective strategies for teaching in culturally diverse classrooms and these are examined in a site-specific context. Further analysis of results appears in the Discussion chapter following this one.

## 5.1. Results: Demographic data

This section comprises data from participant groups: Teachers and Boarding staff. As described in Chapter 4 Methods, participants comprised of four sub-groups at the research site: proficient or lead teachers (Sub-group 1); provisional or graduate teachers (Sub-group 2); boarding staff (Sub-group 3); and, executive staff (Sub-group 4). Executive staff in senior leadership and middle management roles participated in data collection as part of both Teachers and Boarding groups. Demographic information was collected firstly using a single-page survey instrument (see Appendix D), followed by responses to semi-structured interview questions. Where a participant chose not to complete the survey instrument, demographic details were inferred from interview responses, for example, individuals were assigned an approximate age bracket. Analysis of responses was not dependent on demographic data. However, this information assisted in contextualising participants’ experience at the School in relation to their varied professional and personal backgrounds.

### 5.1.1. Demographic data for interviewees

Table 1 provides demographic details for thirteen interviewees from participant Sub-groups 1 and 2: the Principal, whose duties included a teaching role; two Heads of Department, colloquially known as ‘HODs’, responsible for managing staff in a key learning area (KLA) in addition to a teaching role; and eight teachers with a current teaching load of Aboriginal Education classes; and the Head of Boarding and Assistant Head of Boarding (Sub-group 4). Corroborative data was collected on an informal basis from other executive and teaching staff who, in their position of gatekeeper to a shared world, provided contextual information and insider knowledge.

Number of participants per category						
Gender		Age				
<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>20 – 29</u>	<u>30 – 39</u>	<u>40 – 49</u>	<u>50 – 59</u>	<u>60+</u>
6	7	4	3	2	1	3

*Table 1. Demographic details of interviewees – Teachers and Boarding staff*

Demographic data collated participants’ age ranges, total years employed at the school, previous work experience, any completed cultural awareness training or EALD training, and other cultural experiences such as language learning, overseas travel or cultivating friendships with people from other cultures. Information was collected as to whether participants had visited remote communities in northern Australia. This was considered relevant as experience or immersion in other cultures is known to contribute toward development of cultural competence (Berardo & Deardorff, 2012; Moeller & Nugent, 2014).

Teachers represented a range of key learning areas: Mathematics, Science, Art, English, and Health and Physical Education. Three participants held middle management roles as Heads of Department (HODs), and two teachers held current positions of Heads of Year, with responsibilities additional to classroom teaching. All participants held at least the minimum tertiary qualifications required by the Teacher Registration Board of the Northern Territory (TRB NT) for professional teacher registration. Individuals with between one- and three-years’ experience as a teacher were defined as early career teachers (ECT). Two boarding staff agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews, both of whom were Executive Staff (Sub-group 4), holding middle management positions as Head of Boarding and Assistant Head of Boarding.

### 5.1.2. Demographic data for Teachers focus group

Two focus groups were conducted, the first aligning with Teachers Sub-groups 1 and 2. Table 2 summarises the demographic data for participants in the Teachers focus group, which took place at the end of first semester. To maximise the ability for Aboriginal Education teachers to attend, the

focus group was scheduled for the day following the departure of Aboriginal boarding students, travelling to their home communities for the mid-year break. Preferences for location and timing were respected and all involvement was confidential except where participants communicated their involvement to others.

Number of interviewees per category						
Gender		Age				
<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>20 – 29</u>	<u>30 – 39</u>	<u>40 – 49</u>	<u>50 – 59</u>	<u>60+</u>
0	5	1	1	2	1	

*Table 2. Demographic details of Teachers focus group*

Enabling participants to maintain a level of ownership over the focus-group process enhanced their comfort and security. In schools, the teaching day is measured by the bell with frequent movement between classrooms and shared office spaces and as a result of constant change, teachers have highly developed territorial instincts. Contained within any coffee mug or cardigan-draped desk chair lies a potential for conflict that is not to be underestimated. Therefore, any request or preference was taken seriously and accommodated where possible.

A conference room was booked for the duration of the focus group; however, this location was discarded by teachers in favour of the main staff room, which in their view had more comfortable seating and larger tables for shared pizzas. The changed location reduced the level of privacy. Other teachers and Aboriginal Teacher Assistants wandered through the staff room while the focus group was in session, yet this did not seem to deter participants. Focus group discussions, although confidential for research purposes, were not considered by participants to be of a particularly sensitive nature inside the school setting and interruptions were treated with good humour, as evidenced in one teacher's response to an interruption: "Happy chat. Happy chat. I'm alright with happy chat" (Brad). However, when participants recounted incidents or concerns that they considered more serious, they lowered their voices.

Five participants attended the Teachers focus group. One teacher held the position of Head of Department (HOD), occupying a leadership role in addition to classroom teaching; two were Heads of Year with responsibilities for a single student cohort within a year group. All participants represented a range of key learning areas, including Mathematics, Science, Art, Physical Education, and held at least the minimum tertiary qualifications required by TRB NT for professional registration. Two participants were early career teachers (ECT) whose involvement with Aboriginal students represented their first experience in culturally different classrooms. Two teachers, employed for five and seven years respectively, had worked in other industries before commencing their teaching career at the School.

### 5.1.3. Demographic data for Boarding focus group

The second focus group incorporated boarding staff with a current role that included a direct pedagogical involvement with Aboriginal students, aligning with participant Sub-group 3: Boarding Staff. Table 3 summarises the demographic data for Boarding focus group participants.

Number of participants per category						
Gender		Age				
Female	Male	<u>20 – 29</u>	<u>30 – 39</u>	<u>40 – 49</u>	<u>50 – 59</u>	<u>60+</u>
1	2			3		

*Table 3. Demographic details of Boarding focus group*

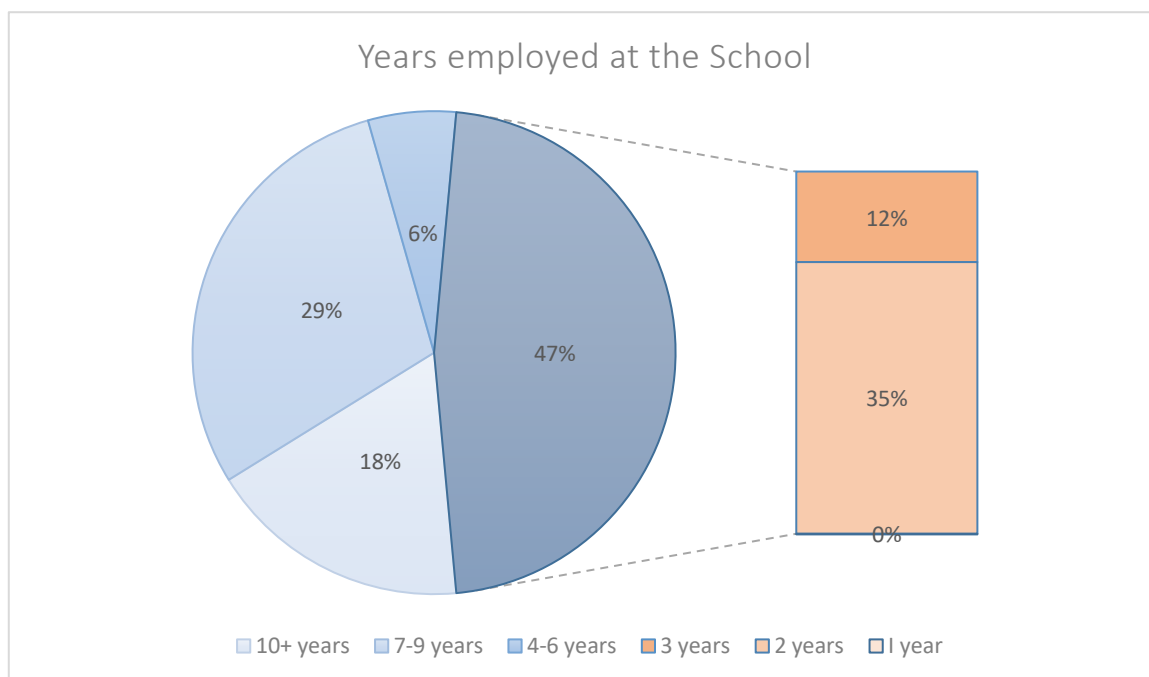
The Boarding focus group was held during semester, prior to the daily briefing when the students had already left for their school day. Three participants attended the focus group, conducted in the tearoom of the largest house. The tearoom was the participants' preferred location, being centrally positioned in the boarding complex with an outlook onto a common hall, offering ease of access if they were required.

All participants held middle management positions as Heads of House in the three functional boarding houses at the School during data collection, and their duties included the operational management and welfare of students and staff in each house. Prior employment experience was predominantly overseas in other industries and environments, including active military duty. They held relevant clearances for working with children, as required for all staff, and although none held tertiary qualifications, two held trade qualifications.

Unlike the Teachers focus group, during the conduct of the Boarding focus group, there were no external interruptions. However, participants checked their phones and updated each other on specific issues with students or staff as the focus group progressed. Due to scheduling commitments, this focus group kept a stricter time limit than the Teacher focus group, which had continued in an informal manner beyond its conclusion.

### 5.1.4. Years of employment at the School

As part of the demographic survey, participants were asked to nominate their total years of employment at the School. Categories are illustrated in Figure 3. The most common duration of employment was 4–10 years. Of the participants employed long-term, 18% had worked at the School for 10+ years, including one teacher employed for a period of twenty years. Slightly less than half of the participants were new to the School, classified as being employed between 1–3 years, of whom 35% were in their second year.



*Figure 3. Years employed at the School, with early career teachers separated*

No participants were in their first year of employment at the School. Given that criterion sampling only included participants with current Aboriginal Education experience, this statistic reflected the School's policy of deferring the allocation of Aboriginal Education classes to new teachers on a full-time basis until after these teachers had gained experience in the cultural context of the School, and had further developed their pedagogical practice.

Data for new teachers to the School, some of whom were early career teachers, was extracted from the pie chart in Figure 3 and is shown in orange, as per above. Apart from those employed for two years, the second largest group of participants had been employed for 7–9 years.

#### *5.1.5. Indicators of cultural competence*

Aside from being invited to complete demographic surveys, participants revealed other information about their employment history and life experiences as part of the semi-structured interview process. Interview questions encouraged participants to share the extent of their formal cultural awareness training and qualifications in teaching English as an additional language or dialect (EALD). Participants were also encouraged to share the extent of their immersive experiences living and working in another culture.

As discussed in Chapter 2, cultural competence in teachers is attained through understanding and reflective insights drawn from personal and professional experience in other cultures, and the development of culturally congruent pedagogical practices, constructed over time (Banks, 2019;

Hollinsworth, 2013). In educational contexts, teachers occupying an advanced position on the cultural competence continuum (Cross et al., 1989) have observable traits: confidence with students marked by a personal connection; relationship with parents; high expectations and acceptance of responsibility for students' academic performance; habits of self-evaluation and critical reflection; and, produce culturally relevant content to enhance students' academic engagement (Teel & Obidah, 2008, as cited in Brace, 2011, pp. 62-63).

For the purposes of the study, three indicators were chosen to gauge with reasonable celerity the likely position on the cultural competence continuum occupied by participants. These indicators or factors that may contribute towards cultural competence, relevant to participant sub-groups and the research context, were:

- cultural awareness training;
- remote community visits; and,
- completion of EALD qualifications or training.

Interview transcripts were analysed for these specific indicators and the following data are revealed in Figure 4 below. Data relating to each of these indicators are provided in more detail in the following section.

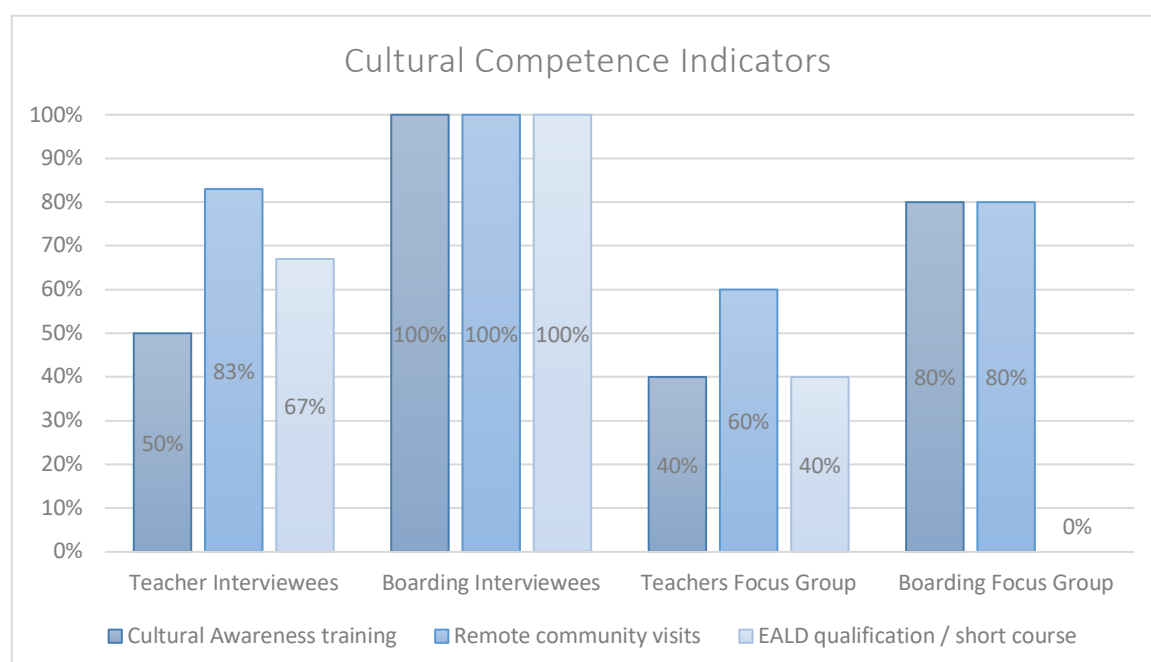


Figure 4. Cultural competence indicators per participant Sub-group



## 5.2. Results: Cultural competence

Cultural competence is acquired through personal and professional experience in other cultures in conjunction with relevant cultural knowledge and the ability to act in culturally congruent ways. While this is a simplified depiction of the long-term process described in Chapter 2, the researcher required a similarly concise method for determining participants' siting on the cultural competence continuum. For this purpose, the researcher selected three indicators of cultural competence from known contributing factors reported in the literature in the field of Aboriginal Education. As data collection commenced, it was soon apparent that the study's participants considered the same indicators to be factors that had contributed in a worthwhile manner to their development of cultural competence. The three indicators of cultural competence are described in this section: completion of formal cultural awareness training with a focus on local Aboriginal cultures and contextual knowledge; participation in visits to remote communities, including meeting community members and/or parents and caregivers; and, formal EALD qualifications.

### 5.2.1. *Cultural awareness training*

Prior to or during their employment at the School, 50% of teacher interviewees and all boarding interviewees had completed a formal cultural awareness course. Of the focus group participants, 40% of teachers and 80% of boarding participants had undertaken cultural awareness training.

As part of the School's Staff Induction Program, attendance at formal cultural awareness training was mandatory for all new staff arriving from interstate or overseas, but voluntary for long-term Northern Territory residents.

When we recruit, we have an Induction Program [in which] staff undertake a Cultural Awareness program that's offered either by a Traditional Elder or they go to Nungalinga College and they undertake the cultural awareness training there. It all depends on the teacher really. It has to be individualised. But if they come from interstate, we generally put them through the whole course. If they've lived in the Territory for a long time, they can have a choice as to whether they attend or not. (Gil)

The following statement by Corey, describing his lack of experience with Aboriginal people before his arrival at the School, demonstrates the need for this policy:

But really not a massive cultural understanding of the difference between Indigenous and us normal White fellas, as they say. And coming from England and moving here, less than the everyday Australian. So, no previous, apart from working with two [Aboriginal] people in Defence. Apart from that, yeah, not much of an idea really at all. (Corey)

One participant reflected on the appropriateness of having completed formal cultural awareness training as part of his induction:

It's good for diversity, appreciation of students' background and acknowledging diversity in the classroom. Having geography knowledge, knowing where students come from, is important.  
(Ian)

An additional offering was made for new staff to participate in an 'on country' cultural experience in the rural area outside of Darwin. One participant reflected that while not classroom-focused, the tour enhanced his cultural knowledge:

It was interesting, learned some things but certainly doesn't fully prepare you for the classroom. It gives you a bit more of an overview of the culture. (River)

For 40% of participants, their knowledge of Aboriginal culture was drawn strongly from personal and working relationships with Aboriginal people. Isabelle and Summer provide an example of this in their statements below.

Living and working in other cultures gives me an awareness of cultural difference. (Isabelle)

I was born in Papua New Guinea. I spent my childhood there, so I have an intimate knowledge of Indigenous cultures. ... And my motto is, the only way to experience a culture is to go there and live it, firsthand. You can't read about it, you can't learn from a video, you've got to go there and experience it. And that's what I did. I want to learn about a culture, I'll go there and live it. For a year, to learn what it's like, to gain that appreciation. (Summer)

Despite previous experience and formal study in Aboriginal cultures, this knowledge may not adequately prepare teachers for the local context of the schools in which they are employed. One participant, educated in Geraldton, Western Australia, with a school curriculum full of Aboriginal cultural content subsequently bolstered by formal university-level studies, expressed frustration that all this knowledge and experience had not informed him to the extent necessary to feel confident culturally with Aboriginal students at the School. In his opinion, Aboriginal cultures in remote areas of the Northern Territory were "still very different" (River) to Aboriginal cultures extant in Western Australia. To emphasise this difference, and the limitations of cultural awareness training, he explained:

They speak creole, which is still another language. ... I wouldn't say it does nothing. No, far from it. It prepares you, but not enough. (River)

For one of the boarding participants, self-directed learning was seen as sufficient for gaining awareness and understanding of cultural issues that may affect boarding students and their wellbeing, in addition to formal cultural awareness training. As a migrant to Australia, this individual viewed himself as being potentially more openminded in his approach to cultural engagement.

Self-learning was the key. And I think, the other key was the fact that I was not blinkered by or had any misconceptions about Indigenous people. So, from my point of view, I formulated my own opinion. I didn't have an opinion that was put on me either by parents or whatever, so I had to form my own opinion of how to deal with it, how to treat them and do whatever. So, I think that was beneficial. I think that was good for me. (Corey)

Reflecting on the value of having formal cultural awareness training, several participants were of the opinion that the experience and knowledge had been beneficial but not essential. Additional strategies were considered necessary for teaching effectively in a cross-cultural environment.

I think a lot of good teachers are quite intuitive and they pick it up. ... Certainly, it helps, a few little tricks and a few strategies and a bit of cultural awareness, um, but a good teacher is quite intuitive and just, I think, picks it up – what works. It might take a term or whatever, but I think you get there. (River)

### *5.2.2. Remote community visits*

Most teachers had visited one or more remote communities during their employment at the School: 83% of interviewees and 60% of focus group participants had visited one or more remote communities, either as part of their teaching duties or for personal reasons, for example, to attend cultural events and festivals.

Teachers often viewed remote community visits as enhancing their capacity to support Aboriginal students, not only academically but also in the management of issues or challenges related to mental and emotional health and wellbeing. A sample of the comments by participants following a community experience are listed below.

Community visits help teachers re-evaluate their expectations and help build teacher-student relationships. I found the experience very useful. (Reuben)

I could see where they came from and I had an insight into the problems that they bring to the school. So, I think that really helped me. (Margaret)

I found community visits helpful for building relationships outside of the classroom. (Ian)

You make personal connections. (Isabelle)

It's about being able to say, "I've lived in your world." Seeing where they come from is really important, eye-opening, even for a day. (Prue)

Of boarding staff, all interviewees and 80% of focus group participants had visited a remote community. Reasons were varied, including: to supervise students on excursions (e.g., Barunga Music Festival), escort students to their home communities, and communicate with parents of prospective students. Community visits were a valued method for enhancing participants' knowledge about Aboriginal culture, in addition to regularly speaking with knowledgeable peers at the School.

A lot of it was around spending time with other staff members who did have that intimate knowledge. A lot of it was around community visits and community engagement. (Tania)

Boarding staff viewed community visits as a fundamental part of their ability to provide support for Aboriginal students, not only academically but also in relation to coping with external incidents and challenges, particularly those affecting their communities.

You will find that the historical knowledge that you garner from other people, and other people's conversations, [during community visits] is as valuable as what is on the paperwork when the students come to school. Because a lot of that information will be obsolete within the first term. The phone numbers, the guardianship may change. The community visit group who see the families and the students and the community face-to-face are a massive fountain of knowledge and a wealth of understanding of what challenges a community is undergoing at any one time. (Tania)

Building or renewing relationships with students, both past and present, and their parents was an important element of community visits. Teachers and boarding staff understood the value of being seen in the communities and taking time to speak with community members, as Aboriginal culture is relationship-based. Therefore, face-to-face contact is highly valued and respected in their culture.

It's about having the face-to-face, and knowing the parents, and [them] knowing that they've got support and feeling that. And that just filters down and gets passed onto other ones and say, "Right, you know, send your kids to [the School] because they care about your kids. Because they're here, they're in community. You can talk to them. You can ask them what's going on." (Corey)

Because with Indigenous students, you do need to build a relationship. And if they don't know you or they don't have any connection to anyone that you might know that they know, it's going

to take a while for them to build the trust, because they've had so much, so much reason to not trust Whitefellas. So, yeah, complex. Complex for new people. Always good to say, "Oh, you're an [surname]. Oh, I remember your brother." Once you say that, they sort of, "Oh, ok, you must know someone that I know." (Margaret)

As one can expect, visits to communities result in complex personal responses by all involved. One interviewee felt a mixture of elation and sadness, which she termed a "disappointment of connection" (Tania). This will be explored further in the next chapter, but Tania ended her recount of disappointment with the following positive comment:

But that is countered by the fact when I or when any of my staff see even expelled students in community, they are always really, really pleased to see us and they are always really, really, really *happy* to say how their time was at school and [ask] "Can I come and visit? How's sir G-going? What's Mr W- doing?" I've never had a negative response from either a parent or a community member or a student who's been excluded either from day school or boarding. *Never*. (Tania)

### *5.2.3. Completion of EALD qualifications or training*

Of interviewees, 67% of teachers and all boarding participants held qualifications in teaching English as an additional language or dialect. In the Teacher focus group, 40% of teachers held EALD qualifications whereas this was lacking in all staff attending the Boarding focus group. Of the teachers who did not have formal EALD qualifications, they applied themselves to adopt relevant strategies.

I did self-study on ESL techniques. Differentiation, directed learning, limited independent writing, adapting resources to the students. (Prue)

Participants expressed differing views on the need for teachers to have EALD qualifications. Some teachers saw a distinct advantage for both teachers and students when the teacher possessed English language training.

EALD training is really important. (Ian)

Because most of the kids are so functional in English, in terms of their spoken English, it's easy to forget. They're often just treated as low literacy kids and not as genuine ESL kids. So [being EALD qualified] I can see certain problems that kids are having. And you can say, "Oh, that's totally ESL," and you can teach to that. (River)

Quality of teacher education is a fundamental issue. Teachers don't actually have the skills to teach Indigenous students and language is a key issue. You've got mono-linguistic teachers trying to teach plural-linguistic students in a foreign language environment. It's all about communication. ESL and EALD training is [*sic*] critical for working with Indigenous students. (Simon)

Reflecting on teachers unfamiliar with catering for English language learners in their classroom, several participants considered EALD training as beneficial but not essential. As with cultural awareness, other characteristics were also necessary for teaching effectively.

They've got to be flexible to be able to work in a class where there is big differentiation between English levels, and not all staff are capable of that. That's just good teaching. But it also comes from experience. (Gil)

#### 5.2.4. Section summary

In summary, it is clear that formal cultural awareness training, visits to remote communities and formal EALD qualifications were considered by participants to be factors that contributed towards cultural competence. In the next section of this chapter, the ways in which participants found and developed effective strategies for teaching Aboriginal boarding students are described.

### 5.3. Results: Pedagogical practice

All teachers viewed their classrooms as places in which to support students. They attempted to create positive environments and approached each day hopefully, treating each lesson as an isolated entity detached from previous negative experiences or failed lessons. They accessed different options of support for different purposes, in order to give the students and themselves a greater opportunity for success.

From the School leadership perspective, the various provisions of classroom support operated within an overarching philosophy of putting the classroom first. In making it the focal point of the School's purpose, teachers and staff external to the classroom all acted to support what happened inside the classroom. The Principal termed this the "Circle of Influence" (Gil):

What you have to do is, you have to put the classroom as the focus of the school. If the classroom is the focus of the school, therefore you have to put into place a Circle of Support, or a Circle of Influence that I call it, because we are *influencing*. All the people who are not teaching in that class are *influencing the outcome*, by being available and by offering support. (Gil)

This is the central theme of this section and the influence that the teacher has on the classroom environment and the students' response is examined below.

### *5.3.1. Support*

Access to support – learning support, contextual support, peer support and community support – is essential for building and sustaining the wellbeing of teachers. From the perspective of the study's participants, these modes of support are explored below, including the influence of support on the creation of classrooms in which cultural safety and security are honoured. The ability of teachers to seek and receive support when needed in cross-cultural contexts is an important concept and one essential for schools to consider: "To educate low-income youths and youths of color, classroom teachers must be nurtured, empowered, and revitalized" (Banks, 2019, p. 132).

#### *5.3.1.1. Learning support*

Teachers were candid in their need for academic support in the classroom, which was described positively and viewed as an extension of their ability to provide tailored learning support to students. The presence of others in the classroom appeared to imbue teachers with perceived higher levels of classroom control. They reported improved learning outcomes with fewer disruptive behaviours that indicated an increased academic engagement by students.

Study participants reported that learning support in the classroom was provided by Teacher Assistants, also termed 'TAs', some of whom were Aboriginal staff members, and international students visiting for a semester as part of the Latitude Global Volunteering program, affectionately referred to as Gap Students or 'Gappys'. Visiting family members of Aboriginal students also provided support in the classroom. For further detail on the contribution of parents and community members, see section 5.3.1.4. Community support. The following quotes are representative of ways in which teachers prioritised the wellbeing of students and utilised the support provided by Teacher Assistants and 'Gappys' to manage instances of disruptive behaviour and to increase engagement.

In terms of reflective teaching, to develop a positive class atmosphere which establishes positive relationships, it's really important to have a stable class so that the teaching environment feels comfortable for students and teachers, and safe for students and teachers. And oftentimes because a lot of students come from quite disruptive environments, in terms of what they perceive as acceptable behaviour, classes are quite disrupted and it's difficult at times to establish that safe environment for students to learn in and for teachers to teach in. So, my real asset in class is having Support Staff and at times, Gap Students to help out and/or adults in the class. Particularly if they are proactive in assisting me, the more I'm able to really enable students to meet challenges set and achieve. And when you have that feeling of achievement, poor behaviour

tends to fade away and students are actually quite engaged, and they feel that they're learning something that's useful and beneficial. So, from that, I'll have students making comments like, "I really enjoyed something today," or "I learnt something today," and that promotes a positive atmosphere. (Brad)

So, you've got these different things going on. You've got some serious behaviours that you need to manage. And you need to try and get to that student when you have the opportunity, to give them the help they need to be able to do some work and achieve something, while still sort of managing the class. Ideally, you've got a TA or someone who can sit down with them and get them started ... It can be difficult. (River)

One teacher offered her opinion on students' receptiveness to learning support offered in boarding:

As far as what I've observed, they have a great support system there. But whether the students want it or not, it's another thing. Like, some students, for example, have been assigned personal tutors and they don't appreciate that support. (Summer)

The reason for this attitude or response to learning support observed in students is complex. Students may not feel comfortable with the tutor in question, may not like or may resent being helped by a non-Aboriginal person, may be embarrassed at the attention, leading to feelings of 'shame' amid other issues of a culturally sensitive nature. Cultural mores needing to be recognised and potentially addressed in the classroom and boarding houses are presented in Appendix J, in conjunction with a selection of participants' observations and experiential data of their pedagogical response. For Aboriginal students, leaving home to attend boarding school can be a difficult and challenging process (Guenther & Fogarty, 2018; Hadwen, 2015; Hose et al., 2018) having difficulty finding their way in an educational setting oftentimes vastly dissimilar to their previous schooling experience, teachers and boarding staff offered contextual support, as detailed in the following section.

#### 5.3.1.2. Contextual support

The School adopted policies and processes to support the development of appropriate behaviour in students for whom an urban school represented an unfamiliar environment. When teachers and boarding staff discussed their approach to student management, examples were always couched in terms related to cultural and community background, disadvantage and student wellbeing.

The classroom knows they've got support through Student Services [which] has the Restorative Officers in it. I also introduced Clontarf to the school. So, Clontarf and Strong Girls ... offer a program whereby students are taught values, they're taught respect for others, and they have



expectations. If they don't go to class, they don't go to [academy] activities. And so, there are expectations on the student but there are rewards should they do the right thing. (Gil)

Teachers and boarding staff reiterated the need for, and importance of, maintaining a cultural identity for the students within the School and classroom. They viewed the classroom as being an entity in itself, distinct from the myriad cultural backgrounds of the students. Recognition of the wide-ranging implications and associations of cultural identity was evident in the approach of many participants.

Surprising how small Darwin is, or how small the NT is, for us. This one's related to that one is related to that one, and then one thing happens to not even their close relation, [to] their distant relation ... and all of a sudden, it all goes. Couldn't predict it happening. Nicest, most respectful, beautiful kid – all of a sudden, a wild boxer! [*Here, he laughed.*] It is what it is. (Reuben)

The above quote from a teacher is indicative of the support and understanding they provide to Aboriginal students within the learning environment. Reuben wanted every student to achieve Year 12, as per community expectations, but he recognised that he couldn't always get there. However, the School endeavoured to put into place as many processes and procedures as possible to maximise outcomes for those students who were motivated to succeed academically.

Boarding staff recounted ways in which they adapted procedures to incorporate respect for culture. This included modifying words and phrases in response to culture and custom.

You know, it's very complicated when you have students from 30 different communities. They would have ceremony at different times for the students, for boys and for girls. We went to some training with regard to cultural competency and realised that when we're saying, "Come on boys, let's go out for breakfast," if the boys had been through ceremony, they were men! So, they would find it offensive for you to say, [*Here, she clapped as if calling students to attention.*] "Come on boys!" So, we have to say, "Fellahs, mate, you lot, mob," and we can't do "boys" anymore. And that was only through a process of education and insight. (Tania)

Participants were, on the whole, cognisant of their position of White privilege. They spoke with a sense of understanding the history of disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal students and many remote communities and possessed a desire to help in efforts to improve their attainments in education, with the hoped-for outcome of providing access to a better life. Some teachers were aware of the formerly patriarchal nature and pastoral care aspect to their role and were at pains to distance themselves from any implied missionary zeal.

I've always put down on my recommendation every year that I wanted to stay in a classroom with Indigenous kids. That's why I came here. I didn't come here to work at a fancy private school. I came to work with disadvantaged students. (Reuben)

When asked if his motivation came from an interest in culture or an interest in service, Reuben declared that his drive to teach Aboriginal students arose from a genuine interest in their plight and not as an overtly righteous or pious act.

More service. Like, I'm not – I hope not – patriarchal. I met a lot of people in my time here and in Australia [some] that approach it from a sense that they're a saviour coming in to help these kids. That wasn't so much it. It's just that I come from a very wealthy area. My brother went to a private school that was \$50,000 a year and I know what that's like, and I don't feel like dealing with those people. [*Here, he laughed.*] (Reuben)

The Principal similarly had a genuine interest in and understanding of Aboriginal students in the School, stating: "It's important to appreciate how brave and courageous they really are" (Gil). The Principal spoke candidly of the processes required to enact change when recounting the journey to transform the school culture around Aboriginal Education and its purpose. The entire process occurred over a number of years and required clear direction and persistence. Over time, evidence suggests that the teacher-student dynamic was changed from one characterised by low expectations and over-weening sympathy, perhaps guilt, to one of high expectations coupled with empathy and mutual respect.

In speaking of the situation of Aboriginal students, the Principal described the prevailing attitudes of teachers and boarding staff that had existed on her arrival at the School more than ten years prior. Consider her feelings of dismay, as evidenced in the quote below and those immediately following, within the context of a sudden encounter between an accomplished educational professional – possessed of decades-long practical experience and doctoral research in the field of Aboriginal Education – and an outdated and patriarchal learning model, wherein the 'White saviour' and 'Noble Savage' mythologies comingled jarringly with the aspirations of an independent international school.

The Principal held an avowed unwillingness to accept any discordance between pedagogical practices being applied in classrooms of Aboriginal students and those applied in classrooms of predominantly non-Aboriginal students, including migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds. The Principal reflected on a successful process of change management, devised and implemented over several years to increase equality and raise expectations in Aboriginal Education at the School.

When I came to [the School], I found it was really dreadful. And what was happening was, there were low expectations because it was “poor bugger them”. They came in with no belongings, no ownership of anything, often sexually abused, certainly malnourished and very low literacy. (Gil)

Using examples, Gil described a dysfunctional educational environment that prioritised wellbeing and safety, arguably through necessity, over establishing and maintaining academic and behavioural standards of similar rigour to that espoused for non-Aboriginal students. The change management process overcame many challenges, not least the resistance of individuals to change, and the need for the SMT to support teachers to enact change (Allport, 1954, as cited in Cousik, 2015, p. 64). From a leadership perspective, Gil believed this attitudinal change process was necessary. By demanding that relationships be established from a higher standpoint, that is, having a greater quality of *connectedness* (a concept to be expanded in the next chapter), permission was thereby given to nurture higher expectations for the students in line with community expectations.

So the staff felt that they needed to make the environment comfortable and so they were often trying to put beanbags in their classroom, let the students sleep in the afternoon, give them sheets of work that they could achieve, which was only at Grade 2 or Grade 3 level, and these kids were anywhere between twelve and fifteen. And I just thought, “Well, what’s the point of them being here if they don’t achieve anything that can lead on to something else?” Because they’re only teenagers, they might be alive for another forty years, so they need to do something, to actually have a pathway. And pathways were not talked about. And I constantly thought of how we deal with our children and how we talk to them about “What’s that leading to?” and “Why are you doing that?” and “What do you need to get there?” And no one was doing that to these students. They were just saying, “Well, isn’t it great, you’re being looked after, you’re being fed seven times a day, you’re getting clothed, you’ve got a bathroom, you’ve got your own bed, we’re teaching you something.” And I said, “No, it’s not good enough.” (Gil)

The complexity of raising expectations is aptly illustrated in Gil’s example, specifically the provision of backpacks to Aboriginal students.

They didn’t have a backpack and the staff used to say, “You can’t give them a backpack ’cause they’ll throw it in the bin, or they’ll lose it.” And sure enough, when they first got their backpack, they left them around everywhere. But I said, “That’s fine, we just buy more, until such time as they learn.” I said, “Backpacks, you can get them for twenty dollars and we just keep buying them, until such time as they start to value them.” Now, they all walk around with their backpacks. (Gil)

A backpack is a small step, merely a symbol of an attitudinal shift. Evidence indicated that the process of raising expectations, for both teachers and students, was a rocky road.

The majority of classes I've taught have had students in them who had quite serious behaviour management issues so that, that was, that can be really tiring. ... Whenever you went to the class, I'd be feeling anxious. Yeah. That kind of situation. (River)

The above statement revealed that teachers felt a responsibility to develop an individual approach to the context. For some, this responsibility weighed heavily at times. From a boarding perspective, relationships with students hinged primarily on the overt demonstration of care and the enactment of this was considered essential, non-negotiable even in the presence of personal tension.

But if you're feeling the pressure but your students aren't feeling the care, the care factor, or if there's no care factor, there's going to be no learning to be had. (Tania)

Just as students needed a supportive learning environment, teachers voiced a need for a supportive working environment. This will be explored in the following section.

#### 5.3.1.3. Peer support

For some teachers, a formal arrangement of mentoring, peer observation and debriefings allowed for an exchange of congruent information, ideas and strategies that may otherwise have been lost amid the daily pressures and busyness of the School. For others, peer support occurred on an informal basis. Teachers' professional care and commitment to each other was clearly evident in their voices.

Peer support's brilliant. (Brad)

You're not operating in a vacuum. The support mechanisms are all in place up here. Everyone's experiencing the same thing. (Woodrow)

But teenagers do have issues and one has to be aware of those. And that's why good teachers get together and talk about their students to make sure that they're sharing information that might be pertinent for the next teacher in the class. (Gil)

Or I'll go to my HOD and I'll talk to him and I'll say, "Hey, this didn't work. You know, what do you suggest?" I'm always reaching out. If I feel like I've lost power in a particular moment. (Summer)

It's very important because we need that debriefing. Staff will come in and say, "Oh, [student] was off the air today. How did you find him?" "Oh yeah, he was the same for me." ... Because

it's very, very demanding for the teacher too. There's very challenging behaviour. You can't always be calling for the Marshal. You have to deal with this challenging behaviour. And it's hard to get on with the job when behaviour is so appalling. (Margaret)

As teachers, I think we need to be quite compassionate, not only to students but also to people who we're mentoring. (Brad)

It definitely helps to have people who teach the same kids. ... There was this whole impetus at the school to set up professional learning communities. ... When you sit down with a team of teachers, that is a professional learning community, when we discuss kids and how to engage them – “This isn't working for me.” “Have you tried this strategy instead?” – then that knowledge is shared, and all of our practice improves and that is the definition of a professional learning community. We don't need to stamp a label on it. ... Professional learning communities drive good teaching. ... I'm a Maths teacher, I don't teach English, so [English teachers] couldn't help me with teaching strategies *per se* but they could help me with behaviour management strategies. But those were still helpful. (Reuben)

Teachers and Boarding staff were expansive in their praise of Aboriginal peers, particularly in instances where their cultural understanding was enhanced by that individual's cultural knowledge or where student behaviour in the classroom and boarding houses could be improved through practical know-how. Examples included the monitoring of students when a pre-existing fraught relationship between communities was causing tension, and in respecting the separation of students in class when kinship laws required that they avoid each other. These working relationships assisted non-Aboriginal staff to understand, and either construct or bolster the contextual need for cultural safety and security in their classrooms, through the translator and mediator roles undertaken by their Aboriginal colleagues.

I think it's very important. I often consult with [Aboriginal teacher], [who] has had a lot of experience as an Indigenous [Education] teacher. ... She works between two cultures and I've learnt so much from her. Because she has said just how challenging it is, for Indigenous people now, to work between the two cultures. ... It's really challenging, torn between the two worlds. So, she knows that in Indigenous societies, and I've talked to her a lot, these expectations are that you work as a group and you're not seen as any better than anyone else. But in our society, it's the individual who is encouraged. As the individual, you do the right thing, you're the leader. But for Indigenous students, it's really challenging. “I just want to be part of the group.” So, she's shown me a lot of insight. (Margaret)

When I first started, we had a large cohort of Indigenous staff. So, in each house, we would've had two or three of this five or six [staff] would've been Indigenous. So, that helped. And you can learn from them and see how they dealt with the students. (Corey)

Debriefing with Aboriginal peers was regularly mentioned by study participants as being very important in their capacity to create positive learning environments while respecting cultural difference.

Many of our students here are psychologically traumatised. They're traumatised from their culture when they come. They've been abused or seen tragic events, horrific things that we wouldn't even think about. So, she knows. She can pick that up very easily with students in the classroom, so she'll often say, "Yeah, he's really having a bad day, so everyone be careful." So that's been really good. ... Because they're different. We'll come in and debrief about that student, like nurses need to go back after patients and debrief. So yeah, being together as a team is very important. (Margaret)

In addition to classrooms and boarding houses, Aboriginal staff were also employed in supportive roles in Student Services within the School and through advocacy programs such as Strong Girls Academy, Clontarf Academy and Restorative Justice (these programs are outlined in Chapter 3).

Normally, if a child is really acting out, being violent, volatile, swearing, throwing desks and chairs and things, there's always someone there that will help. ... We used to have phones, but the kids made short work of those. But I just phone for a Marshal, basically, and they come running. (Summer)

The above examples from Summer represent the type of incidents that prompted the participants to reach out for community support. The communication between teachers and boarding staff with students' home communities was highly valued as a way for students to remain connected with culture and country.

#### 5.3.1.4. Community support

The Principal explained that parents' aspirations for their children remained at the forefront of the restorative approach whenever incidents arose. For the School, it was very clear in all interactions with parents that they had sent their children to gain experience and success in a Western environment and that they wanted them to achieve in both worlds.

We invite families if they're in Darwin to come by and visit, and talk to the teachers, talk to House Parents. And we have plenty of accommodation here so families will often stay here for up to a week. (Gil)

You know, we have students who come from really high functioning communities where their parents or grandparents may have been the School Principal or the clinic manager, and they have high expectations around education. They have an understanding of what school and academia and achievement is. (Tania)

Interactions between the School and the community represented a deliberate choice, based on the values inherent in standards of cultural responsiveness, to maximise the quality of connectedness that existed in this context. Participants spoke of their appreciation for the relationship that was cultivated between students, their families and communities, and they understood the strong potential in leveraging this relationship to assist in managing challenging behaviours. In the voice of the Principal, "You work with people to have expectations on both sides" (Gil).

In discussing ways in which the School, teachers and boarding staff created and maintained strong links with community, the Principal explained how families contributed towards supporting students' learning inside the classroom.

We bring in parents. If a child is proving troublesome and won't go to class, rather than send them home, we bring the parents in. And if they're not working, then they can come in. And we ask them to stay for a week and try and get the child to class. And again, that they have to go to class with the student and they support the student during school hours. And we provide meals and a room to stay. (Gil)

When asked if this model of family support was based on an existing model from elsewhere, the Principal responded in the negative, pointing out that it was a policy based on the unique context of the School. However, practical aspects to the arrangement required clear communication from the School regarding families' responsibilities and the anticipated benefits for the student.

So the rules are, if they come and stay, they have to go to class every day from 8.30 to 3.00 and then they can go shopping and take the students out later in the day, but they're not to miss class and the parents are to go to class and support the student in class. (Gil)

A common refrain among participants was the need to keep students in school for as long as possible, to give them every opportunity to learn and achieve. As shown so far in this chapter, the consideration and provision of cultural safety and security within classrooms and boarding houses was paramount

for Aboriginal students' wellbeing. In the next section, the ways in which teachers individually achieved this will be examined.

### 5.3.2. *Cultural safety and security*

In this section, teachers' anecdotes are provided, demonstrating how cultural competence was enacted in their classrooms, sometimes at odds with what they considered to be standard practice or school policy. By using a trove of pedagogical skills coupled with cultural knowledge, these teachers sought to create a culturally responsive environment wherein the needs of Aboriginal students were placed first and foremost.

This material is really well structured and when I've got help, the lessons go either moderately well or well most of the time, which is a big step up for most lessons that I'm making material for. And the kids actually leave the room [saying], "Oh, I learnt something today. And I feel good about learning and I feel good about school." So, it actually is quite effective. It makes them feel that they're in control of anger, in control of positive thinking, gives them strategies to calm down, [rather] than just reacting. (Brad)

They've got to think you care. They've got to have the perception that you care individually for them. (Ian)

Further participant responses are provided below, grouped by their relevance to cultural safety in action and their experiential descriptions of how they have managed cultural sensitivities.

#### 5.3.2.1. *Cultural safety in action*

Cultural safety and cultural security are terms related to cultural responsiveness (Gower, 2012, p. 10). Each begins with an acknowledgement that each person has value, and staff and students learn from each other in a reciprocal relationship. Participants considered this approach to be fostered first and foremost within themselves, as individuals, as part of their identity as teachers then secondly, to be enacted in a professional capacity within the school environment. This does not imply a missionary zeal but instead is based on an attitude of equality, respect (whether mutual or initially one-way), and service.

As much as they're learning from me, I'm learning from them. (Woodrow)

The teacher needs to be not a person who's strict on what is *going to happen* in the class but more aware of what *is happening* in the class. (Ian)



As a term, cultural safety encompasses the establishment of environments that are physically safe (Banks, 2016, p. 257), while also ensuring a sense of safety in spiritual, social and emotional domains in accordance with values of cultural recognition, respect and equity.

I tried to pick concrete examples that they could relate to. So, in that sense, I tried to respect their culture. That, or at least their knowledge and their experience as individuals. I mean, what else is culture? ... You're not referencing things that they don't know. (Reuben)

Apparent within the participant responses was an acknowledgement of cultural difference in the classroom. In describing firsthand experience of this phenomenon, that of being a non-Aboriginal teacher of Aboriginal boarding students, interviewees acknowledged the complexity of the context. They recounted with humour and pathos the various challenges and rewards that were uncovered while navigating the cultural, social and educational lifeworlds brought into the classroom by students.

I wouldn't say that it's any different than working with other kids per se but it's just that their personalities are very different, and their cultural boundaries are gonna [*sic*] be very different to other kids. So, when you're trying to engage with a student, learn their personality, learn their... style of learning, I don't know how to say it any other way. Like, what they're gonna [*sic*] respond to. It's much harder in some cases. In some cases, it's not. There are some communities that are very open, vibrant and willing to share. And there are other communities that have essentially taught their kids that in class they need to be very respectful and very quiet and very silent. (Reuben)

Such an example indicated that cultural mores had an influence on classroom dynamics and student engagement, and teachers demonstrated there was a need to be cognisant of these. Several teachers expressed an inclination to take a proactive stance through encouraging and praising students who contributed verbally in ways akin to expectations in mainstream classes, while others accepted the potential shyness and worked around it, using adaptive practices and modified classroom activities. Boarding focus group participants recounted moments that had required them to reflect on differences related to cultural mores and custom, and to adapt their responses accordingly.

Because being regimental, I'd walk across to the cookhouse at some speed. They'd be walking across with thongs off, taking their time, and I didn't understand. Obviously, it's all a new learning curve for me, I couldn't understand it. "Hurry up, hurry up, five o'clock it starts." Very, very disciplined, regimental, I soon realised that wasn't always the approach to take with them. (Harley)

In every individual story, there existed the hint of a broader conceptual framework, one in which the classroom or boarding house represented a microcosm of wider society, wherein a tapestry of interconnecting, yet at times disparate, threads of culture and identity entwined, entangled and occasionally unraveled within the workings of daily life. Teachers and boarding staff developed their own responses to surprising, uncomfortable or negative incidents, oftentimes working with each other to produce workable solutions that, in their view, represented the best possible outcome in that moment.

I constantly reflect. In the beginning, especially. If I've felt something hasn't gone well, like there was major behaviour issues to deal with, I'll reflect with [colleague]. I'll say, "Hey, what do you think about today? How do you think we could've handled that situation?" I will reflect on that at the end of the lesson, for sure, with [colleague] if they've got the time and ask, "What can we do differently next time?" (Summer)

I think experience really plays a big part – you can cope, you've got strategies in place. "Ok, I'll just let that go. We won't push that issue there; we'll move onto this one. Let's change subject, let's do another activity." And have the *ability* and the *flexibility* to be able to change your programs. There is a new teacher this year who can't do that ... she hasn't got the expertise or the strategies just to move the class from this to that. Too much Teacher Talk of rules. And the students, they don't want to go to her class. And that's really challenging. "Well, you have to go." "I don't want to go." And I've poked my head in and I know why they don't want to go! [Here, she laughed.] I think if you're a new teacher and you have Indigenous students, you'll find it extremely challenging. You really do need a lot of mentoring and, yeah, just have your little kitbag of a lot of activities. And if your program doesn't work today, so be it. Throw it out the window and bring in something that does work. (Margaret)

So, the experience comes from dealing with kids day-to-day. So definitely, when I first arrived, had no knowledge of culture. Was fairly intimidated, as new teachers would be, walking into a world of 'I don't know anyone', hard to remember their names even for a start, let alone their behavioural issues, medical issues, how they respond, how they respond to the way you talk to them. Every little child is different. For some, just face-to-face will set them off. If you say, "You can't do that," you always have to approach it with the *why* rather than *can't*. (Max)

Of failings or mistakes made, participants were philosophical and adopted a modicum of realism comingled with humility. While maintaining a sense of their own volition and hopefulness on the whole in most circumstances, they also expressed frustration with their inability to solve all the issues related to the background of students. Strong feelings are evident in the participants' voices.

I want to see more and more Indigenous kids graduate and not go back to communities and make a more significant impact. Because they're still being drawn back, even our Year 12s. When I go back to visit: "What are you doing?" "Nothing." It's just a shame. They've done so well to get that far. But there's nothing for them after, because... that's another big thing, it's not the school's fault, and it's not the government's fault. Other things need to be done. (Corey)

So, all of that time is learning how to manage all of that. And understanding in yourself that if a student has gone off, has broken windows, done damage, is excessively angry, sometimes you just need to give them time. You can't be straight in there, "What's going on, what's all this about?" Get them to a quiet place. "Do you need time?" You ask them quite a few questions. If you're getting no answers, "Do you need time? I'll give you a little time, then I'll come back." So, it's how you approach. And no-one has that experience when they first arrive. (Max)

As mentioned previously, participants' voices reflected the frustration felt in incidents in the classroom or boarding houses. Through their stories, they described responding to incidents often triggered by external factors including the effects of historical trauma in students' backgrounds. Within their response to these situations, a proactive attitude was seen to be incorporated whereby teachers and boarding staff sought to identify the cause of disruptive behaviours or students' behavioural characteristics.

For instance, part of a conversation between two participants in a focus group is shown below. The teachers were attempting to understand the causes of an incident and in doing so, were demonstrating their cognisance of external factors affecting learning engagement. Some participants stated that these kinds of collegial conversations lead to a deeper understanding of students and opportunities for them to support students better (see section 5.3.1.3. Peer support).

Reuben: Part of it too comes down to the teaching. I can't speak to what they've had in communities, but you can see it's, call it traumatic, and their responses are fearful. They can't afford to get it wrong. Only a correct answer is acceptable. And I just wonder what goes through their head. Kids who can usually write some form of sentence – in most cases, if I do questions on the board and they manage to get one wrong – they might not just erase the one they got wrong, they might erase the entire page of work.

Ian: Or rip it out. Rip it out, bin it.

Reuben: Or rip it out and throw it in the bin. Because having *one wrong answer* on the page means the whole page is a waste. They're so focused on what's wrong, they're not focused on their strengths or their skills. So, to me, that's a condemnation of the teaching they've had in the

past, which obviously never came from a *strength* base, that came from a *deficit* base. And that's awful ... And that's true of every community – with kids of every community that come into my classroom – and these are the best ones. These are *the best ones*. That's the way that they act.

Ian: That's pretty common. Just tear the thing out and start again. Or walk out of class.

Reuben: Or walk out of class. Because they're so afraid of getting it wrong.

Ian: Some can be very simple stuff: "Have a go, get it wrong." Even my Year 12s, I'm saying, "Guys, it's ok to make mistakes. How do we learn? We learn powerful messages from those mistakes, not what we get right. So, write something down, let me correct it, but don't give me nothing." I'll walk away, and they go, "Now what do I need to say?" And they've done nothing. But it's because they don't want to do it, because they don't want to get it wrong.

The level of experiential detail contained in participants' stories provided an insight into the process of determining whether a specific behaviour or incident was age-related, that is, part of the adolescent developmental process, or culturally based, or possibly trauma related. The linking of potential causality to the visible manifestations of behaviour and attitude was important as it assisted teachers and boarding staff to choose an appropriate response, often in coordination with other staff and family members, if necessary, to support student wellbeing and engagement.

The other focus is, for them to be able to differentiate between what is a *cultural* issue and what is a *teenage* issue. (Gil)

As previously mentioned, in some instances, the process of choosing an appropriate response required the teacher or boarding staff member to have knowledge of cultural sensitivities in order to be able to work effectively with Aboriginal students. This is discussed in the next section.

#### 5.3.2.2. Managing cultural sensitivities

Aboriginal students' cultural background influences their values and worldview, ways in which they think and act, and their communication with others (Perso & Hayward, 2015). When interacting with non-Aboriginal adults in an educational setting, cultural difference brings layers of complexity to the situation (McQuade, 1992). In the study, the participants demonstrated that they recognised, acknowledged and respected the cultural filter through which all communication occurred. Teachers and boarding staff endeavoured to bridge the "*canyon*" (Woodrow) by acting appropriately for specific cultural sensitivities, seeking advice and further learning and using a trial and error process to attempt to achieve a balance between the educational and cultural requirements in these moments.

Existing literature (e.g., Berndt & Berndt, 1981; Harrison, 2011; Trudgen, 2004) describes the complexity of Aboriginal culture, the depth and breadth of Aboriginal law and lore, and the customs and traditions embedded within the social fabric of communities. Inside the School's unique context, classrooms and boarding houses contained students from many communities and therefore many different cultural backgrounds. In order to understand and manage cultural sensitivities, participants applied an adaptive and critically reflective approach and utilised a range of skills, knowledge and understanding, as illustrated in their voices. A selection of participant responses to cultural mores and subsequent changes to their pedagogical practice is presented below.

Even with a cursory examination of data drawn from participants' voices, it is clear that teachers are willing to use "trial and error" (Isabelle) quite exhaustively and with optimism, to enhance their cross-cultural communication and teacher-student relationships. Teachers recalled "trailing and erroring a lot of different things" (Reuben), in order to find out *what works* – a body of knowledge which, while effectively 'known' in literature, must always be personally discovered (IESIP SRP, 2000; Perso & Hayward, 2015; Price, 2015) – for Aboriginal students generally, being ever cognisant that the expression and experience of indigeneity in Australia is not homogenous, or for students individually. Teachers adopted a raft of culturally responsive strategies from their "little kitbag" (Margaret) to ensure that learning occurred while the cultural safety and security of students was maintained.

Participants recounted practical ways in which they observed, responded and utilised their 'kitbag' when issues of cultural sensitivity arose in the learning context. Examples of these stories are detailed in Appendix J and summarised below.

Teachers were consciously projecting a positive and welcoming attitude, which extended beyond the classroom to the wider school setting.

I'll say, "I don't care if you make mistakes. Cross it out. Put the correct answer in there." ... I keep drumming that into them. So that's just changing the environment into a nurturing, positive environment as much as I can. So, you know, positive, positive, positive, as much as possible.  
(Brad)

I will never walk past them without a welcome or a greeting to the whole group or any specific student on the way past. Because it is about them knowing you want to have a relationship with them, and you are interested in them. (Tania)

Indigenous kids are pretty intuitive. They can gauge you pretty quick. Again, it's the little things – you smile as you walk past, say hello. (Woodrow)

Teachers were observant of changes in the moods and behaviour of students, especially in relation to learning in an EALD environment. Participants understood the need for giving their own time, having patience and being aware of different worldviews.

But you've got to gauge it. They get pretty tired pretty quick. They'll tell you it's painful, it hurts, learning in English. (Brad)

But the thing is, you see some students do very, very well and I just think the most important thing is *time*. If you don't put time in with the students, you'll never be a good [boarding staff]. (Harley)

Nonverbal cues were also adopted by teachers as part of their 'kitbag' for classroom management. In the teaching profession, nonverbal communication – proximity, a smile, nod or shake of the head, for example – can be deployed for many reasons, including to reduce disruptive behaviour, de-escalate tension or to praise. When applied in conjunction with cultural knowledge relevant to students, such skills are useful: "The authoritative teacher ... establishes meaningful interpersonal relationships that garner student respect; ... and holds the attention of the students by incorporating interactional features of black communicative style in his or her teaching" (Delpit, 1995, as cited in Brace, 2011, p. 42). In the study's context, one participant described her use of nonverbal cues and Aboriginal sign language (Alpher, 1993) to encourage the formation of positive, trusting relationships.

Often, I will use the nonverbal cues, like the eyebrow or the mouth or the hand. And that is something that has been learnt over nine years. And it's as worthy as a sing-out across the field, as a "come over here". In the beginning, it felt very odd but now the students will respond in kind with the nonverbals. (Tania)

Most teachers mentioned touch and personal space as potential issues to consider. Some participants spoke of these concepts in relation to students' past experience of trauma, including the following:

But for those students who struggle, and every day is a struggle, and every class is a struggle ... to just give them a kind word. Because a lot of them don't actually like physical touch. Even a pat on the back can make them shudder. You really have to be mindful of that. (Tania)

However, touch could be a positive tool for participants, in addition to a sense of humour and well-honed instinct for propriety, as described by boarding staff member Max and teacher Woodrow:

We understand fully why, but there is [*sic*] times where they need a good hug. ... You always have to be aware of your role and react in the right time, in the moment, and sometimes that's difficult. (Max)

They love to touch you. Students sit right next to you, put their arms around you. As a teacher, it's like, "Oh!" You have to be a bit malleable, I suppose, yet be disciplined in yourself. You still have that teacher-student boundary. (Woodrow)

In general, teachers and boarding staff would initiate interactions with students, including the use of touch to build rapport and offer support for wellbeing. However, one teacher took a less overt approach, as follows:

Try hard to be more of yourself, less culturally appropriate. Aboriginal students really are like adults already. They can tell when you're being genuine. Don't touch them. Leave them alone. It will come. Wait until they approach you, then you'll know they're giving 100%. (Prue)

One teacher described occasions when it was better to refrain from using a tool found in most teachers' pedagogical 'kitbag', namely, that of requiring students to maintain eye contact.

In terms of barrier, the kids looking in your eye or not wanting to meet your eye, it's a cultural thing. And getting that sort of concentration, when they don't want to look at you, it's not really a cultural thing to maintain eye contact. And I sometimes cringe when [mainstream colleague] says, "Look me in the eye so I know—" It's not necessarily the best way to communicate with these kids because it's a really big effort for them. (River)

Practising diplomacy and respect were noted by teachers to be important to avoid students feeling *shame*, singled out or embarrassed.

What you learn is, you don't specifically target that child with the hat on by name and say, "Take your hat off, J—," because that is the shame thing coming in. The whole room's now aware that he's in trouble. And it's not a big issue, you just missed your hat. So, how you get round that is, talk to the whole room. "There's two hats on. Hats off please." Choof! [*Mimes removing his hat.*] You'll see it happen, you know, because they've forgotten it's there. So, it's no good to say, "Why've you got your hat on?" (Max)

The teacher River demonstrated a similar approach by adapting learning and assessment tasks to accommodate students' reticence to speak in public.

You try and not single kids out, and give them opportunities to show what they can do in an 'other' situation whether it be one-on-one or let them write, rather than having to talk in front of the class. So, just adapting them like that. One [option] with the older kids is to record audio-visual rather than to present in front of the class. Put audio to a PowerPoint, for example, so they can do a presentation like that rather than in front of the class. (River)

Being flexible, and having the ability to reflect critically in the moment and adapt learning tasks according to the situation, featured in teachers' stories, including the following:

They have a different cultural mindset, a different perspective in the way they accept learning. I can only describe it as whole part learning. As a teacher, you have to teach the whole thing then refine it later. For example, the students start playing a whole football game then you refine the tactics and specific skills. (Brad)

Boarding staff member Harley recounted several ways he sought to foster self-efficacy in boarding students:

But teach them just the fundamentals of life skills, ... explaining to them why we do it and giving them the ownership, I think that's the key. Any work, any artwork, or anything we do within the dorm is to give them responsibility, their ownership. (Harley)

Another boarding staff member spoke about how knowledge of family connections and kinship structures enabled him to respond in culturally appropriate ways to sensitive situations:

It's also understanding who can talk to each other. Boys going through ceremony, manhood – sister can't even look at him at that stage. For a whitefella, you don't know that. Students will come and say, and it's how they talk, "Can you tell—" They can't even say his name at that stage. Straightaway, if you know those connections, you know that it's only a few kids they're talking about. But unless you know those connections... (Max)

These data show the range of tools and approaches used by teachers and boarding staff in a practical sense, to manage cultural sensitivities.

### *5.3.3. Section summary*

In their lived experiences, participants showed a willingness to learn and particularly in issues of cultural sensitivity and cultural safety and security, to move beyond their initial sensations of discomfort toward a position of "deep listening" (Territory Families, 2017, p. 9). This proactive approach, in combination with empathy and compassion, commenced the development of "culturally congruent practice" (Territory Families, 2017, p. 7) and the first steps towards connecting with Aboriginal students. Trust and connectedness are central to the teacher-student relationship and these concepts will be further explored in the next section.



## 5.4. Results: Connectedness

It is clear from data collected in the study that classroom effectiveness, in the view of participants, was not so much about well-prepared learning plans and culturally relevant resources as about making connections. Teachers actively sought to build relationships with Aboriginal students and sufficient trust and understanding was established such that they could come back from a disagreement, or resume the lesson after a disturbance had occurred, and maintain the purpose of their role. This would not be possible, in participants' opinion, without having constructed in advance authentic, respectful connectedness with students and their lifeworlds.

In this study, connectedness refers to teacher-student relationships constructed from a foundation of localised cultural knowledge, contextual knowledge of the School and students' home communities, and a comprehensive interest in students as individuals or, at the very least, a willingness to develop one by showing interest in students' strengths, aspirations and experiences. Connectedness with Aboriginal students therefore encompasses the concept that "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity is about ancestry and 'country of origin' ... it is not about skin colour ... or bloodlines. It is about relationships with people and obligations to them" (Perso & Hayward, 2015, p. 7). Aboriginal and Western worldviews are portrayed in theory, perhaps simplistically, as almost polar opposites placed at either end of a continuum. This is an unrealistic depiction. Presenting cultural competence as a binary fails to recognise the nuances of knowledge and experience that inform a person's capability. This means that the placement of most individuals lies somewhere in-between both ends of the continuum depending on the amount of contact they have had with individuals of Western and Aboriginal cultures (Perso, 2012; Perso & Hayward, 2015; Spiers, 2010).

Participant voices repeatedly referred to the importance of building rapport or a positive, respectful professional relationship with the students in their care. Teachers and boarding staff made a conscious effort to relate to students in their attempts to bridge the gap between worldviews, in order to bring the placement of their personal worldviews closer together on that theoretical continuum.

I'd say the most important factor for the success of anyone working with Aboriginal students is about forming the relationship. The deep-seated relationship where they have an understanding of you and your heritage, your culture, your family, your space in the world and you also have an understanding of their family, their community, their challenges, their strategies, their personality, their kin, their skin, their poison cousins<sup>5</sup> and everything else. (Tania)

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<sup>5</sup> The term *poison cousins* refers to an avoidance relationship under Aboriginal Law, which encompasses "kinship, reciprocity, obligations, land, care of country and totems, to name but a few" (King, 2011, p. 103).

The data analysis stage of the study identified the range of skills, knowledge and understanding utilised by participants when cultivating a connection with students. The difference in students' culture from their own, as mentioned previously, required careful and considerate navigation of the relationship-building process. This section will identify key practices that participants adopted and drew upon at this stage of developing connectedness. From their voices, it was apparent that all of these strategies, or at least several, were needed to be enacted over time by teachers and boarding staff for the possibility of a meaningful teacher-student relationship to develop:

**Second chances policy:** Participants displayed a broad appreciation for cultural difference in their responses to issues and incidents, and in their classroom management, in part due to the influence of attitudes and expectations established by the School for all staff and students. In the view of participants, the School actively promoted the development of a 'school community' separate from students' home communities and enacted a top-down approach of high expectations for academic performance, Restorative Justice processes and the adoption of a *second chances policy*<sup>6</sup> for behaviour management. Participants acknowledged the influence of students' cultural background on responses in classrooms and boarding houses and couched this as additional, and supplementary, to their identity as teenagers. The entwined complementarity of culture, identity and adolescence was understood.

The other focus is, for them to be able to differentiate between what is a *cultural* issue and what is a *teenage* issue. Teenagers, in the main, have documented issues going through Year 9: their puberty; interest in the opposite sex; all sorts of issues. School comes last for a Year 9 student, generally, so one has to work really hard with Year 9s to motivate and energise and involve them in what learning should be taking place in the class. However, on top of that, with an Indigenous student, you've got an extra layer. They may have cultural commitments, they may have cultural stress at home whereby a parent may be in jail, a parent or grandparent might be in hospital, they might be worried about money, they might be worried about where their family actually are, because they might've moved or something's happened. ... Some teachers are too inflexible, and they go in saying, "Right, we're going to do this and we're going to do that." But if everyone is upset about something that's happened on a community and they need to talk that through, then that's what has to be done *first* before learning can happen. (Gil)

Participants reported that some boarding students arrived with certain behaviours or habits not ordinarily tolerated, such as smoking. In these circumstances, the second chances policy was applied

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<sup>6</sup> *Second chances policy* is a term, coined by the researcher, to describe the way participants provided multiple opportunities for students to learn from mistakes or choices that might be deemed inappropriate in a school environment but, in this context, were considered to be processes in a steep cross-cultural learning curve.

as an alternative to suspension or expulsion, in the hope and expectation that the students' time at the School would be extended and their academic potential reached.

We're just a bit more tolerant around that. More chances before we phone up parents. We do stuff and try and keep them, because once they've had a growling from a parent then they're off-side with you for a bit, and then that takes a while to get their confidence back. (Corey)

I've driven buses of three boys round to the Police Station while they've been shouting their mouths off and carrying on. Just driving them round, talking and saying, "I'm dropping you off. I'm gonna [*sic*] drop you off at the Police Station. You can't behave like this." And then they went on to graduate, they went on to get jobs, they went on to be really solid young men within the community, but you just know it was stress related, alcohol related, and trauma related. So, you do have to realise that these aren't students to whom you can say, "This is your last chance, this is your last chance, this is your last chance." They need *five hundred chances*, not five chances. Because they struggle with the processes. They struggle with the processing of behaviour and consequence. (Tania)

See the big picture, behind the student. (Woodrow)

Second chances were important to strengthen the teacher-student relationship and in no small measure to deploy the appropriate level of social and emotional support necessary during this stage of the students' cognitive, psychological and physiological development. Yet equally so, the School's clear articulation of high expectations, embodied in the mission statement and as a permeating ethos throughout the Day and Boarding schools, assisted with reinforcing academic and behavioural standards for the school community.

To be understanding. To have an understanding of where they come from. And how *amazing* they are, to be able to come and put a uniform on and sit in a classroom and be expected to just be like everybody else – and they do it! After a term here, you know, they're pretty good. First term is very hairy. Second term's a little bit better. Hopefully by third term, you know, they've had that expectation. (Margaret)

**Proactive stance:** This occurred when teachers and boarding staff applied a range of classroom management strategies, some specifically intended to defuse tension and deescalate aggressive behaviour, in combination with humour and a non-judgmental approach. This attitude infused their actions and their stories. Some participants recounted a sense of bewilderment or surprise when the unexpected occurred in the classroom, followed by a moment of reflexivity concerning possible causalities for the incident, closely related to context, then a subsequent choice of actions. More often

than not, in recounting these incidents of high emotional impact, the teachers adopted a stance of philosophical acceptance, an understanding that not all classes go to plan and there will be new opportunities for success tomorrow. This proactive stance was replicated in a whole-school approach, detailed below.

In recognition of the School's contextual complexity, there was a constant iterative expectation of service-oriented professionalism, of staff supporting each other and working together for the 'big picture' vision, of demonstrating a shared commitment to excellence, compassion and justice, and of understanding others. As outlined in Chapter 3 Context, the Principal provided release time for weekly confidential mentoring of early career teachers, particularly in their first year, by experienced former staff members (expert teachers). Wellbeing support was implemented by the SMT in concert with Support Services and external providers, such as Headspace (<https://headspace.org.au>). Debriefings were scheduled between teachers and boarding staff every morning and afternoon to ensure a whole-school approach to resolving issues and highlighting achievements in relation to the health and wellbeing, learning engagement and performance of Aboriginal students.

Part of coping with Indigenous classes is to be able to recognise that a non-successful class oftentimes is something that you just need to forget about. And you just restart the next lesson as though everything's from square-one again. (Brad)

Walk away. It's a funny moment, in the end. That was him having the last word. ... We had a really good relationship actually, him and I. (Reuben)

In the following quote, Woodrow's exposure to the rich cultural lifeworld of students is wrapped in gentle humour and he shows concern for the effect of those who fail to grasp the complex reality and diversity of Aboriginal cultures, even if the serious business of cursing inanimate objects was not one to which he subscribed.

They're very immersed in their culture. Last term, someone cursed a hat. To me, my timing's impeccable, I'm never around when these big things happen. But it caused a big hoo-hah. To me, it's very strange. ... Gave me a valid experience, so when I go back Down South, I'm now talking about personal experience. At least that's something. People with rose-coloured glasses – I don't think that's serving the Indigenous well. They're not all one big homogenous group. They couldn't be more different from each other than we are from them. (Woodrow)

In the anecdote below, Reuben describes bringing an episode of boisterous behaviour to a close. Note the subtle humour in his improvisation, of accessing possibly untried football skills in the classroom, of his awareness of time and the slowly creeping imminency of the home-time bell. No consequence

greater than the confiscation of a ball was applied, and the teacher remained cognisant of the student's usually cooperative character and his positive connection with him throughout.

There was one [incident] where a student – who had been a really respectful, good student that I thought I had a really good relationship with – for whatever reason that day, he was kicking a footy around in the classroom. Back and forth, not listening to any instructions, not listening to his classmates, not listening to the family relations that were in the class [who] were telling him to sit down. ... That was a very challenging situation for me to respond to, in the classroom. I ended up having to physically take the footy out of the air as he kicked it. Which meant, because he was a good footy-player and he was kicking it around me, I had to step up and basically be as athletic as I could be to snatch it out of the air and say, “This isn't happening anymore. I've got the ball.” And we got on with it at that point, but it was challenging. He sat down at his desk, he got upset that I had his ball. ... It was towards the end of the day, so we only needed to make it about thirty minutes. (Reuben)

Although teachers gave various examples of methods for ‘de-stressing’ afterhours, none used the term *stress* or would permit it to be used.

I wouldn't call it stress. I would just call it dissatisfaction. (Brad)

Must be one of the lucky people. I don't get stressed. (Corey)

Only one teacher reported feeling “anxious” (River) at the prospect of daily interaction with a class in which students had persistently exhibited disruptive behaviours. As detailed in Chapter 2, teachers' experience of “unproductive behaviours” that impede academic progress can run the gamut from low-level issues of irregular attendance, such as students being unprepared and inattentive, through to behaviours that disrupt the class, where students may be impulsive or unresponsive, through to more difficult to manage and potentially unsafe behaviours, such as non-compliance and aggression (Sullivan et al., 2014, p. 46). River's solution to his reported difficulty in managing disruptive behaviours was to seek peer support from teachers of the same class, leading to a coordinated approach to classroom management being adopted for that particular cohort. Consistency, through peer support, resulted in increased student engagement and enhanced teacher self-efficacy.

Boarding participants felt better able than teachers, in their view, to find creative solutions to issues such as truancy or ‘prowling’ (a euphemism for students leaving their rooms at night). They viewed a coordinated approach between boarding staff and teachers, and clear processes and outcomes, as essential.

And the rules are, you can't go prowling. ... In place, there's consequences to their actions. And there's far more things that we can put in place in boarding than the school can actually do, to be able to deal with their behaviours. So, for me, it's about the process. And if you follow the process, the process works. So, it's not really stressful, if you know what I mean, if you're doing it properly. You make it stressful by not following the process. (Corey)

Teachers recognised the pressures on students and voiced their intention for the classroom to represent an oasis of sorts, a refuge from the maelstrom of life's challenges outside the door. They took proactive steps in class to create a sense of identity separate to the School, even as the School sought to foster an identity separate to the students' home communities.

The classroom's in many ways an escape. Just like it should be for the kids. (Reuben)

It's learning how to work with what you've got to maximise their potential. And to make the students who are disruptive a lot of the time, feel valued and feel that they are *cared for*, so they belong to the group. (Brad)

Each school is different. Every school has its own culture within an umbrella. (Summer)

It has to be a two-way street. You have to walk in both worlds. ... We're a unity here. We're one. (Colleen)

**Build trust:** Teachers and boarding staff created environments of cultural safety and security based on the strategies of explicit instruction, fair consequences and respectful communication. Often, this involved an intimate knowledge of the student's place within their community and cultural lifeworld, and an awareness of the intricacies of Aboriginal culture, especially elements of the "secret-sacred" (Berndt & Berndt, 1981, p. xii), the extremely sensitive rituals and beliefs that often cannot be spoken of, which have the potential to impact activities or processes in the School. As the following quote illustrates, kinship laws and traditions surrounding contact after initiation were just some examples wherein teachers and boarding staff recognised the underlying influence of culture and applied alternative strategies to address important issues or work around, if necessary.

You would look at another strategy ... You wouldn't make appointments for the students to go to the same place within the same timeframe. You wouldn't place them within the same class, and that might be the same for poison cousins<sup>7</sup>. You know, you might have said, "Go to this class," but they can't go to this class because their poison cousin is there. Unless they have that

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<sup>7</sup> *Poison cousins* refers to an avoidance relationship within the Aboriginal kinship system (King, 2011).

relationship with you, they're not ever going to describe that to you or divulge that to you.  
(Tania)

Trust was also established through authenticity and genuine respect for students, where teachers and boarding staff were at pains to remain true to their word, to behave in ways that contributed toward the wellbeing of students, including fostering the confidence in Aboriginal students to speak up on issues of cultural concern. This course of action was undertaken with a seriousness that is evident in the following quotes, highlighting the value placed by teachers on classroom authenticity:

They need to be able to confide in you. They need to be able to trust you. (Woodrow)

The values should be inherent in the way that I treat people. So, treat people with the respect that you would expect for yourself. It's really that simple. Everything else comes second. ... Doesn't matter if they like you. But it comes down to respect. (Reuben)

Well, that's the wonderful thing about Indigenous culture in many respects, students are extremely honest. They'll tell you exactly what they're feeling and thinking without any contrived motivation. (Brad)

We have time to speak to them, talk to them, spend time with them. We go on activities with them. We deal with their parents. We deal with their communities. We're like a home from home for them so they know it's a trust thing as well. And they trust you in boarding to look after them, to do the right thing and know that they feel safe. (Corey)

**Acceptance and willingness to learn from each other:** Participants described ways in which they reached out and sought to learn the Aboriginal perspective directly from students. They asked questions, clarified the appropriateness of words, taboos or gender-specific themes, then modified their actions in culturally congruent ways. Through this process, teachers co-constructed learning environments that were culturally safe with normative values of respect and reciprocity embedded. When participants spoke in experiential detail of having made an error and been corrected by students, their mistake was not viewed as a 'shame job' (a colloquial exclamation for an embarrassing event or situation), but as a learning opportunity. Teachers acknowledged their error, laughed about it with the students and applied this newfound knowledge in other relevant contexts. When teachers and boarding staff spoke of making mistakes, an individual approach to the repair and restoration of relationships was apparent while yet retaining similar elements. Often, the adoption of humour and humility was woven within the experience.

I think it would apply across all cultures. Because if you're not understanding of a culture and you make mistakes, you have to rebuild that relationship. And that's what happens with our students. I just think there's more areas for us to make mistakes because their culture and the facets of their culture are so wide and varied within their own culture. (Tania)

Having taught Indigenous students for twenty years ... sometimes people make a big issue out of content that I find students don't find unpalatable. Whereas, sometimes students react uncomfortably to some of the material that I haven't realised is not totally appropriate. That's when I'll take a back step and start to have a think about what I'm delivering. ... They're a little bit proactive in terms of what's culturally appropriate. I teach javelin, for example. I don't think girls are allowed to touch spears, and girls might equate javelins to spears, so you need to be sensitive to what they're allowed to do culturally. (Brad)

Find out what cultural words not to say, what girls are not to say in front of boys. (Isabelle)

I've definitely reflected on bad lessons. Like, they didn't get it that time because I didn't reach them, that was my fault, bad lesson. But a lack of success isn't an indicator that I'm doing something wrong. (Reuben)

You can often make mistakes very easily around seating, very easily around people having a thought that someone is being disrespectful or obstinate – when you might find that they have a relation in that room, in that classroom, in that clinic, so they can't access those areas. And you think that they're being rude, and you've made this appointment for them or you've got this homework tutor for them, and they can't go because the elder brother who's been through ceremony is in there. And if you don't know that, it gives you a different opinion and a different view of the student that you're dealing with. (Tania)

**Defer to Aboriginal staff:** In moments of uncertainty, when participants were unsure how to respond to an issue or incident, the study data suggested that they deferred to Aboriginal staff for cultural advice, pedagogical assistance and peer support. The value of Aboriginal staff as cultural interpreters was widely affirmed in participants' voices, as evidenced in the phrase: "I'm about to have a meeting with one of our really wise Indigenous teachers" (Brad). This glowing sentiment reflected the acknowledged and important role of Aboriginal mentors in educational contexts, particularly in their provision of advice about Aboriginal "ways of knowing" to assist colleagues in the construction of "home-school relationships" (Santoro et al., 2011, p. 72).

I'm really grateful I have a [Aboriginal] Teacher Assistant. ... She has her own way of dealing with situations. ... I give her that respect. And whenever I make a decision, I usually make it in



connection with my [Aboriginal] Assistants. I'll say, "What do you think about this, Miss?" (Summer)

You can learn from them and see how they dealt with the students. (Corey)

**Respect for cultural responsibilities:** When students prioritised family and community responsibilities over school, participants recognised the positive benefit and essential nature of this part of Aboriginal students' social role and cultural identity. However, several participants also lamented the deleterious effect that school absences, for cultural events (e.g., ceremony) or meetings with an Elder or family member, have on the continuity of their education.

Whilst they get cultural time and I accept that sometimes they need to do that, but walkabouts and that, you know, not turn up for a week and then come back, or turn up for one or two days coming back, disrupts the whole Boarding program as a whole and what we're trying to achieve. So that had an impact on us. (Corey)

It's hard when some of them go away for months on end, because of funeral leave or whatever. That can be a challenge. So, the transient nature – they come, they go, they come, they go. There is like an 'open door' policy. They go away, they come back. It's about how you pick that up again. (Woodrow)

Cultural responsibilities and a collective attitude were important not only for Aboriginal students but also for Aboriginal staff. The majority of non-Aboriginal participants respected this aspect of their Aboriginal colleague's identity, but this was countered by several who held the perception that these obligations impacted their colleague's provision of support to students, and the staffing rosters. The nuances of community obligation and kinship interconnectivity were perceived to influence the level of commitment of Aboriginal staff to their role, a dynamic reflected in the following statements:

Over the years, we've come to find that Indigenous people like to work with their own countrymen and when there is [sic] issues with those countrymen from those communities, they don't get involved. They don't like to be involved. And they can't have the same objective vision of how to deal with that situation because they don't want to have any comeback from other people in the community to them, because they got themselves involved in it, so that has caused many issues for us. (Corey)

They don't like to change, didn't like change. And if it didn't affect their community, they weren't really worried. (Corey)

**Respect differing priorities:** Participants recounted ways in which they responded to feedback from community members on issues, concerns or suggestions related to classroom and boarding. The feedback was generated through regular consultations that occurred informally throughout the year, when parents visited the School, and formally at the end-of-year consultations when Year 12 graduates' family members were accommodated for a week and participated in several feedback sessions (this culturally responsive initiative was detailed in Chapter 3). Following SMT acceptance of feedback and the adoption of specific recommendations, teachers and boarding staff met before the end of each year to finetune the changes and make the necessary modifications to curriculum delivery and boarding operations for the upcoming year.

Every year, we bring the Year 12 parents in for the Year 12 Graduation week. And we have various forums during that week where they give us feedback on everything from boarding through to their education in mainstream or in the school, over the time that the child's been with us. So, we get feedback from the parents that way, formally, in Year 12. (Gil)

In certain circumstances, cultural considerations required that teachers restrict what information might be spoken about in the classroom by, and to, whom. As stated in earlier chapters, schools and classrooms are a "microcosm of society" (Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010; Perso & Hayward, 2015, p. 3, citing Friere, 1972, 1976) wherein the teacher-student relationships reflect wider societal racial and cultural dynamics. Teachers therefore have "a powerful role" (Perso & Hayward, 2015, p. 3) as facilitators of change in cross-cultural understanding and acceptance, including enacting "a supportive role and a counselling role" (Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010, p. 105). This circumstance was viewed by participants as positioning them to be potential agents for change. Their narratives described the responsibility they felt to ensure curriculum delivery was culturally appropriate and tailored for the holistic needs of students, and that learning resources were adapted to fulfill mandated curriculum requirements while ensuring strong reference to, and respect for, Aboriginal cultures.

Participants provided examples of how they negotiated these responsibilities and evaluated and applied different pedagogical practices depending on the circumstance. Team teaching was used to ensure gender-specific content, such as in Health, could be taught by teachers of the appropriate gender. On occasion, a teacher recounted the decision-making process involved in teaching content that was not concomitant with the traditional conservatism present in many Aboriginal cultures, particularly when gender-based division of classes was preferred.

It's being perceptive of student needs, curriculum needs and 'big picture', and it needs to be developed in line with consultation with stakeholders. ... I think it's my responsibility to give Indigenous students the same educational knowledge as non-Indigenous students, to the point where it's culturally appropriate. If it's not, that's where I arrange for consultation and possibly

separating the students into male and female, if it's culturally appropriate. ... And sometimes you don't get it right. And a lot of the time, you can gauge from the way students respond as to whether it's appropriate or not. (Brad)

It's much more in tune with answering some deep and meaningful questions. There needs to be sensitivity to Indigenous issues but on the other side of the coin, there can't be a total enclosed, "This is taboo, that's taboo, you can't teach about gender identity, you can't talk about diverse sexuality." ... So if you do have gay Indigenous students in the class, they feel as though they're at least being exposed to some knowledge regarding their sexuality, whereas if their blanket statement is, "You can't talk about those kinds of things because of cultural reasons," then they won't get the same equal opportunity as non-Indigenous students to be exposed to those kinds of topics. (Brad)

Teachers and boarding staff developed a heightened awareness of issues around gender and cultural roles. Care and sensitivity were required when interacting with students of a different gender to themselves, including being aware of possible student responses or communication challenges.

You notice that a lot more with a lot of the girls than with the boys. That they're just not gonna [*sic*] speak to a man. And I think the same goes in reverse. So, I'm a man. I know that some of the female teachers have a bit more difficulty engaging with some of the lads. (Reuben)

As in all schools, academic decisions were made by parents for their children. When decisions did not support teachers' aspirations for students, they felt the loss of those imagined and hoped-for future pathways. Despite this sense of disappointment, teachers respected differing priorities expressed by parents. The dichotomy of parental expectations and perceived responsibility of teachers and school is a known part of the complexity of the Aboriginal Education context (Chenhall et al., 2011).

It's no different to non-Aboriginal parents having different views for where their kid is going in life. And it's a challenging and sometimes disappointing discussion for a teacher to have when those don't align. Because you do think you know their academic capabilities better than the parents might. (Reuben)

**Respect for community issues:** Participants made a point of not getting personally involved or stating an opinion on issues or situations arising in a student's home community. However, they were proactive in providing options for students, focusing on wellbeing support, including Headspace counselling (this, and other culturally responsive programs are outlined in Chapter 3 and in Section 5.4.1. below). Oftentimes, in their voices, participants appeared mindful of supporting students from all communities involved and demonstrated an awareness of cultural sensitivities around specific

incidents and sometimes this included the need to separate students while counselling was offered. Firsthand knowledge of students' home communities was invaluable in these circumstances, a practice encouraged in diversity studies (Cousik, 2015) and actively promoted as part of the School's induction process.

We can identify, having those contacts on the ground that will give us the information or if we perceive things in the media or find out things from the travel officer or from the Indigenous Liaison Officer, we can then pull the pieces together with regard to what support is required for these students on their return. (Tania)

It's a maximum benefit. Knowing which kids are related to each other, what community they're from. After community visits meeting grandparents and parents, being able to call them by name, you know, the grandparent or the parent. You mention their name, the kid knows you've got a stronger connection. ... They know you've been to their community, that you know where they live, you know which house in the community they're from. (Max)

While teachers attempted to assuage the effect of community issues inside the classroom, to maintain focus as much as possible on learning, they also recognised that focused pursuit of the curriculum did not in all circumstances equate to quality teaching. Sometimes, teachers chose to stop teaching and instead, actively listened and engaged with students about their cares and concerns outside the classroom in order to best support the learning inside the classroom. In doing so, teachers demonstrated compassion and empathy, and considered a flexible approach to be the best pathway to success even if it that required the setting aside of a lesson plan to focus on issues of immediate concern in students' cultural and social lifeworlds.

And I think that's a reflection of people's cultural competency, in that they're *aware* that they need to know where the students are at. (Gil)

We have to somehow find a way to be between them and to keep them safe, then find a way to get them on track and to focus on their education. (Reuben)

This complexity was part and parcel of the educational context and the study's participants expressed awareness of their limited capacity to change the external circumstances affecting students. To overcome the existential weight of this reality, participants reported practicing self-care and compassion in their personal lives and tried to sometimes absolve themselves of this burden of responsibility, to 'let go' of the dissatisfaction related to levels of classroom engagement perhaps, or fears and concerns for students' safety and wellbeing, or for their future pathways.

If that student, due to their personal circumstances, wants to act up in your class and have the final word, you know, it's no reflection on me. Something else has happened that's well beyond my control. (Rueben)

It's the same in, I suppose, any job but there is [*sic*] many nights you go home after a shift and you cannot get it out. You cannot get it all out and you can't sleep. You get a couple of hours sleep, the rest of the time, you've been sitting and thinking. (Max)

I always make time for myself. So that's one thing I have learned here. So, you know, I could do 10, 15 hours a day but I will always find one hour, or an hour and a half, to go to the gym. On a weekend, I always have one round of golf. That gets me away and then I come back. ... Always good. It's another day. My mindset is, I'm here for ten weeks and then I get a break. (Corey)

The School assisted in the management and maintenance of staff wellbeing in several ways. These are discussed in the following section.

#### *5.4.1. Culturally responsive leadership*

The School implemented a coordinated system of support for staff and students in a deliberate strategy that embodied the Principal's concept of a "Circle of Influence" (Gil). This conceptual approach was visibly articulated in a suite of whole-school policies and processes which are outlined below. In its briefest sense, the Circle of Influence approach stipulated that everyone not *inside* the classroom worked together *outside* the classroom to support what happened *inside* the classroom – quite literally, a perpetual feedback loop. The School with its various parts therefore assumed not only its own 'community' identity, a notion exhorting in classrooms, boarding houses and student induction, but also worked as a team, in which staff members were expected to acquit their roles and responsibilities toward the same goal: to ensure that classrooms and student learning remained the core focus of the School. This top-down, high-expectations leadership style was described by a member of the SMT as "a meritocracy" and teachers attested to feeling supported by the SMT: "I've had the people above me support me in the initiatives I was making for many years," teacher Reuben asserted, and another stated, "So that level of support's pretty important" (Brad). Teachers felt the effects of the whole-school Circle of Influence approach, particularly when perceptions of success in the classroom were bolstered by the presence of Teacher Assistants and effective staff communication including through the learning management system called Seqta.

Having support in the classroom really helps, particularly if they're proactive. Having Seqta to communicate back to the dorms really helps, in terms of if kids are misbehaving, there's an extra person who knows in the circle. ... [Students are] like, "Ooh, it's not just the teacher that's

finding out about this, it's the House Parent and the Head of Year." And that makes them think twice. But some of them still do it. Others will be pulled up a little bit. (Brad)

I have the final say but I like to empower the people around me, students and support. And I take full advantage of support systems that are in place. (Summer)

The School's vision and values are espoused across both the Day and the Boarding activities. School values included professional learning, reconciliation, partnership with families and communities, and service to community. In a semi-structured interview, the Principal described community consultation as a "triangle – with the family and the student and the School in that triangle" (Gil). In keeping with the geometric theme, these metaphors of triangle and circle served to illustrate *how* the School was supporting those most invested in Aboriginal Education. Several key strategies are now outlined and grouped in relation to three of the School's values.

Professional learning:

- No first-year teachers in Aboriginal Education. Graduate teachers, and teachers expressing an interest in teaching Aboriginal students, were expected to complete one year in mainstream while paired with a Buddy Teacher, to observe and be mentored by, before being considered as a teacher of Aboriginal students. This policy placed student wellbeing first and foremost.
- Mandatory cultural awareness training for all new staff, except Northern Territory residents who were understood to have acquired a localised contextual and cultural awareness. This policy ensured all staff possessed a 'baseline' level of cultural awareness across the School.
- Mentoring of graduate teachers – employed 0.8 of the time with allocated release time for confidential, weekly mentoring by former staff members (expert teachers) in their first year.
- Peer support – teachers supported teachers, formally and informally. Daily briefings between boarding staff and teachers ensured a whole-school approach to student wellbeing.
- Professional learning communities – teachers teaching teachers. One participant said, "When you sit down with a team of teachers, that is a professional learning community ... then that knowledge is shared, and all of our practice improves" (Reuben). Collaboration occurred across subjects and year levels, including Aboriginal Education and mainstream teachers.
- Classroom support and learning support – Teacher Assistants, including Aboriginal TAs, and 'Gappys'; also, Support Services, Marshals, and Restorative Justice Officers. Aboriginal teachers, Aboriginal youth workers and visiting parents and family members ensured whole-school visibility and valuing of Aboriginal perspectives.

- Professional development – annual, mandatory week-long professional development program included Restorative Justice training for staff interested in enhancing classroom management.
- Data-driven practices – the SMT used a data-informed change-management process. The School developed partnerships with local and interstate universities as a Research Hub to provide data for decision-making, with a focus on teacher quality and academic engagement. When discussing the use of data to propel and inform the process for change, the Principal stated: “Teachers need to be assertive enough to encourage high expectations but at the same time, bring to the class an *individual approach* whereby they will work hard to use the data that we produce ... to identify the gaps in learning for all of our students. And it’s been particularly useful for our Indigenous students.” (Gil)

#### Reconciliation:

- Visible representation of Aboriginal peoples, cultures and histories throughout the School.
- Partnerships with external providers (Restorative Justice, Clontarf Foundation, Headspace), in conjunction with the development of School-based initiatives (Strong Girls Academy) to support Aboriginal student wellbeing and learning engagement.
- Aboriginal perspectives sought and valued, that is, Aboriginal Teacher Assistants and youth workers provided classroom and learning support, and peer support for non-Aboriginal teachers; Aboriginal families were welcome to stay in Boarding and provide in-class support for students; ‘two-way relationships’ through annual community consultation for families of Year 12 students; Aboriginal students included in all aspects of school experience.
- Restorative Justice Officers and a *second chances* policy (restorative practices) provided continuity of support and assisted Aboriginal students to develop skills for navigating in both worlds, build self-efficacy and self-concept and learn in culturally safe and secure spaces.

#### Service to community:

- Proactive fostering of the School as a ‘community’, a vision supported by local Aboriginal Elders, invited to welcome and speak with Aboriginal students to establish expectations.
- High expectations for Aboriginal students, in collaboration with community aspirations, to assist students to be positively contributing members of their home communities and the wider community. Many teachers expressed a service-learning attitude.
- Change management, enacted over three to five years, raised academic standards for Aboriginal Education and increased teacher quality. Data-driven process, informed by

evaluation and assessment data, and supported by culturally congruent and enabling policies. Provision of resources with expectations attached (e.g., backpacks, see section 5.3.1.2.).

- Role modeling of values – teachers and boarding staff described role modeling values, such as authenticity, loyalty, reciprocity and respect.
- Culturally congruent curriculum delivery in Aboriginal Education, in consultation with communities. Equity and wellbeing also required access to some curriculum content, for example, Health topics, that may be considered as taboo by communities.

These policies and strategies, delineated through the voices of the study's participants, show *how* the School proactively supported teachers and boarding staff to improve cultural competence and support the learning and wellbeing of Aboriginal students. The School not only expressed these values, it enacted them in a very deliberate whole-school approach for the sole purpose of supporting success in the classroom. In scholarly literature in the field of Aboriginal Education, the equitable access of Aboriginal students to a quality education is long overdue (see Chapter 2) and in practice, as shown by the research site, this requires a multi-layered and data-driven suite of strategies both *inside* and *outside* the classroom, such as those listed above, to establish equity and to maintain protective measures against potential barriers. The following explanation by the Principal reflects this iterative process:

And what I mean by that is, if the classroom is the centre of the *purpose* for the educational institution being in place, then the Circle of Support needs to be non-teaching staff who have an interest in resolving cultural and social problems. Often, they are Aboriginal staff themselves but not necessarily. (Gil)

## 5.5. Summary

This chapter has provided demographic data for the participants and explored three cultural competence indicators: formal cultural awareness training, visits to remote communities and formal EALD training. Interview and focus group data were presented in ways that demonstrated how participants utilised their skills, knowledge and understanding to improve their pedagogical practice while remaining cognisant and proactive regarding cultural sensitivities. Lastly, this chapter has revealed several key strategies used by participants to build relationships with Aboriginal students. These strategies included adopting a policy of second chances, building trust, applying a proactive stance in connecting with students, respecting cultural responsibilities, deferring to Aboriginal colleagues in moments of uncertainty, and showing respect for community issues and priorities. At the research site, these strategies were developed and strongly supported by the School leadership and this showed in the data to be a crucial aspect to the level of support teachers felt they enjoyed and the



attitudes and resilience they displayed in the classroom. This chapter has demonstrated that cultural competence, pedagogical practice, peer support and connectedness are cornerstones of teacher effectiveness in classrooms of cultural difference. This is further explored, with particular regard to the research questions, in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER SIX



On country looked after by the Bunitj, Manilagarr and Mandjurlgunj people  
Photo © Megan Spiers

## Chapter 6: Discussion

*It's an experience, just like my travels. I like some of it, don't like other parts of it. I don't want to sound all soppy. It's all about the journey, rather than the destination. (Woodrow)*

The previous chapter demonstrated ways in which the participants navigated their lived experience of the phenomenon – expressly, that of being a non-Aboriginal teacher of Aboriginal students.

Demographic data and cultural competence indicators were presented, and the use of specific skills, knowledge and understanding to improve pedagogical practice were detailed in the voices of teachers and boarding staff. The importance of teachers being cognisant and respectful of cultural sensitivities, and proactive in preserving the cultural safety and security of Aboriginal students was established.

Several key strategies were revealed that participants considered to be of value for building relationships with Aboriginal students, notably: accessing peer support and classroom learning support; acquiring localised cultural awareness; visiting remote communities in person to meet families; and, being proactive in initiating and maintaining communication with students and communities. The three cornerstones of teacher effectiveness in classrooms of cultural difference – cultural competence, pedagogical practice and connectedness – are now explored in relation to the research questions.

In earlier chapters, a review of the current body of scholarly knowledge in Aboriginal Education presented a range of issues pertinent to the research site, including historical educational inequity, socioeconomic disadvantage and racial discrimination in schools. Teacher-related issues, including the cultural awareness and classroom preparedness of preservice teachers, self-efficacy in cross-cultural learning contexts, and high rates of attrition for early career teachers in Australia and globally, introduced the study's focus on teachers' acquisition of cultural competence. This overview preceded a description of the unique context of the research site, a boarding school in the Northern Territory. Chapter 4 Methods outlined qualitative research approaches, specifically phenomenology and the naturalistic-ethnographic processes adopted for data collection and analysis. In Chapter 5 Results, the lived experience of non-Aboriginal teachers and boarding staff was revealed, and participants' strategies presented for teaching in the cross-cultural context of the School. Results were generated predominantly from semi-structured interviews and focus groups supplemented by the researcher's classroom observations and immersion in the research site. These results contain the kernels for the following discussion of causal attribution and motivational variables, and the identification of essential characteristics leading to improved cultural competence in teachers. In this chapter, the results will be discussed, and the research questions answered.

To date in this study, reference has been made primarily to two participant sub-groups: registered teachers, and boarding staff. To concentrate the following discussion, this chapter will be couched in terms of its applicability for teachers in cross-cultural contexts, in reference to the study's focus on non-Aboriginal teachers of Aboriginal students and their pedagogical practice. However, the research findings can certainly be applied more widely, as the following discussion and subsequent conclusions have emerged from results drawn from all participants, including executive staff.

## **6.1. Re-statement of the research aim**

The research aimed to discover the causal attributes and motivations of culturally competent teachers and enunciate what essential skills, knowledge and understanding are required in order to improve the development of cultural competence in teachers and boarding staff new to the phenomenon. In this thesis, the phenomenon is defined as the experience of being a non-Aboriginal teacher in classrooms comprised wholly of Aboriginal students in a boarding school, defined in the study as *teaching in classrooms of cultural difference*.

Data were collected and analysed in ways conducive to revealing the process of cultural competence acquisition and development of cultural responsiveness in educational contexts. In doing so, the lived experience of the phenomenon was revealed through the voices of teachers and boarding staff in a boarding school. The selection criteria ensured that participants possessed current experience of the phenomenon. Prerequisites for participation included a current teaching load of Aboriginal Education classes or a student management role in the boarding program. Using qualitative methods, the study identified the skills, knowledge and understandings acquired over time that participants considered to be essential for enhancing their effectiveness in classrooms of cultural difference.

## **6.2. Re-statement of the research questions**

This study investigated the central Research Question:

What are the causal attributes for cultural competence in teachers and boarding staff (paraprofessionals) working effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?

It was anticipated that the following sub-questions would inform the Research Question:

*Sub-Research Question 1:* What factors, such as prerequisite skills, knowledge and understanding, are the best predictors for the long-term success of teachers in classrooms of Aboriginal students?

*Sub-Research Question 2:* What relationship exists, if any, between causal attribution, motivational variables and attainment of cultural competence?

*Sub-Research Question 3:* How can this relationship be leveraged to effectively develop cultural competence in teachers and non-teaching staff who are inexperienced or feeling overwhelmed by the challenges inherent in a multicultural environment?

The research explored the phenomenon in two ways. Firstly, by focusing on teachers' attitudes and actions that have assisted in their acquisition of advanced levels of cultural competence and secondly, by reviewing their strategies for cross-cultural communication. The outcomes of this study are intended to inform both teachers new to the phenomenon and preservice teachers with an interest in Aboriginal Education, and to contribute towards their effectiveness in culturally different classrooms. In the study, the term *cultural difference* implies no negative connotation but defines the circumstance wherein the teacher possesses a cultural heritage different from that of all the students in the classroom.

The study sought particularly to reveal, through analysis of spoken word narratives, the causal ascriptions and motivational variables underlying participants' descriptions of the phenomenon. Challenges inherent to the unique context of the research site (a boarding school in northern Australia, titled 'the School' in this dissertation) were revealed and teachers' strategies described, including responses to cultural sensitivities, in the hope that a leverageable relationship between cultural competence, causal attribution and motivation would be uncovered.

### **6.3. Pathways to cultural competence**

This section comprises three sub-sections that explore the early phases in the journey toward cultural competence, the development of teachers' skills and knowledge relevant to the educational context and their commitment to connectedness, in particular the teacher-student relationship.

#### *6.3.1. Early phases in the journey*

As mentioned in earlier chapters, three factors herein referred to as *cultural competence indicators* were identified from the literature as being essential in the early stages of a teacher's development of cultural competence. These factors, more precisely defined as qualifications and experience, provided a platform from where teachers could consciously begin engaging with the School context in its realities. This was confirmed by participants in the study, with the caveat that while qualifications and experience may provide greater understanding, other characteristics must also be present to increase a teacher's potential for acquiring cultural competence.

Demographic data collected in a written survey and through interview responses enabled a profile to be constructed for each participant, particularly in reference to known factors that support the development of cultural competence (Brace, 2011; BurrIDGE et al., 2012). Participants had either

possessed or experienced one or all of the following three cultural competence indicators: formal cultural awareness training, visits to remote communities and formal EALD training or qualification. These three indicators were selected by the researcher following an extensive review of literature related to cultural competence, cultural responsiveness, initial teacher education and Aboriginal Education. The researcher considered these indicators to be representative of the factors most likely to hasten the development of cultural competence in a fast-paced and complex school environment. The study's participants revealed in their narratives that these indicators had increased their cross-cultural capabilities and improved teacher-student relationships, enabling some to fulfill their aspiration to teach Aboriginal students. Some participants had not completed all the indicators (e.g., cultural awareness training was not mandatory for long-term residents of the Northern Territory) yet affirmed the usefulness of training and cultural experience for early career teachers or teachers new to the School. Occurring over time, this combination of personal experience and professional development can increase an individual's capacity to work effectively in cross-cultural environments (Gay, 2010; Hollinsworth, 2013; Joiner Watts, 2008; Perso, 2012). As indicated in the review of current literature, cultural competence is highly desirable in Australian educational settings (AITSL, 2018; AITSL, 2020a; Benveniste, Guenther, et al., 2014; Department of Education and Training, 2015; Jin et al., 2016; Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014, 2015).

Australian teachers, on completion of their graduate teacher qualification, are expected to possess an understanding of quality teaching (Bahr & Mellor, 2016; McArdle, 2010), protective practices (TRB NT, 2011) and the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching (AITSL, 2015, 2020a), wherein the skills, knowledge and characteristics necessary to be demonstrated in their professional teaching practice are described. The accreditation process for Australian universities expects that initial teacher education programs incorporate principles of equity, diversity and differentiation as issues and essential values to be considered in the classroom (AITSL, 2019). In addition, graduate and preservice teachers must possess a "broad knowledge of, understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages" (AITSL, 2019, p. 20) to ensure they meet Standard 2.4 of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2020a): "Focus area 2.4 Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians". In relation to the first two career stages:

- Graduate teachers must: "Demonstrate broad knowledge of, understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages."
- Proficient teachers must: "Provide opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages." (AITSL, 2020a, p. 13)

Preservice teachers are required to complete the Literacy and Numeracy Test for initial teacher education students, or LANTITE (ACER, 2020; Universities Australia, 2015), and provide evidence of their skills and knowledge through the Teaching Performance Assessment (TPA) process prior to graduation (AITSL, 2020b; Egeberg et al., 2016, pp. 10-11).

Noting the aforementioned accreditation and registration requirements, teachers can scarcely fail to have gained, as part of the theoretical underpinnings encountered in their initial teacher education, a general overview of issues relevant to teaching in multicultural classrooms. However, all the study's participants expressed the sense of being underprepared for the complexity of Aboriginal Education, that the Aboriginal culture and histories learned in school or other experience was insufficient for the context wherein up to thirty-five distinctive cultures were represented in their classrooms. Research supports the finding that teachers are often underprepared for the complexity of teaching Aboriginal students: "Despite the best intentions and commitment from many teachers, most have inadequate understandings of appropriate pedagogies and the complexities of Indigenous cultures, knowledge and identities" (Santoro et al., 2011, p. 65).

Although assessments of cultural competence are not formally required, provisional and full registration of teachers with each state and territory's teacher registration authority implies that they will arrive at their place of employment with sufficient cultural awareness to teach Aboriginal students. In the study, the Principal at the research site ('the School') did not rely on teachers' assumed knowledge and instead, insisted on each teacher completing professional development as part of their induction process, including exposure to local Aboriginal cultures and traditions. A description of the research site, a boarding school in the Northern Territory, and relevant policies and processes can be found in Chapter 3 Context and Chapter 4 Results.

Thus, a combination of prior knowledge, however broad, and induction-driven formal cultural awareness training provided teachers new to the School with a general overview of Aboriginal cultural knowledge. The School also encouraged teachers to accompany boarding staff on visits to students' home communities and this served to provide Aboriginal Education teachers with localised, on-country cultural knowledge relevant to the students. These policies were enacted so that when teachers arrived in their classroom, they were equipped to interpret the context through the prism of current community and cultural knowledge supplemented with EALD skills and understanding.

Analysis of the data showed that teachers at the School were able to analyse issues of disengagement or disruption arising in the classroom through this lens of understanding. Moreover, they expressed confidence in their capacity to determine when an issue might be related to language, when culture-based, or be due to another cause entirely. In particular, English language training and experience enabled teachers to build empathy for students navigating this foreign-language environment.

Through teachers' voices, this study showed that attainment of three specific indicators: EALD qualifications, remote community visits and formal cultural awareness of local Aboriginal cultures and history, are strong indicators of a teacher's potential for long-term success in classrooms with Aboriginal students (Sub-Research Question 1).

At this stage of their journey toward understanding the Aboriginal worldview, deep connections with culture is in its infancy because a sufficient level of comprehension needs time to develop. Awareness of cultural nuance represented a step towards grasping the full complexity of the School's unique context. One teacher compared the intricacies to European countries that appear deceptively similar:

It's like teaching overseas in, say France, and ok you're aware of cultural differences, then you go to Italy and you have *different* cultural differences. You're sort of prepared in some ways, but you're not fully prepared for every single cultural difference. (River)

Navigating the "considerable complexity" (Berndt & Berndt, 1981, p. xi) of Aboriginal culture takes time, as does development of relationships. Teachers must, as part of this journey, actively engender in themselves and their practice the realisation that this particular cohort of students has a connection with their culture that is deeply felt, ingrained and abiding. Time is required on the part of the teacher to develop a relationship with students, particularly those who are mistrustful of adults or disengaged, such that they do not "retreat into behaviours that safeguard them" (McDonald, 2010, p. 202). Taking time, and making the effort to create respectful bonds, enables teachers to step forward into a place of openness, where consideration of culture becomes unquestioningly inherent in their interactions with students and in their interpretation of students' behaviour, choices and actions (Sub-Research Question 2). By viewing culture as a major component in the construction of the students' reality, teachers move on the cultural competence continuum from a position of ignorance or superficial stereotypes towards a genuine *deep understanding*.

These elements are regarded, not as something that has been 'frozen' at a particular point in time, but as a configuration that is essentially dynamic, sensitive to varying pressures, receptive to outside views, and sufficiently adaptive to permit them to survive and make their impact on the wide Australian society. Knowing something about traditional Aboriginal living is of even more importance now than it was a decade ago. (Berndt & Berndt, 1981, p. ix)

[It is] ignorant and naive to paint a picture that they're all dancing around singing songs.  
(Woodrow)

As teachers orient themselves to an Aboriginal Education context, the process of fostering a deeper understanding (Cousik, 2015) or connection with Aboriginal cultures is in its early stages. Some



participants spoke of having very little knowledge of Aboriginal peoples, histories and cultures. Others, arriving from interstate, felt knowledgeable about First Nations in their home jurisdictions but were relatively ignorant of boarding students' cultures and communities. As teachers interact with students and family members, their body of localised cultural knowledge at this point, according to their voiced narratives, is of a shallow, toe-dabbling depth. Comprehension is growing, a conceptual understanding of the complexity of being an Aboriginal boarding student in the Northern Territory is widening but teachers are still building their knowledge and experience and are initiating fledgling teacher-student relationships. In this study, most teachers in Aboriginal Education visited remote communities to improve their awareness and these visits, according to their recollections, served to increase or validate their motivations to teach Aboriginal students as they personally met students' families, saw their homes and learned about the community's aspirations for young people.

### *6.3.2. Development of skills and knowledge*

Pedagogical practice is demonstrated most effectively when teachers make a habit of tailoring their knowledge to the learning context, also termed "elaborative curriculum" (Loreman et al., 2005, p. 135). Good teachers build a toolkit of skills and knowledge, some "so automatic that they hardly know how to articulate them" (McArdle, 2010, p. 70), and equip themselves with a range of support mechanisms for both their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of their students (Hattie, 2012, pp. 25-38, 78-79). Literature suggests domains of wellbeing specific to Aboriginal peoples (Butler et al., 2019), such as family, community, spirituality, culture and country, are necessary to consider separately or in addition to Western-oriented measures of wellbeing. A "complex relationship" exists between wellbeing and education, described in Chapter 2, and research confirms that tailoring formal schooling to meet communities' cultural values, needs and understandings is ideal for supporting Aboriginal students' wellbeing (Butler et al., 2019, p. 151).

The capacity to construct a repertoire purposefully for support is a vital one that, if done well, assists teachers with the process of translating, interpreting, understanding and preserving the relationships in which they engage. A professional toolkit serves to continue forward momentum of the cultural competence journey and focus the teacher's intentions to serve the big-picture complexities of this unique context. In short, the study showed that what teachers gathered within and around themselves was fundamental to sustaining them in their attempts, often repeated attempts, to achieve their avowed purposes in the classroom, for the School and students, and for the wider community. The following quote from Prue illustrates a teacher's care and commitment to building relationships over time:

They were so shy and shame, they would not acknowledge me. But if you are a good person, ultimately, they will accept you. You need to demonstrate brave confidence that it will be fine. It

takes months but it will happen. I always say to them, “We’re gonna be great, you and me. It’s just gonna take time.” (Prue)

The teacher quoted above had visited remote communities, studied EALD techniques and placed a high value on building positive relationships. She welcomed the speaking of Aboriginal languages in class. Her advice to teachers new to the phenomenon was: “always ask them about their knowledge ... aim high ... talk slowly, repeat yourself if they request it, be aware that they literally can’t understand you” (Prue). In concert with other participants, Prue evinced the respect, passion and praxis in her stories that are evidence of an excellent (“expert”) teacher, defined by Hattie (2012, pp. 27-32) in five major dimensions: high levels of knowledge and understanding of their subjects; capable of guiding students to surface and deep learning; successfully monitor learning and provide feedback to ensure students do progress; attend to attitudinal attributes such as self-efficacy and mastery motivation; and, provide data-driven evidence of positive impact.

When participants recounted their first experiences of the School’s Aboriginal Education context, experiential detail in their stories showed they did not possess all the answers (knowledge) nor skills (praxis) needed. However, they reported that as their time in the School increased, their commitment to Aboriginal Education deepened and their motivational intent was firmly focused on the students. An enhanced toolkit of knowledge and experience led teachers to adapt to the strengths of Aboriginal students and where possible, to support the academic and employment pathways endorsed or supported by their home communities. At this point on their journey to cultural competence, teachers attempted to see the *truth* of the context, couched in realism and empathy, humility, patience and, ultimately, hopefulness (Sub-Research Question 3). This attitude can be clearly seen in the voices of teachers, of which the following quote is representative:

When I walk into a classroom where the kids are fifteen years old and they have a reading level of Year 1 or 2, I have to change my expectations. I can’t put them, even as clever as they may be, on a pathway to university. It’s just not realistic. It’s not gonna [*sic*] serve the kid. ... Trying to identify what their pathway is. They still have paths that they’re going to take. Right? And you’re not teaching if you’re not preparing them to open what doors they can. (Reuben)

In brief, the results showed how teachers utilised their skills, knowledge and understanding in the classroom, in an environment of cultural difference, to improve their pedagogical practice. Some of these skills were representative of *good teaching* and the principles of *quality teaching*, which participants also referred to as *best practice*. However, the mere application of quality teaching principles and values was not sufficient for this unique educational context. Teachers needed to embed good teaching practices with culturally relevant strategies, localised for the students within each class, and to adopt a longer-term viewpoint that extended beyond the classroom door, reaching

further than a single school day, term or semester to incorporate the students' past, present and future pathways. Such strategies as adopting a policy of second chances through restorative practices and applying a proactive stance for teacher-student interaction in the classroom, or on an informal basis, were evidence of targeted and deliberately adaptive quality teaching (Llewellyn et al., 2018, pp. 6, 10). For examples of these teacher practices, refer to Chapter 5, Section 5.3.2.2. Managing cultural sensitivities.

In a similar vein, more esoteric strategies such as respecting cultural responsibilities and showing respect for community issues and priorities indicated a deep-seated commitment to reach across the “canyon” (Woodrow) of cultural difference, that might otherwise prove an unbridgeable gulf of miscommunication, stereotypes and misunderstandings. To do this, teachers sought the feedback and advice of parents and members of students' home communities, making a concerted effort to gain expert illumination of, to their initial vision, the murky and possibly treacherous waters of cultural misunderstanding. This culturally tailored response, the purpose of which is indicated in the quote below, represented teachers' attempts at “treating kids like individuals” (Woodrow):

Getting what, in my mind, is right for each student. (Woodrow)

As described earlier, consultation consisted of a number of formal opportunities supported by the School wherein families and community members with a vested interest in the students' academic advancement gathered with teachers and boarding staff to discuss, in a *deep listening* setting, any matters of concern, particularly those requiring a solution that bridged both Western and Aboriginal worldviews. Informal consultation involved teachers and boarding staff communicating directly with parents, caregivers and interested community members about students, school life and learning. These formal and informal consultations moved the teacher towards a deeper level of connectedness with the students' cultural backgrounds.

All participants indicated that at some point in their journey to cultural competence, a significant event or incident had occurred that resulted in a moment of enlightenment. This moment contained the realisation that they did not possess the skills to be able to resolve this incident to the satisfaction of their students, their professional selves or expectations of their own performance.

I still remember it vividly ... I walked into the classroom and there happened to be a young man at the front [who] picked up his chair and threw it at me. I think I just froze! ... So, things improved from there! (Margaret)

Some participants interpreted this junction-point as a moment of reckoning, describing their attitude as a form of humility, in which they recognised the limitations of their cultural knowledge and current

repertoire of pedagogical skills. Teachers displayed an unassuming attitude in promptly seeking different forms of support at these times, including classroom and learning support, peer support and community support. All forms of support were considered by teachers to be essential, notably in relation to building and reinforcing perceptions of their own capability in the educational context.

I had *enough* support at the beginning to get the skills to be independent. I've had the people above me support me in the initiatives I was making for many years ... In terms of actually teaching these kids, I've felt supported. (Reuben)

Teachers with humility consciously adopt an unassuming stance regarding their own abilities. Avoidance of feelings of superiority and a willingness to learn are critical characteristics for effectiveness in cross-cultural settings. In their pedagogical practice, teachers adopted or preserved an element of modesty. This attitude was necessary, as stated above, for teachers to navigate a challenging moment or circumstance with appropriate levels of support. Teachers in the study did not imagine that they were superior to the situation or that their existing knowledge base was sufficient. There was a deliberately cultivated attitude that allowed for genuine learning to occur between the teacher and their peers, colleagues and students.

Teachers too think they're indispensable. They think they can actually change the universe. Smarter people than me can try beforehand and smarter people than me will try after and cause less damage than those teachers who say, "Give a class to me and I'll turn them into something." You can ignore reality, but you can't ignore the consequences. They learn a hard lesson. (Woodrow)

Comprehending the viewpoint of students was advantageous in the initial stages of building teacher-student relationships. Teachers who critically reflected on their relatively impermanent place in the lives of students, particularly given the transience of the Northern Territory population as a whole, fostered a pragmatic enthusiasm for their role, a realism tempered by humility.

Being aware that being a bit modest is a positive thing. Knowing I'm the umpteenth white guy [in the classroom]. It's like chipping away at the sculpture. Closing the gap – more like a *canyon*! (Woodrow)

Mindful of cultural safety and security, teachers deferred to Aboriginal colleagues for advice, most especially on matters of cultural appropriateness and communication in the classroom. An attitude of awareness, pragmatism and humility accentuated teachers' proactiveness in accessing support where necessary, in order to increase their existing skills and knowledge relevant to the context. An important outcome of this approach was an increased understanding of their role, particularly in

assisting students to develop pathways to employment or higher education, which inevitably led to a heightened intention to build positive relationships with Aboriginal students. Connectedness, and teachers' commitment to this concept, is explored in the next section.

### *6.3.3. Commitment to connectedness*

Connectedness is the feeling of being connected to others. In a school setting, student connectedness is manifested through positive and trusting teacher-student relationships, safe environments and high expectations (Waters & Cross, 2010). Having a sense of affinity and closeness with people or objects and places, of being intangibly linked to such, imbues a powerful sense of belonging in individuals. Integral to connectedness is the forging of relationships between people and the recognition of being a part of a greater whole. Schools impart a sense of connectedness through ideas of community, identity and purpose. The same transformation occurs in a classroom, when teachers actively seek to engender in students the idea of being part of a team and of the classroom as a sanctuary.

The classroom has to maintain its integrity at all times and that's the only way it can be a refuge when you need it, or otherwise. (Reuben)

Results revealed several key strategies used by participants to build relationships with Aboriginal students, outlined in Chapter 5, Section 5.4. Connectedness. Teachers applied a proactive stance, recognising that Aboriginal students may be culturally inclined to wait and observe rather than initiate contact with unfamiliar teachers. Teachers showed respect for community priorities, acceptance and respect for community responsibilities, remained cognisant of cultural sensitivities in the classroom and sought advice from Aboriginal staff. Teachers participated in consultations with parents and members of students' home communities, both at the School and 'on country'. They showed a willingness to learn from their peers, including Aboriginal colleagues, and other perceived experts in education and the unique context of the School, and, most tellingly, from students.

Building trust proved to be of fundamental importance for connecting with students. Trust unified the authenticity, respect and genuine interest shown by teachers and served to solidify their preliminary overtures of rapport. Teachers honoured the giving and receiving of trust, expressed in the sentiment:

Never lie to them. (Woodrow)

Teachers practised forgiveness. This sentiment was amply present in their voices when describing their use of adaptive and restorative classroom management practices. Through the purposeful application of "five hundred chances" (Tania) and "twelve-thousand paths" (Prue), teachers sought to create a positive learning environment and to improve teacher-student relationships. This approach was underlined by a belief in the worth of every student and a view of the 'big picture' – an

understanding of where precisely the School featured in the life of a student, its purpose and possibilities for influence, and the long-term benefits when this influence was able to extend over several years. In their words, teachers and boarding staff appeared cognisant of the need to apply whole-school restorative practices (NSW Department of Education, 2020) and of safely managing the behaviour of students who were at first ill-prepared to navigate the confronting intersectionality of ‘two worlds’, also termed the “Cultural Interface” (Nakata, 2007, pp. 197-201) wherein deeply ingrained ways of knowing, doing and being were confronted by, and generated friction with, the unfamiliar culture of a school and urban environment. Given time and consistency of expectations, and compassionate guidance, students were able to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate successfully this vastly different landscape.

Without a restorative practice approach, which I have termed a ‘second chances’ policy in this dissertation to reflect ways in which the participants couched it, Aboriginal students, arriving from unequal starting points of school preparedness and academic attainment, would not have been able to reposition and *situate* themselves in these new (essentially, foreign) settings for long enough to gain traction and familiarity, or the necessary confidence to move forward and thrive. Ending their engagement with the School too hastily through suspension or expulsion risked permanently truncating their schooling. That is to say, without considering all aspects to the students’ experience, including issues such as homesickness, a dogged pursuit of punitive or disciplinary measures would amount to a perpetuation of discriminatory practices that have kept Aboriginal students excluded from school when in fact, their perceived recidivism may be based on unfamiliarity, confusion and cultural dissonance. Research on Aboriginal boarding students’ experiences has indicated that Aboriginal students feel respected when “teachers allowed them to think and act in Aboriginal ways without being penalised for their differences” (Macdonald et al., 2018, p. 18). Keeping students in school for longer than perhaps other schools might permit allowed them to become familiar with the School ways and to set their feet on the path most travelled, toward academic success, if they wished to tread it.

Further to the contextual consideration shown by teachers, their stance of forgiveness reached its limit whenever, in the words of one teacher, a student “infringed on the rights of other people” (Reuben). The line was drawn on recurrent unsafe behaviours, particularly if impacting on staff and students:

I mean, at the end of the day, every school’s gonna [*sic*] make policies and it just depends on where the line is in terms of the last straw. (Brad)

We all have rights. But your rights stop where mine start. There’s no overlap. ... I mean, there’s no amount of restorative work or anything that *we* can do as teachers, right? We’re not psychologists, we’re not counsellors, we’re not social workers. (Reuben)

In cultivating a deeper understanding of Aboriginal students and opening themselves to the vulnerabilities of relationships and combined with the complexity of students' cultural and social lifeworld, teachers were vulnerable to experiencing *disappointment of connection*. This occurred when teachers' anticipated outcome for individual students was less than hoped-for, academically or otherwise; the teacher-student relationship had failed to thrive, withering due to reasons outside the teacher's control or never completely blossoming; or, when incidents or issues did not get resolved to their satisfaction sometimes due to divergent school and cultural priorities or responsibilities. In these circumstances, teachers recognised their sadness and "disappointment of connection" (Tania), and sought to manage the accompanying "dissatisfaction" (Brad) and "disappointment" (Corey) by rationalising the situation, in light of any external factors, and critically reflecting on their personal contribution. The complexity of *disappointment of connection* mirrored the complexity of the unique context of the School, and of the relationships within it.

Connectedness required more than teacher-student relationships and peer support. Connection with community had a flow-on effect in the classroom. Building trust and being proactive, particularly in regard to community visits, assisted teachers to see their part in the broader tapestry of students' lives.

It's about having the face-to-face, and knowing the parents, and [them] knowing that they've got support and feeling that. And that just filters down and gets passed onto other ones and parents say, "Send your kids to [the School] because they care about your kids. Because they're here, they're in community. You can talk to them. You can ask them what's going on." (Corey)

I guess it's not a conscious thing. But I just try to be concerned, talk to them, ask them how they're going, just seeing them around, saying hello, going up and talking to them. And that's important for behaviour management as well as building that relationship 'cause they know you're around, they know that you know them. They know you've talked to their parents occasionally. And that all sort of stems, works into it. (River)

Teachers displayed a *deep commitment* to bridging the gap between themselves and students. They acted in a concerted manner. This included cultivating attitudes and adopting behaviours that brought them somewhat closer to connecting with students in that 'third space' of the Cultural Interface (Nakata, 2007). In order to meet students between two worlds, the depth and complexity of Aboriginal culture and the experiences navigated by Aboriginal students in their daily lives must inevitably be approached. It must be touched, whether tangibly or figuratively, and comprehended as a concrete truth. In other words, teachers need to grasp the reality of students' lives with a deep understanding. They must comprehend that the identity, experiences and aspirations of students are constructed within an ancient yet adaptive culture and, though students may be more than capable of

traversing the Western educational context, they may require more support than anticipated in order to set their feet stably on their chosen path.

The swiftest, and arguably surest, way to gain a sense of the truth of Aboriginal students' lives is when teachers visit communities, in company with a *gatekeeper* to provide introductions and interpretations. This deep understanding and support, in combination with increased skills and knowledge and a commitment to connectedness, assists teachers to move through future incidents in the classroom that might otherwise be confronting to those less habituated to the complexity:

I was *shocked*... (Woodrow)

Showing the love but not letting them get away with what they want to get away with. Their job is to test me. My job is to set boundaries, establish those lines, put a bit of structure into the students' lives. Cause they come from very diverse backgrounds. A lot of them from very volatile backgrounds. They don't know what structure is. They don't know what love is. They don't know what positivity is. So, I always show them my regard, always show them respect, at the same time as being firm with them. (Summer)

The nature of the journey toward cultural competence is revealed to be one of compassion, understanding and truth-seeking.

A lot of it's pastoral, even though I don't like that word. (Woodrow)

It's all about relationships. (Isabelle)

Connectedness encompassed the building of teacher-student relationships over time. Without intrinsic motivation and successive proactive attempts to initiate, maintain and sometimes repair relationships with Aboriginal students, teachers have a reduced capacity for effectiveness in classrooms of cultural difference. The following section will apply the research findings to answering the research questions.

## 6.4. Conceptual analysis of the findings

Cultural difference in the classroom adds an intangible yet transformative layer of complexity to the teaching and learning process. Voices of participants revealed the strategies and incidents that shaped their pedagogical practice and supported progress towards cultural competence. Teachers in this study revealed a highly conceptualised view of *good teaching* and *best practice*, one that was less reliant upon rigid structure and narrowly defined roles than that of some schools described by participants, and more contingent on flexibility and authenticity, which were defined in how they managed their relationships, particularly teacher-student connectedness.



I know how to read them. [If] a student is not going to work, you just bypass for that day. But he's got to do it. Sometimes he's three or four days in a row then he'll get it done. At that age, they don't particularly like chastising all the time. I suppose no student does, really. And they want to be given the, I guess, the flexibility to have a bad day. So, I read them. (Margaret)

In the study, the researcher conducted interviews and focus groups, classroom observations and adopted a participant-observer approach to gain an insider's perspective into the rich complexity of the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Shared between the researcher, as a fellow teaching professional, and the participants was a relationship characterised by empathy and a shared knowing (Titchen & Hobson, 2005). While at times disarmingly honest, participants were generous in providing anecdotes that clearly and articulately revealed their attempts to make sense of the unique context: an urban boarding school in which Aboriginal students from remote communities comprised over 30% of the total student cohort. In describing their experience, participants directly referenced policies and processes, and these have been described in earlier chapters within the broader context of Aboriginal Education and more specifically, the School context (see Chapter 2 Context and Chapter 5 Results, section 5.4.1. Culturally responsive leadership). This study focused on teachers' lived experience in classrooms of cultural difference, and analysis of the findings is drawn from the experiential detail in their voices.

Data collection revealed participants to be capable, critically reflective teachers, confident in their teaching practice. Teachers displayed individual attitudes and approaches that had been formulated in direct response to their position as a non-Aboriginal person teaching Aboriginal students. The teachers' journey toward cultural competence involved developing effective strategies for teaching in culturally diverse classrooms and these must be interpreted in a site-specific context.

How teachers spoke of and reflected on their knowledge and praxis, recounting their commencement at the School and subsequent experiences through their strategies for resolving various challenges in the classroom, the support sought and received, and how this assisted their pedagogical practice; all these aspects of their lived experience were in large part framed by the narrative of the School. The resulting analytical discourse is seated within the historical context of Aboriginal Education in Australia more broadly, and in the Northern Territory specifically, in which the School played a fifty-year role of educating Aboriginal students from remote communities. This dissertation, and in part the analysis following, has been interwoven with aspects of critical race theory discursivities, touching upon racism, discrimination, dominant culture narratives and White privilege (Castagno, 2014; Crichlow, 2015; Kilgour, 2013; Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010; Winchell, 2013) and the everyday issues faced by teachers in schools, such as funding and teacher preparedness and mentoring.

The ways in which teachers ascribed causes to their own performance in the classroom, and to the students and specific incidents that were recounted – their attitudes and causal attributes – were analysed using a framework of attribution theory. Values of respect, cultural safety and security, and equity featured in the voices of all participants were of critical importance, and these were explored accordingly. Strategies that teachers found to be most useful for approaching classroom challenges with humour, humility and empathy were described.

Teachers expressed an inner yearning to “make a difference” (Isabelle), to experience teaching in not only a cross-cultural but also an Aboriginal cultural setting and, somewhat more esoterically, to have an adventure and to give back. In their reasons for seeking and accepting employment at the School, teachers possessed intrinsic and altruistic motivations reflected in current research (Sheridan, 2019, p. 83) that drove their efforts to connect with students and improve the cultural responsiveness of their pedagogical practice. Without this inner motivation to stay at the School, to meet the oftentimes daily challenges with resilience and humour, to move beyond difference to a place of understanding, teachers would not have achieved the deep commitment to connectedness required to grow their skills sufficiently for effectiveness in culturally different classrooms. The following quote represents the inner motivation, the compulsion within teachers to support students, that emerges from the ethical relational standpoint that van Manen (2016) eloquently termed, “a moral demand, ... an appeal” (p. 202):

You’ve got to really love it. It’s a vocation. ... It’s something you don’t do for money. We all need money to survive, but you don’t do it for money. (Colleen)

Research indicates that teachers, when giving in to negative feelings such as isolation or resentment, are at risk of attributing blame to students for disruptive incidents in the classroom (Brace, 2011). This results in negative causal attribution, the placing of students in a position of fault when, in fact schools being what they are, microcosms of society (Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010), there are an extraordinary number of factors present within the dynamic of any occurrence in the classroom. In the study, teachers universally condemned deficit thinking with regard to students, rejecting the “construction of Indigenous people as the problem” (Smith, 1999, as cited in Gower, 2012, p. 4), and they avoided placing sole responsibility on students for disruptive behaviour. Even when recounting the most upsetting of incidents, teachers sought to rationalise undesirable behaviour in its wider context, considering external contributing factors, such as homesickness, school readiness, history of trauma.

And you just have to have mental resilience to know that this is my job. If I don’t do this, no-one else is going to do it. ... It did not matter what happened, I did not lose my cool, I would never lose my cool at a child because I do have that understanding that it’s a child. (Reuben)

I just recognise that tomorrow's another day and if it's a destroyed lesson, fine. And at the end of the day, they're probably better here than at home running rampant in a really violent environment that's dysfunctional and this could be the best safe place for them. So, I just keep that in mind because, time and time again, we get reminded that this is probably *the best place* for them, in terms of the most functional environment. For some kids that are really, really underprivileged and some never get to see what a 'normal' society looks like, this is probably the closest these kids get to it. (Brad)

Adopting a strengths-focused internal narrative to avoid negative causal attribution required teachers to possess the set of previously described personal characteristics, such as humility, compassion and empathy, and the interpersonal and cross-cultural skills concurrent with deep listening and high levels of cultural competence. Identifying and recognising the pre-existing capabilities brought by Aboriginal students into the classroom was a conscious choice, requiring effort by teachers.

It's hard when you're starting out. But just getting to know each kid, letting them trust you, being around long enough for them to be able to recognise you, because we do have quite a high turnover of students and a high turnover of teachers. So, just building that familiarity so they know who you are. And I go play footy with them, boys in the morning, just do things like that. (River)

So, to me, that's a condemnation of the teaching they've had in the past, which obviously never came from a strength base, that came from a deficit base. (Brad)

And it's about an individual plan and understanding for each student and working to their strengths. You can identify their weaknesses, but we really have to work to their strengths. And looking at where *they* see their strengths being, yet also where they think they will need support with challenges. If we are just thinking *we* know what their strengths and challenges are, we're doing the students a disservice. (Tania)

While there is ample opportunity for teachers to denigrate or ascribe blame in the school environment, particularly when situations arise leading to stress or distress, it is clear from their voices and stories that culturally competent teachers of Aboriginal students seek to hold the reality of the student, that dichotomous truth of the big picture and of that individual child, poised before their faces, and in their minds and hearts. In doing so, they are teaching "*to and through*" the student (Gay, 2010, p. 26, emphasis in original) seeing their strengths, knowing their weaknesses, learning where it is they want to go, what it is they want to be, and refusing as far as possible to allow them to settle for low expectations if that is what circumstance has foisted upon them, all while focusing on the future while acknowledging the past. Teachers of this ilk see themselves as agents of change in students' lives, not

change-makers in and of themselves, firmly enabling the student to take the reins of their own destiny, knowing that their role is one of transient influence, filled with hope and good intentions and not necessarily ever having a finite, neatly wrapped ending.

I thought we were making progress and then he threw it all out the window with one bad decision and that caused an emotional reaction. But it's not like I didn't come back for the rest of the kids. That's sad, that's all it was. It was just sad. Who knows, a few years down the line, maybe I find out that he finished his studies while he was in jail. You know, those are pathways that people take. He has the ability to do it. We'll just see if he made the choice. (Reuben)

So, when I see my kids graduate, you know, I've got them all on my wall there since I've been here. But that's my main focus, to see these kids to graduation. (Corey)

The ability to cope with, reconcile and utilise these contradictory elements of the phenomenon is a key characteristic for effective teachers. Capabilities and motivational variables that are determinants of long-term success in culturally different classrooms will be delineated in the next section.

#### *6.4.1. Capabilities and motivation*

This section presents an exploration of the study's results in relation to three Sub-Research Questions with the following themes: predictors for long-term success; the relationship between causal attribution, motivation and cultural competence; and, leveraging the relationship.

##### *6.4.1.1. Predictors for long-term success*

*Sub-Research Question 1:* What factors, such as prerequisite skills, knowledge and understanding, are the best predictors for the long-term success of teachers in classrooms of Aboriginal students?

As has been discussed, long-term success in teaching Aboriginal students is predicated on a distinct set of skills, knowledge and personal characteristics possessed by teachers, along with a deep understanding of the cultural landscape inhabited by students. This depth of understanding, coupled with a deep commitment to connectedness, enables a teacher to face the challenges that arise in navigating the 'third space', also termed the Cultural Interface, that place of potentially friction-inducing uncertainty where two cultures meet (Nakata, 2007), to seek support as needed and to return each morning with a positive, service-oriented attitude. Effective teachers have relinquished unhelpful beliefs, such as deficit thinking, racial stereotypes and low expectations, and instead replaced these with a strengths-based focus, an accurate and preferably firsthand knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds and community lifeworld, and high expectations while yet respecting the academic values and community priorities expressed by the students, their parents and community members.

Localised knowledge of Aboriginal culture and students' home communities is pertinent to building trust, developing respectful relationships with parents and community members and, more crucially, connecting with students. A willingness to learn and to seek support from experts, including deferring to Aboriginal colleagues and receiving feedback through consultation processes and community visits, is essential for developing culturally congruent practices and sufficient depth of knowledge to embody the first standard of the Australian Professional Teaching Standards: *Know your students and how they learn* (AITSL, 2015). Humility, forgiveness of oneself and others, and respect for community priorities and responsibilities are important for coping with the unexpected, moving past disappointments and sadness, and applying a second chances policy. Experience and immersion in other cultures, cultural awareness training, and qualifications or training in teaching English as an additional language or dialect are fundamental. Classroom management improves when teachers can distinguish a language barrier (Cousik, 2015) from cultural mores or health and other issues, as shown in the following quote, which is also representative of accessing peer support:

What the problem was, he was not understanding a word on that page. So, he was trying, and when he got criticised in front of everyone – which was simply, “You’ve done nothing,” – bang, his response was, “I’ve had enough,” and went off. I found out what the problem was, his teacher talked to him, we had time, she then guided him through the homework. He completed it all, but it was different words that he just had no idea what they meant, so that was stopping him dead. Stopping is what they do, and you’re lucky they don’t then try to disrupt because they’re bored and can’t cope ... You know, that’s what happens. So that’s what I meant by knowing them and knowing what the problem may be. (Max)

Without possessing the abovementioned skills, knowledge and understanding, teachers are unable to interpret student behaviour within the prism of cultural backgrounds, community responsibility and cultural mores. They cannot bridge the “*canyon*” (Woodrow) of cultural difference. In this situation, the classroom becomes a site of cultural dissonance (Brace, 2011, p. 39) where misunderstandings, miscommunications and mistakes can be rife. However, when in possession of the factors that are supportive of long-term success, teachers are better able to connect with students, act with compassion and apply a range of culturally responsive strategies in the classroom. The process of learning about, and from, Aboriginal students in turn motivates teachers to help them.

#### 6.4.1.2. Relationship between causal attribution, motivation and cultural competence

*Sub-Research Question 2:* What relationship exists, if any, between causal attribution, motivational variables and attainment of cultural competence?

Life consists of experiences; some major and transformative, others so minor as to be unmemorable. The act of engaging in life is akin to a process of learning or in the words of Henry Ford, “All life is experience, and one level is exchanged for another only when its lesson is learned” (Ford, 1925, as cited in Ford, 2020). Each event, incident or circumstance may have an influence on an individual that leads them to consider the question, *Why*. The act of seeking to understand or interpret reasons for an event or incident is termed causal attribution. Attribution, also known as causal ascription, is in its simplest form the designation of a cause to explain how an event, incident or circumstance came to occur (Brace, 2011; Yang & Montgomery, 2011). Causal attribution is used by individuals to comprehend and make sense of their world.

Attribution theory, outlined in Chapter 4 and briefly reprised below, is in essence a theoretical construct to explain behavioural choice, effects and consequences. Although literature offers a range of explanations for events related to human behaviours (Heider, 1944; Weiner, 2008), Heider grouped explanations for events into two attribution categories: internal (personal) and external (situational). When directed at the behaviour of others, in educational contexts specifically, an internal (personal) attribution for disruptive behaviour can result in teachers applying deficit thinking, lowering their expectations and blaming students for “internal deficiencies or shortcomings” (Constantine & Sue, 2006, as cited in Brace, 2011, p. 27). This can lead to labelling (Burgess, 2017; Marias, 2016) which, relevant to Aboriginal people, can simplify the complexity of contextual factors and exclude analysis of “other identity positions that may more accurately reflect their interests, strengths and concerns” (Burgess, 2017, p. 742). When teachers resist applying “maladaptive” attributions, and instead focus on a strengths-based approach with “instrumental” (Yang & Montgomery, 2011, p. 14) or “adaptive” attributions (Dong et al., 2013), they are incorporating their contextual knowledge of students to create and maintain learning environments that support students’ wellbeing.

A study investigating the causal attributions of 156 North American college students attending foreign language classes by Dong et al. (2013) found multiple attributions for success or failure were common. As described in Chapter 2, the attribution theory developed by Weiner (1985) categorised causal ascription into three causal dimensions: locus of causality (internal or external); stability (stable or variable over time); and controllability (can or cannot be controlled) (Dong et al., 2013, p. 1588). When the students in the abovementioned study made multiple causal attributions across these three dimensions (p. 1597), they were using functional attributions for success and failure, that is, the dimensions were internal and personally controllable, such as effort (p. 1599). Dong et al. (2013) noted that the typically Western self-enhancement pattern of attributing external causes for failure was not apparent in their study; instead self-critical attributions were used, but results did provide support for researchers to “focus more on causal dimensions as opposed to causal ascriptions” (p. 1599).

Causal attribution, motivation and cultural competence are interwoven conceptually, in the sense that all relate to an individual's cognitive rationalisation of their lifeworld in the way they explain and comprehend the everyday ordinariness occurring around them, and thus can directly affect that individual's behaviour and attitudes and their responses to others. Cultural competence requires the personal characteristics of tolerance, self-awareness and reflexivity, and a willingness to learn (Brace, 2011), attitudes amply demonstrated by teachers in this study. However, unlike the study by Dong et al. (2013) above, teachers in this study also revealed mainly self-enhancement patterns of attribution.

When teachers viewed classroom incidents through the causal dimensions of external, personally controllable and unstable, and thus changeable, they took action. In the following example, teacher Brad recognises that disruptions in group work are caused by the fraught dynamic between different communities and therefore he seeks support from *outside* the classroom in order to regain personal control over what occurs *inside* the classroom. Self-enhancement patterns of attribution, and a whole-school approach (see Chapter 5 Results, particularly section 5.4.1. Culturally responsive leadership), enable teachers to adopt a reflective approach for developing strategies, often with peers, which lessens the occurrence of student labelling or blame.

Peer support's brilliant. ... As an individual teacher, most of the time you can't do group work because it needs a certain amount of maturity for students to be able to cope as individual groups and there's not a huge amount of trust when it comes to group work. So very quickly you'll have disruption from within groups whereas if you've got someone [i.e., Teacher Assistant, 'Gappy'] who's mature and proactive working with a small group, it tends to work a lot better. (Brad)

The recommendation by Yang and Montgomery (2011) that future research should seek to "determine the causal-comparative effect of causal attribution ... on cultural competence" (p. 15) was influential for developing this study's research focus, particularly that of understanding the relationship between attribution and cultural competence. That a relationship exists is evident in literature (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2012; Brace, 2011) as is the interconnectivity of attribution and cultural competence. However, in the specific educational context of this study, an understanding of this relationship and teachers' ability to leverage this relationship has the potential not only to improve teachers' experience of classrooms of cultural difference but also to improve the learning experience of students and, in casting a wider net of potential influence, lead to the fulfillment of community aspirations.

So how did the participants in the study perceive the individuals in their classes? In this study, insights into teachers' attributions were gleaned from the experiential detail of their stories. In their own words, they explained the causes of classroom incidents. Analysis of the data revealed an overwhelmingly positive attitude toward students, even those whose behavioural choices led to tension, stress or discomfort for teachers. As literature indicates, attributions have the capacity to

influence a teacher's attitude toward students (Graham et al., 1995; Mander, 2012; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; McQuade, 1992; Reyna & Weiner, 2001; Richmond & Smith, 2012; Rubie-Davies & Peterson, 2016; Rudolph et al., 2004; Sullivan et al., 2014). In this study, analysis determined whether teachers viewed student behaviour as being caused by internal or situational triggers. In addition, in their attributions, as in the example above, the researcher sought to determine whether teachers considered students to be fully responsible for their actions, or acknowledged other aspects within this context, extraneous to the students as persons, that needed to be considered.

Maladaptive thought processes, briefly described above, were not apparent and the labeling of students by participants did not occur in research processes, such as when teachers were observed in the classroom and in focus groups. This was notable, as student labeling may be practiced by teachers between peers as a warning of potential classroom management issues (Rogers, 2003, p. 8) and are indicative of deficit thinking. This practice was not evident among the studied cohort in the collected data. The researcher theorises that this was because the School was unusually cohesive in the way it approached Aboriginal Education. Over time, the Principal had established a suite of culturally responsive practices to ensure Aboriginal students would not experience, as far as possible from a policy and staffing perspective, any low expectations, discriminatory or deficit thinking attitudes from staff. This whole-school approach will be further discussed below (Section 6.5.1.3. Leveraging the relationship). Therefore, analysis focused on causal attributions applied by teachers in relation to their pedagogical practice and in perceptions of their capability when teaching in culturally different classrooms.

Causal attribution has the capacity to empower individuals and promote a proactive stance when the locus of causality is perceived to be within their personal control, and therefore capable of being altered. This attribution enhances a sense of personal control in individuals leading to heightened self-efficacy. Alternately, attribution has the potential to curtail positive actions and lead to a negative state of mind when the situation is perceived as outside an individual's control and permanent, resulting in reduced self-efficacy. Therefore, the causal attribution used by teachers to explain incidents or events in the classroom matters.

Motivation and emotion are interrelated with causal attribution, and both have the capacity to influence an individual's behaviour and response to incidents (Weiner, 1985). Motivation is guided by expectation and value, or effect (Weiner, 1985; Yang & Montgomery, 2011), which in turn influences self-efficacy, also linked to causal attribution (Yang & Montgomery, 2011). These aspects of the human experience are critical for the classroom, and operate strongly within the teacher-student relationship as *how* teachers think about Aboriginal students will have an impact on their feelings regarding incidents in the classroom, and subsequent actions.



The three concepts of causal attribution, motivational influence and cultural competence are intrinsically linked within a teacher's response to students in the classroom. In a metaphorical way, these concepts overlap like waves upon the beach forming a constantly reiterative interrelationship. This relationship will be discussed further, but at its core, there is a central space in which all three intersect representing a deeply embedded place within the teacher's psyche that brings together: consideration of past and present situational influences on the Aboriginal student, the inner motivational influences that prompt the teacher's drive for experiencing the phenomenon, and the level of competence developed for effective cross-cultural communication, particularly in culturally different classrooms.

When interpreted within the framework of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, this relationship can be seen to contribute toward the first standard, that of *knowing* students (AITSL, 2020a). Self-efficacy is achieved through knowledge of oneself. This cognitive accomplishment is inherent in the journey toward cultural competence wherein acknowledging and recognising one's own cultural worldview and the raft of biases, assumptions or stereotypes that have been consciously or unconsciously adopted in its development, all form a key part of the process. Self-awareness and its pursuant self-efficacy contribute to interactions based on equity, appreciation and respect.

Further to self-efficacy and knowing the students, a teacher must also develop a deep understanding of the context from which students arrive, and draw from this in the classroom. Without this contextual knowledge, a teacher is unable to reference the students' prior knowledge, cultural roles, strengths and capabilities in the curriculum, nor build genuine moments of learning from each other, nor enact the 'deep listening' required for meaningful consultation with community members. Only through contextual knowledge are teachers able to initiate authentic relationships and develop *connectedness* with Aboriginal students, their parents and caregivers, and community.

Conversely, teachers may have consideration for the students' backgrounds yet not attain a proficient level of cultural competence. They may feel compassion for students but respond by lowering their expectations, in which case their pedagogical practice is at odds with quality teaching (AITSL, 2020a; Halsey, 2018; Llewellyn et al., 2018). Effective teachers maintain high expectations for all students. For teachers less advanced on the cultural competence continuum, whose motivations are high to serve the needs of students, possibly viewing, as study participant Colleen did, their involvement in Aboriginal Education as a vocation, leading to improvements to cultural awareness that can be attained by actively pursuing professional development and learning opportunities, including accompanying students on excursions and community visits (Cousik, 2015). Teachers who adopt a proactive stance in these matters may well be on their way toward cultural competence.

By considering the contextual background of students and reflecting critically on what occurs in the classroom, teachers begin to ascribe causes for situations and behaviour that are adaptive and instrumental in nature. In this way, the teacher's understanding and use of causal attribution enhances their journey toward cultural competence, motivation drives their capacity for resilience and forgiveness, and self-efficacy contributes toward persistence in their pursuit of connectedness despite perceived failures. In all these circumstances, across the cultural competence continuum, however, there is a need for mentoring of teachers by others. Consistent within their voices, participants in the study reported the value of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peers as mentors, and of subject-matter experts and gatekeepers in the community for translating or interpreting situations and culture for the benefit of the teachers and consequently, of the students.

In the following quote, Rueben revealed several key characteristics and attitudes required for cultural competence (Bainbridge et al., 2015; Perso, 2012). His words demonstrate humility and a willingness to learn, a clear sense of self-efficacy, and motivation to serve the needs of students first. He proactively developed his skills and, despite some emotional turmoil resulting from his experience of the phenomenon as revealed in other earlier quotes, Rueben maintained his commitment to Aboriginal Education, amid successes and failures.

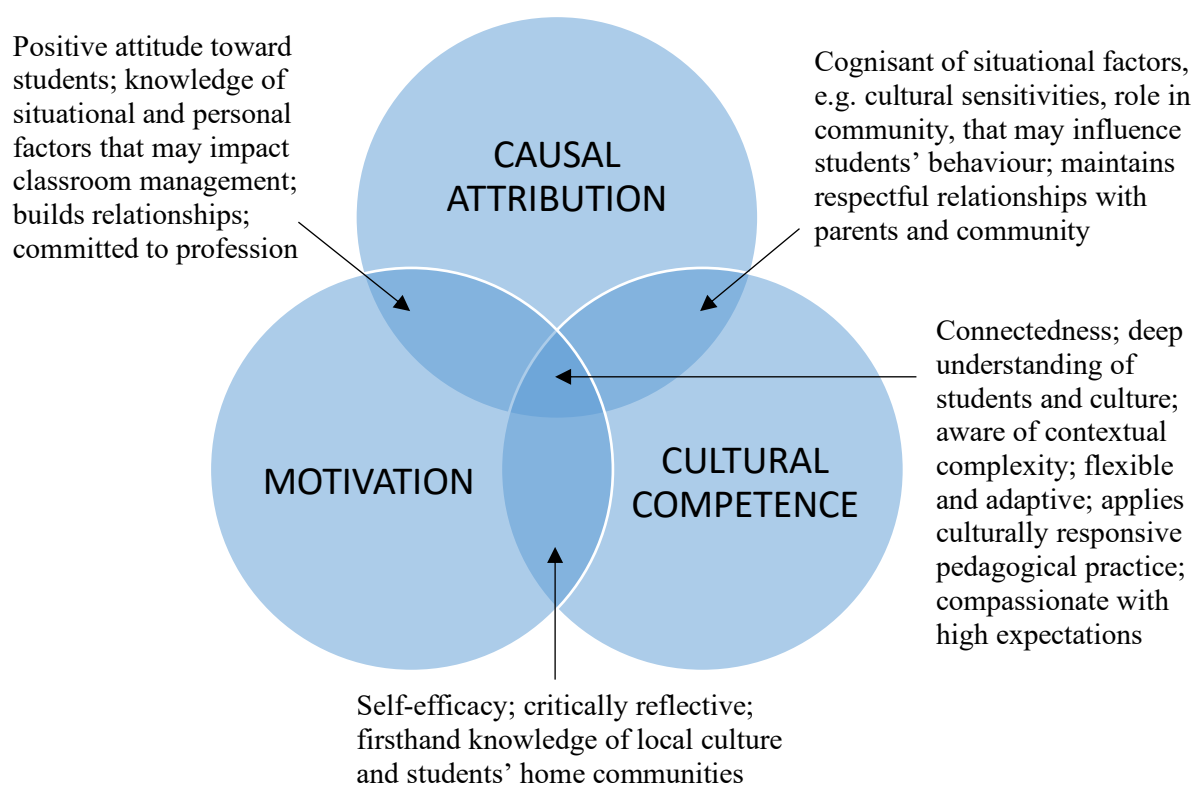
I don't know that a person is anything more than experiences and skills. So, I'm gonna take from it that I've had a bunch of good experiences, I've had some bad ones, and I've developed skills to either compensate for my deficiencies or to pursue my interests, and I'll just continue to use those skills wherever I go next. ... Like, it's not about what *I* get out of it. I came to teach Indigenous kids because I wanted *them* to get something out of it. And some of them did.  
(Reuben)

In the voices of participants, as with Rueben's words above, there was a raft of contributing factors for every challenging situation or incident. However, beneath the surface veneer of phenomenal complexity, it was clear there exists a single yet multi-branched cohesivity at work. Firstly, the requirement for teachers to consider deeply the cause of a student's behaviour taking into account their contextual understanding and knowledge of the student, then secondly, to have the motivation and resilience, driven by *connectedness*, to remain in the situation, and to work through the complexity towards a culturally appropriate solution or resolution. And lastly, connectedness and the process of working through the issue or situation was achieved as a result of, and in direct line with, the teachers' level of cultural competence and their sense of self-efficacy in culturally different classrooms.

In short, teachers had to be confident and have compassion for, and belief in, the students and to project this confidence and belief in all teacher-student interactions, in order to return daily to the joys

and sadness, hopes and disappointment, and the occasional chaos of the external contributing factors at play within classroom dynamics. When teachers take a proactive stance, show forgiveness, make efforts to build relationships and undertake community consultation, to list a mere few of the personal characteristics and pedagogical practices of effective teachers, the three concepts of causal attribution, motivation and cultural competence are evident.

These three concepts are interrelated and all three must exist in the teacher, operating within an almost constant feedback loop, in order for positive – perhaps one might say, the best – outcomes to occur for the student, academically and socially. There is a relationship between these three concepts, as depicted in the diagram below (Figure 5).



*Figure 5. Relationship between causal attribution, motivation and cultural competence*

**Causal attribution:** a specific approach to the compassionate classroom management of students. Teachers in the study had an understanding that external factors may be involved in the behaviours enacted by students in the classroom and did not attribute blame but worked constructively toward culturally responsive solutions or resolution. In order to move through challenging situations with empathy and pedagogical tact (Gay, 2010; van Manen, 2016), teachers must have a confident sense of their own professional self, their role and capabilities, and a firm belief in the students' worth in order

to act with decisiveness. Teachers with low self-efficacy, who do not believe they can influence a situation, who believe nothing can change, that is, that the situation is outside their personal control, bring deficit thinking into the classroom and repeat past discriminatory patterns. The opposite involves teachers who have high expectations, who think that what happens in the classroom is within their personal control and capable of being altered, and who believe in their students. There was evidence of these attributes in the voices of teachers who participated in the study. They were cognisant of the complexity of reality for Aboriginal students yet hoped to exert, in some small way, a positive influence on their future pathways.

**Motivation:** an innermost, intrinsic motivational influence that drives teachers to take a proactive stance in connecting with students and their community. Teachers in the study saw their role as a vocation, a service-oriented profession and yearned to contribute productively to the future pathways of students, an attitude evident in the words of Margaret, Tania, Gil and Rueben, among others. Teachers were strongly motivated to continue despite some perceived lack of success, academically or in classroom management. High levels of pedagogical skill and peer support assisted teachers to maintain their internal motivation. Without these whole-school support structures, such as mentoring, professional learning communities, restorative practices and community consultation, teachers do not ‘make it’. Alternatively, despite access to such support, teachers may cling to culturally incongruent practices or deficit thinking. This circumstance was evident when participants referred to former staff who had been ineffective in their classroom management or became demotivated and left the School. Longevity as teachers in Aboriginal Education required both care and compassion for one’s students, and for oneself.

**Cultural competence:** being in possession of a theoretical and academic knowledge of the principles for competence in a diverse educational environment. Such knowledge must be strongly present in the individual teacher in order for their teaching practice, and the building of positive yet robust teacher-student relationships, to be successful. Teachers must have a genuine respect for, and interest in, the students. This aspect of quality teaching has been covered earlier (see section 6.4.3. Pathways to cultural competence) and arrives with a single caveat from this research, in the words of study participant Prue: “They can tell when you’re being genuine.” Authenticity and the creation of culturally safe, secure and respectful learning environments are essential for enhancing the (English language-based, Western, urban) capabilities of the most disadvantaged students in Australia. Aboriginal students bring many strengths to school and when the rich depth to their identity is acknowledged in the classroom, they feel respected by the school and teachers (Macdonald et al., 2018). Suffice to say, teachers who lack the motivation to improve their siting on the cultural competence continuum will not thrive in the phenomenon of a culturally different classroom nor create aspirational environments.

If the summary measure for success in schools is that a student gains an education and graduates, then it stands to reason that progressing the student toward this attainment is crucial. The question remains, *what* needs to happen in order for the student to graduate? Is there a relationship between these three concepts, listed above, that enables the pathway to this end-result to be achieved? The answer is “Yes”, the study findings show there is a relationship and by leveraging the interconnectivity of attribution, motivation and cultural competence, teachers can work towards, and even achieve, success in the classroom.

Essentially, this research question is answered in the affirmative. Yes, there is a relationship between causal attribution, motivational variables and cultural competence. Interactivity between these three concepts must be present in cross-cultural settings for learning to occur, and success to be achieved.

#### 6.4.1.3. Leveraging the relationship

*Sub-Research Question 3:* How can this relationship be leveraged to effectively develop cultural competence in teachers and non-teaching staff who are inexperienced or feeling overwhelmed by the challenges inherent in a multicultural environment?

In architecture, the keystone is of crucial importance to the formation of an arch. While not the strongest or heaviest loadbearing part of the structure, a keystone anchors the form and provides a point of strength from which all other points draw support. The keystone of teaching in cross-cultural and multicultural settings is the relationship, never more so than when teaching Aboriginal students. In this study, the teacher-student relationship has been termed more cohesively and interconnectedly as: *connectedness*, the active creation and maintenance of relationships between the teacher, student, school and community. Connectedness might be the equivalent of the keystone in the arch and is of particular cultural relevance in this context where the word ‘relationship’ pertains to deeply embedded concepts of identity, belonging and kinship.

Frequently observed and oft-voiced in this study, the advice from culturally competent teachers for peers new to the phenomenon was always to “build a relationship” (Margaret), closely followed by the adjuration to “build the trust” (Margaret), with various maxims on the theme of *time* and *effort*, that is, of putting in, and the making and taking of. In order to build a “trusting relationship” (Prue), to commit consistently to the time and effort involved, teachers required all three concepts discussed in the previous section: causal attribution, motivation and cultural competence.

For early career teachers, or teachers new to the phenomenon, the interconnecting of these three concepts may disclose a certain weakness where cultural competence intersects with motivation and causal attribution (see Figure 5). This lack of cohesivity may be due to many reasons, including: lack of confidence in their capacity to teach in culturally different classrooms; insufficient cultural

knowledge and understanding, which is a known limitation for effectiveness with Aboriginal students; and, fewer options to deploy with respect to their pedagogical practice, owing to inexperience in the profession or the specific educational setting, among others. These are challenging aspects for preservice, novice and early career teachers to overcome, with processes for encountering and addressing these issues having been examined in other research (e.g., Forrest et al., 2017; Gallavan, 2007; Kilgour, 2013).

For the purposes of the study, it is sufficient to say that inexperienced teachers must consciously question their motivations for joining the profession and the phenomenon in particular, monitor and bolster their attitudes and enthusiasm, oftentimes daily, and take steps to administer meaningful self-care regularly. Teaching is service-oriented and can be demanding physically, emotionally and psychologically (Koenig, 2014). Teachers are enacting a disservice if they cannot place students at the centre of their pedagogical practice, and embody the notions evident in this study, particularly the Principal's statement that "the classroom is the centre of the *purpose* for the educational institution being in place" (Gil).

To be effective in culturally different classrooms, most especially in classrooms comprised entirely of Aboriginal students, non-Aboriginal teachers must be proactive and forthright in grasping as soon as possible the complex realities of students' lifeworlds. This occurs through learning about local culture and students' home communities, preferably firsthand, and giving time and effort where possible to engage with students outside of the classroom. Access to support, including peer and classroom support, are essential in this endeavor, as is involvement in professional learning communities in schools or wider education fraternity.

Research in schools and universities has evaluated teacher education programs and made recommendations for assisting new or inexperienced teachers to grow their teaching practice, at home or abroad (Buchanan et al., 2013; Cain, 2014; Jin et al., 2016; McArdle, 2010; Rowan et al., 2017). However, while this undertaking does not occur alone, some initiative on behalf of teachers is expected. In this study, the School implemented whole-school policies and processes to support graduate teachers: year-long partnership with a Buddy Teacher; peer support; classroom and learning support; and, release time for weekly confidential mentoring by former staff members (expert teachers). While these services were invaluable for some participants who had been graduate teachers in the School, their professional development did require effort on their part involving a willingness to learn and to ask for help when necessary. Early career teacher Isabelle's advice was to "Get help from other teachers."

In the study, teachers revealed the value of mentoring in their professional development and capacity to manage a complex educational environment. Research supports this finding, particularly in the

provision of mentoring by quality teachers and engagement in positive community experiences (Harslett et al., 2000; Young et al., 2018). In this way, novice or early career teachers are able to increase self-awareness and self-efficacy, to ascribe with greater accuracy multiple causes to incidents that will inevitably occur in the classroom, and to deliver a culturally responsive curriculum. All of these characteristics and capabilities drive the development and maintenance of connectedness, the keystone of teaching effectively in culturally different classrooms.

#### 6.4.2. *Forged in fire: the making of good teachers*

In all educational contexts, if I may reach for metaphor here and throw a wide net, every teacher will encounter situations for which their knowledge and skills are insufficiently honed. This circumstance can be likened to having waded out amongst the mangroves at low tide only to realise that the incoming waves, though cooling, have brought with them the lurking danger of crocodiles. In that moment, the teacher experiences what van Manen (2016, p. 58) refers to as the “temporal immediacy” when instant action is required with no time to “permit a reflective stepping back” in order to take stock, gather their thoughts and determine rationally how best to respond. Rather, they must act quickly and decisively, particularly if the safety of students or staff hangs in the balance. As described in earlier chapters, teaching is a complex and demanding profession. Excellence in the classroom, again drawing from van Manen (2016, p. 106), occurs when the teacher possesses “pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact”, that is, the capacity to combine informed insights with sensitive praxis or actions, tailored to the situation at hand. Because of the ever-changing and dynamic nature of classrooms, teachers cannot precisely *know what to do* in every circumstance nor, as the study’s participants attested, can they predict or pre-empt these disconcerting occurrences. The participants could only respond intuitively, on the instant, with their existing skills then later, reflect and seek support, mentoring or professional development as necessary. The School’s provision of multiple avenues of support was essential for the participants’ sense of personal control because each reported accessing different forms of support as individual preference and circumstance required. Being able to manage the unexpected served to increase their confidence and assurance in readiness for the next unforeseeable incident. In this way, the study’s participants engaged in a “praxis-theory-praxis” cycle (van Manen, 2016, p. 125) that they described as trial and error, or *trial by fire*, but which clearly, in the experiential detail of their stories, allowed them to move beyond that instant’s shock, surprise or confusion and to purposefully and safely take action to resolve the situation.

Having addressed the study’s three Sub-Research Questions in earlier sections, the central Research Question is answered in the next section with a description of the causal attribution of non-Aboriginal teachers in classrooms of cultural difference, and the potential for applying self-enhancement patterns of causal attribution to increase a sense of personal control and self-efficacy in teachers who are embarking on their own journey toward cultural competence.

#### 6.4.2.1. Causal attributes for cultural competence

*Central Research Question:* What are the causal attributes for cultural competence in teachers and boarding staff working effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?

Teachers in the study universally condemned deficit thinking. If they used the term at all, or spoke negatively of behaviour in the classroom, this was expressed in relation to a lack of provision of education at an appropriate level and quality in students' home communities or to a community issue, for example, community role models and parenting. Research has acknowledged that teachers are at risk of attributing blame to a student for disruptive, aggressive or violent behaviour (Graham et al., 1995; Reyna & Weiner, 2001; Sullivan et al., 2014; Yang & Montgomery, 2011), which in turn affects their relationship with, and beliefs about, the student. Effective teachers develop the capacity to ascribe multiple causes to an incident and display a consistently positive and affirming attitude toward all students, regardless of past behaviour, thereby demonstrating adaptive causal attributions in interpersonal settings. In the study, teachers considered trusting relationships and connectedness to be foremost for improving their effectiveness. Given that maladaptive causal attributions deliver the opposite effect, reducing the likelihood of strong teacher-student relationships, a deeper exploration of intrapersonal causal attributions for cultural competence is warranted.

Teachers expressed themselves in a range of ways when discussing concepts of self-efficacy, cultural competence and effectiveness, many examples of which were included in the previous chapter. This supported other research that has demonstrated when teachers make intrapersonal causal attributions that are "internal, personal and stable attributions" (Weiner, 2000, as cited in Yang & Montgomery, 2011, pp. 3-4), they are best positioned to improve their siting on the cultural competence continuum. Similarly, in the present study, teachers expressed beliefs that their cultural competence capabilities were derived from internal, personally controllable and stable sources. Consequently, they adopted the attitude that most challenges could be managed with an application of effort, in concert with others, and voiced positive feelings such as pride, satisfaction and high self-esteem as a result. There was no indication of guilt or shame in their voices; in fact, the situation was quite the opposite, which would otherwise have been apparent if teachers believed that their effectiveness in a culturally different classroom was reliant on unstable, uncontrollable and external causes.

Furthermore, the use of adaptive causal attributions to teachers' own praxis and knowledge may have disposed them to be making multiple adaptive attributions regarding students' behaviour. If at any time, teachers had relinquished this consciously constructed, informed understanding of themselves and of the complex realities accompanying students into the classroom, they may not have been able to maintain such a strengths-focused, student-centred attitude. From evidence supplied in participants' voices, it is accurate to assume that teachers in multicultural classrooms will doubtless experience



confronting moments that prompt them to seek self-care and support from others. Feelings of occasional despair at the vastness of the ‘big picture’ and metaphorical sinkholes are normal when one attempts to “walk those two worlds” (Prue).

You can’t always be in your comfort zone. Stories? You have them forever! I don’t even need to embellish this stuff. ... Teaching, you never see the fruits of your labours. But one day somewhere, the penny might drop, and you don’t do it for fame and fortune. Layer upon layer, little bit by little bit. Not everyone’s gonna [*sic*] make it and you don’t know who that will be. (Woodrow)

The fact that the unique complexity of the phenomenon did not deter participants from maintaining a belief in both themselves and the students speaks volumes to the commitment, persistence and resilience required of teachers in culturally different classrooms. The importance of making adaptive causal attributions for cultural competence and student behaviour cannot be understated.

## 6.5. Summary

While graduate teacher qualifications expose teachers to an overview of issues surrounding cultural awareness, equity and diversity, and cultural safety and security, the need for a deeper level of commitment to these concepts is vital if they intend to contribute meaningfully to Aboriginal Education (Llewellyn et al., 2018; Rowan et al., 2017; Vass, 2018). This need extends beyond good teaching. Teachers must possess a deep commitment to students in order to advance their own skills, knowledge and understanding to a sufficient depth, such that a realistic comprehension of the local cultural and community fabric and structure is achieved. This deep understanding recognises and respects students’ cultural lifeworlds, is underpinned by firsthand experience in students’ home communities, and is authentically replicated in words and deeds in the classroom. Teachers in the complex multicultural context of today’s schools, particularly in Aboriginal Education, must accept that their profession and the outward expression of cultural competence will always be an ongoing journey, that there is no point at which one can say, ‘I know it all.’

Quality teaching, that is, the praxis and knowledge grounded in culturally relevant philosophical and pedagogical frameworks, must be complemented by a set of essential skills, understandings and characteristics conducive to teaching Aboriginal students effectively. Attainment of several factors known to influence the acquisition of cultural competence, coupled with the adoption of service-oriented motivations of both an intrinsic and extrinsic locus, were seen to be extremely useful for the cultivation of teacher-student relationships in the study. While it is unarguable that best practice will always be applicable in Aboriginal Education, the distinct requirements of this complex cultural learning environment requires something more: a teacher’s deep commitment to connectedness.

Connectedness involves long-term effort, a proactive stance, a second chances policy, respectful relationships and trust. It requires a culturally responsive, whole-school approach with layers of accessible support, including classroom, peer and community support. It is a belief, a vocation and a sentiment aptly and concisely echoed in the following statement, which bears repeating:

What you have to do is, you have to put the classroom as the focus of the school. If the classroom is the focus of the school, therefore you have to put into place a Circle of Support or a Circle of Influence that I call it, because we are *influencing*. All the people who are not teaching in that class are *influencing the outcome*, by being available and by offering support. (Gil)

This chapter concludes the presentation and discussion of the study data, having presented the findings within the unique context of the research site, namely a boarding school in northern Australia, with further implications for other multicultural education contexts. Issues for teachers to consider on commencing their professional careers in Aboriginal Education, and for those currently completing preservice teacher training, were described. Key issues arising from the study that would benefit from further research will be highlighted in the next chapter, in conjunction with a summary of the limitations.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



Northern Australian coastline  
Photo © Megan Spiers

# Chapter 7: Review and Conclusions

*It's not necessarily about the complexity of the school. It's about the complexity of people. ... I don't think the school itself is that complex. Kids are in classes, you know. Teach the kids, be a good teacher. That shouldn't be hard. (Reuben)*

The previous chapter addressed the findings within the unique context of the research site and concluded the study. Implications for multicultural education, generally, were described and suggestions made regarding issues for consideration by teachers commencing their professional careers in Aboriginal Education, and those currently completing preservice teacher training. This chapter reviews and concludes the study, reflects on the original aims and intentions, and discusses these in terms of the new findings and significance to this quite specific field of education. The chapter concludes with a focus on the limitations of the study, including reference to personal limitations, followed by details of implications for future research. It should be evident to the reader that this study makes an original contribution to the field of Aboriginal Education in providing teachers' perspectives on their journey towards cultural competence in boarding school classrooms.

## 7.1. Significance of findings

This section describes the significance of the findings in relation to the research questions and the study's original contribution to scholarly knowledge in Aboriginal Education.

### 7.1.1. Research questions

In brief, the research sought to discover the causal attributes and motivations of culturally competent teachers and to enunciate what essential skills, knowledge and understanding are required in order to improve the development of cultural competence in teachers and boarding staff new to the phenomenon. An adaptive research approach was applied, using phenomenological and ethnographic methods, to collect and analyse data that would reveal the voiced articulation of teachers recounting their journey toward cultural competence, including their lived experience of the phenomenon. The relationship between causal attribution, motivation and cultural competence was examined and found to be essential for enhancing teacher-student connectedness and pedagogical effectiveness in classrooms of cultural difference.

The study focused chiefly on the central Research Question:

What are the causal attributes for cultural competence in teachers and boarding staff (paraprofessionals) working effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?

Designed to inform the Research Question, the following sub-questions enhanced the capacity for contextual layers of insight and rich description of the phenomenon to be gained:

*Sub-Research Question 1:* What factors, such as prerequisite skills, knowledge and understanding, are the best predictors for the long-term success of teachers in classrooms of Aboriginal students?

*Sub-Research Question 2:* What relationship exists, if any, between causal attribution, motivational variables and attainment of cultural competence?

*Sub-Research Question 3:* How can this relationship be leveraged to effectively develop cultural competence in teachers and non-teaching staff who are inexperienced or feeling overwhelmed by the challenges inherent in a multicultural environment?

The research explored the phenomenon in two ways, firstly by focusing on teachers' actions and attitudes that had assisted in their acquisition of advanced levels of cultural competence and secondly, by reviewing their strategies for cross-cultural communication. Outcomes were intended to inform teachers new to the phenomenon and preservice teachers with an interest in Aboriginal Education and contribute towards improving their effectiveness in culturally different classrooms.

### *7.1.2. Original contribution to research*

In identifying the study's original contribution to research, this section articulates how the study answered the research questions, after outlining the validity of its original contribution to the current body of scholarly knowledge in the field of Aboriginal Education. Originality can be demonstrated in two ways: "Either it will report 'the discovery of new facts', or it will display 'the exercise of independent critical power', or both" (Dunleavy, 2003, p. 27). This thesis achieves the fulfillment of both, in revealing new facts, that is, the exploration of a unique educational setting, and in exercising critical power through fully cognising the teachers' experience of the phenomenon in an erudite and empathetic manner enriched with personal insight.

Originality is often drawn from the constitutive process of thinking and writing (Dunleavy, 2003). In the case of the current study, this necessitated a willingness to step inside the conceptual discomfort of the research context, and to walk amongst its somewhat confronting complexity. Boarding schools in the Northern Territory, as a construct, have their footings in outdated philosophies of deficit, discrimination and cultural deprivation (Benveniste, Disbray, et al., 2014; Engel et al., 2012; Sommerlad, 1976) yet some have metamorphosed in recent years into high performing institutions of international reach (Lynch et al., 2015) having sustained reciprocal partnerships with remote communities. Thus, immersion in the research site afforded a window into the workings of a boarding

school that still retained connections to historical roots but valued its dynamic cultural present. For the researcher, it was a privilege to hear stories of hope and failure, disappointment of connection tempered with narratives of transformation, that revealed some small truths about the nature of those teachers who prevail with passion undimmed in classrooms of cultural difference.

The interpretivist perspective adopted in the study focused necessarily on knowledge production that was “value relative” (Greene, 2010, p. 71), and reflective of the values held by the researcher. The resulting inductive theory was heavily grounded in data generated by context-specific fieldwork, in which immersive research processes were utilised. Normative values are embedded, as is the pluralistic nature of participants’ lived experience (Greene, 2010). By adopting an interpretivist approach, the study has produced a rich description and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in preference to judgements or evaluations (Bernstein, 1976, as cited in Greene, 2010, p. 71).

In this way, the study makes an original contribution to the body of knowledge in the field of Aboriginal Education by describing the lived experience of non-Aboriginal teachers and non-teaching staff in a boarding school in northern Australia. In demonstrating a relationship between motivation, causal attribution and cultural competence, the research will assist teachers new to the complexities of teaching in multicultural classrooms to develop adaptive pedagogical practices, self-efficacy and connectedness. This will significantly improve the experiences of both the teacher and the student in a multicultural educational environment, potentially improving student educational outcomes.

The research is unique in being focused on a context that is not explored in any prevalent way in the current corpus of scholarly literature. The research setting of a boarding school in northern Australia, established with the sole function of accommodating Aboriginal students from remote communities, and later becoming a truly culturally responsive and multicultural learning environment, is not given much time or space in terms of current research in educational literature, although it is frequently discussed as a concept in government and departmental policies and reports related to improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students.

Secondly, the research found that the answer to *why* teachers gained cultural competence over time was due to the possession of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational influences. Furthermore, effectiveness in classrooms comprised wholly of Aboriginal students is firmly rooted in that deep commitment. Teachers put *time* into their efforts to acquire advanced levels of cultural competence; devoted time to learning through completing cultural awareness training and acquiring EALD qualifications; gave up personal time to visit communities, a process often requiring days of arduous travel, in order to learn about the background and lifeworld of Aboriginal students; and, volunteered in boarding, desiring to learn more about how students’ social networking and kinship relationships

worked, to know what motivated the students themselves and to understand how to work *with* them, not *to* or *against* them.

And thirdly, the research identified that the basic underpinning attribute of effective teachers was the possession of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. The intrinsic motivation of having a strong interest in contributing to Aboriginal Education caused teachers to develop proactive and culturally appropriate strategies for building and maintaining positive relationships with Aboriginal students. As relationships and rapport were forged, the research showed that teachers became more fully engaged in the phenomenon and even more motivated to work with students. In addition, teachers sought and constructed a working relationship with families, thus increasing their understanding of the diverse, rich and changing complexity of Aboriginal cultures, community aspirations and priorities.

The research revealed that, while these aspects of attitude and action may imply good teaching, it is the quality of the relationships and deep commitment to building and maintaining those relationships that really mattered. Teachers with longevity in the phenomenon gave *strict adherence* to an understanding of cultural sensitivities, enacted respectful cultural protocols in their everyday interactions with students and mirrored these beliefs and standards in their classroom practice. They showed respect for cultural mores, reflected critically on issues of concern or taboo, and expressed the necessity to be cognisant of these when developing curriculum. It was made clear to the researcher that a willingness to learn from students and community members was essential.

In summary, the research revealed participants to be flexible teachers, caring and empathetic, of different personality types and yet who, without exception, demonstrated an underlying ethos that entailed a service-oriented approach, an attitude of humility, equity and respect, a strong belief in social justice and enduring commitment to quality teaching. Underpinning these attitudes and approaches was an alertness at all times to the context, that daily changing complexity, of knowing what might have occurred on communities that may affect engagement and behaviour in the classroom, and a deep commitment not only to students themselves but also to pedagogical practices that ensured cultural safety and security in the classroom.

## 7.2. Limitations

Limitations in research are influences that the researcher cannot control, potentially placing restrictions on the methodology and conclusions. Whilst attempts were made to minimise the scope of limitations throughout the research process, there were specific limitations that impacted the research findings, and these will be clearly articulated in this section.

Limitations in the research are related to firstly, aspects of the study parameters, such as methodology, including research site and sampling, and the unique characteristics of the school environment at that

time. These potentially affected data collection and staff participation. Secondly, personal limitations such as travel constraints due to cost and geographic distance from the site, as well as difficulty in enlisting Aboriginal participants due to this geographic barrier, will also be reviewed in this section. In terms of study parameters, limitations in methodology will now be considered:

One limitation to the research was the selection of a single research site. This decision was driven chiefly by a focus on the School's unique complexity, in terms of being a boarding and Day school for a large number of remotely based Aboriginal students studying education at secondary level. The decision was hastened into effect through in-kind support provided as part of an industry engagement partnership with the researcher's supervising University. Research findings are necessarily derived from results confined to the parameters of the unique context of the School. That said, conclusions may be drawn, and implications applied to other multicultural educational settings more generally.

In terms of the research design, this is firmly embedded in the phenomenological and ethnographic traditions. As a single method qualitative inquiry, written surveys collected demographic data, and interviews and focus groups were semi-structured and conducted with open-ended questions akin to a collegial conversation. The research sought to reveal the essence of the phenomenon, that of being a non-Aboriginal teacher in classrooms comprised wholly of Aboriginal students in a boarding school. As a result, criterion sampling limited participation to teachers and boarding staff with experience of the phenomenon.

Ethnomethodology allows for a range of timeframes and varying levels of commitment in immersion. In this study, immersion did occur, but it was limited to a short-term EALD teaching role at the School, as distinct from the data collection during site visits, which also accounted for immersion time albeit of a different calibre. It was considered that the previous life history of the researcher, in teaching Aboriginal students in remote communities and living in northern Australia for an extensive portion of her life, contributed to an overall high-quality level of immersion.

A significant limitation in the study was the lack of Aboriginal voices in the study participants. The contribution of Aboriginal voices, with their distinct perspective, was clearly desirable at the commencement of the study but did not eventuate for the following reason: whilst an Aboriginal teacher and several Aboriginal boarding staff were employed by the school at the time, they were very much in demand as representatives of the Aboriginal 'voice' on a variety of local and government issues at the time. As a result, consultation fatigue was evident in their response to an invitation to participate, although representation at focus groups did occur. Limited ethnic variance in the study participants, as previously discussed in Chapter 4 Methods, was the outcome. Further research in a boarding school context may benefit from the involvement of Aboriginal teachers.



Potentially, the greatest limitation of the study was a contextual one. The School had been in existence for fifty years and was originally developed in response to Aboriginal families in remote locations wanting an equity-based secondary education. However, financial limitations in terms of the amount of government funding available for boarding students to be supported in a culturally appropriate way, meant that the School was under increasing pressure to either close or be bought by another independent school from interstate. Mention was made of this public speculation in the media in Chapter 4 Methods. Although this did not actually come to fruition during the life of the study, it meant that the teaching and boarding staff were affected by the insecurity of their positions during these times. The suspense and anxiety over the future of the School could be seen and heard in the voices of the participants, especially in the focus groups.

We've got some lovely staff. I think it's a lovely school. It's just a shame what's happened over the last few years. It's just awful. (Margaret)

This unsettled environment also resulted in a higher than usual staff turnover during the life of the research. This was detailed in Chapter 4 Methods, identifying that there was a loss of five participants from the study, four of whom had completed semi-structured interviews before they undertook new positions elsewhere. This is mentioned as a limitation of the study, and a possible threat to data collection, as the findings may have missed collecting the perspectives of other potential participants who may have had differing views to those expressed in the study. The next section of this chapter will consider the personal limitations of the study from the perspective of the researcher:

Geographic distance of the researcher from the research site meant that travel had to be planned at significant personal cost with little latitude to change dates and times if circumstances changed at the research site. Though this did not seem to be an issue at the time of collecting data, as the researcher was quite prepared for the flexibility required due to prior professional experience with the location and context, it is nonetheless an acknowledged potential limitation. There was, however, a more serious limitation as a result of the geographic barrier, and that was the difficulty in enlisting Aboriginal participants in the study. By not being more freely available to meet and share the intentions of the study, the researcher was unable to make the kinds of ongoing social and political connections with local Aboriginal teachers necessary for relationship building, which may have garnered a more extensive Aboriginal participation. This limitation also meant that the researcher was regrettably thwarted in actively recruiting participation onsite *as it suited* the Aboriginal staff member, in terms of time, commitment and relationship-establishment, rather than according to the schedule of the researcher's travel diary.

One perceived major limitation, from a multicultural perspective in the study, is that the researcher is non-Aboriginal, and this has been referred to in previous chapters. While cultural identity has been

acknowledged and explicitly confronted, the researcher has, throughout the thesis, outlined her life story and her strong and sustained interest in Aboriginal issues, culture and history as well as her extensive experience in Aboriginal Education and teaching in the Northern Territory. Thus, drawing upon firsthand understandings, the thesis has emerged from a perspective of respect and empathy.

### 7.3. Implications for further research

The implications for further research are described in this section, including connectedness, the professional and cultural challenges encountered by teachers in classrooms of Aboriginal students, evidence from the study showing that more is needed in preservice teacher preparedness, and potential research to inform government policy related to practice in Aboriginal Education.

#### 7.3.1. *Connectedness*

Described as a “trial by fire” (Reuben), the evidence of participants’ voices defined their journey toward cultural competence as being difficult but rewarding. Given that the research was firmly based in a theoretical framework drawn from phenomenology and ethnographic traditions, teachers were asked to describe their lived experience of the phenomenon, namely, that of being a non-Aboriginal teacher of Aboriginal students. Their experiences related to working in the very precise context of a boarding school in northern Australia catering for Aboriginal students from remote communities. Research findings can be applied, however, to other cross-cultural educational settings and the knowledge, beliefs and practices expressed by culturally competent teachers in the study will be pertinent to teachers more generally.

Framed in the phenomenological attitude, and related to Heidegger’s discernment of “wholeness of equipment” (Kaufer & Chemero, 2015, p. 188), that is, humans as having purposive skills or *know-how*, it was clear from the outset of the research that the study’s participants demonstrated “routine, skillful coping” (Kaufer & Chemero, 2015, p. 188) in their adaptive approach to the phenomenon. However, unlike their peers teaching in more familiar, perhaps culturally monochromatic environments, the learning environment described by participants was complex, challenging and changing and yet, ultimately transformative.

The research articulated, through rich description of the phenomenon uncovered in teachers’ voiced narratives, a clear relationship between causal attribution, motivation and cultural competence, having established the presence of all three factors in teachers with longevity in the phenomenon. Leveraging this relationship will assist teachers in multicultural classrooms more generally, and with Aboriginal students specifically, to develop and maintain positive and effective relationships such that learning can occur with cultural safety and security intact and the self-efficacy of teachers and students enhanced. While there were significant challenges inherent to the unique context of the research site,

including external factors, the findings indicate that teachers with the capacity to adopt a humble yet proactive stance and an authentic, respectful, student-centred attitude will discover themselves to be positioned advantageously in other classrooms of cultural difference.

For three years I had spoken to her. It started with a little finger high-five on the way past so no-one would see. And then it just became a little bit of eye contact, then a little bit of conversation. And then, by the time she was graduating, it was full-on conversation. And you really felt a little bit sad that we hadn't done this three years before. But that was her journey and I couldn't put my thoughts and feelings to her. She had to come to me and be open to a relationship with me.  
(Tania)

Findings from the research are applicable for all teachers in classrooms of cultural difference and all schools with a student cohort of multicultural heritages. Strategies that may provide improvements in teacher retention, particularly that of early career teachers working in the first five years of their professional experience, have the benefit of potentially improving cultural responsiveness of schools. Given that cultural competence develops over time (Cross et al., 1989; Yang & Montgomery, 2011), any improvement in teacher retention would influence classroom effectiveness through enabling long-term relationship-building opportunities. Connectedness lies at the heart of every interaction in a cross-cultural learning environment, with the capacity to enable or reduce the effectiveness of teachers. Further research on the learning effect of teachers who are present beyond their early-career years would be useful, particularly in charting the development of teacher-student relationships.

A potential Research Question could be: How do experienced teachers maintain a high-quality connection with remotely based Aboriginal families and students over time?

### *7.3.2. Challenges facing the teacher*

Challenges facing the teachers of multicultural classrooms are evident from the literature. However, the professional and cultural challenges in classrooms of Aboriginal students from remote communities is unique in and of itself and needs to be a continuing focus for government policy and protocol planning. This study has clearly demonstrated what it takes for early career teachers to become culturally competent in such settings. Results from this study could be utilised in government policies concerning the wellbeing and professional support requirements of early career teachers. This would need to be linked to additional funding for specifically targeted schools for the professional learning of staff.

A further potential Research Question could be: What school-based measures are required to ensure that teachers of Aboriginal students are well placed to cater to the specific educational and culturally transitioning needs of their students – that is, for the teacher to be culturally competent and thus able

to guide students in “walking two worlds” (Prue) – and to ensure that a strong connectedness is maintained between the teacher and remotely based families?

Alternately: What governmental policy improvements are needed to ensure that teachers of Aboriginal students are culturally competent in their practice?

### *7.3.3. Informing university teacher education / preservice teacher training*

Evidence from the study showed that more is needed in the preparation of teachers in Aboriginal Education. A recommendation drawn from the experiences of teachers in the boarding school would be that Aboriginal cultural knowledge should be more clearly articulated in preservice teacher training. The study showed that cultural competence appropriate for Aboriginal Education contexts was not possible to develop without the experience of being in classrooms of cultural difference, attending cultural awareness courses and visiting communities. And yet, even when teachers considered that they had sufficient cultural awareness, it was localised in character and did not necessarily prepare them with the Aboriginal cultural knowledge required for an interstate (or as the case may be, international) educational setting.

A potential Research Question could be: What is the level of Aboriginal cultural knowledge possessed by preservice teachers on completion of their teaching qualification, and is this adequate?

And within the degree, or more truncated job-focused training courses such as Teach for Australia, a recommendation would be that research be undertaken to discover what needs to improve in the delivery of these qualifications such that beginning teachers do actually graduate with a greater body of knowledge regarding the complexity and diversity in the cultural heritage of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders. Teachers emerging from teacher training qualifications have little likelihood of being fully equipped for cultural competence due to the compression of complex issues of equity and diversity into a single unit of study and the short duration of school-based practicums. However, within these practicums, opportunities should be sought and preferably arranged between universities and schools for those preservice teachers expressing an interest in contributing to Aboriginal Education to actively observe teachers who are considered to be competent in classrooms of cultural difference.

### *7.3.4. Informing government policy in the field of Aboriginal Education*

Improving Aboriginal Education requires an acceptance of the reality, the unique complexity and historically parlous state of inequity and disadvantage characterising much of education delivery for Aboriginal students in remote communities. Despite this, the future rests in the hands of the next

generation of school-leavers, the Year 12 graduates with university entrance scores for diverse industries and professions, which for many have no precedence in their home communities.

The interwoven dependence of health and education as social determinants is a crucial aspect of success in Aboriginal Education. When schools are not funded sufficiently for the needs of their most disadvantaged students, the risks of increased social, psychological and economic disadvantage for the students and their future families are extremely high. The perpetuation of such inequities has been visible in the failure of successive governments to close the gap between Aboriginal students' academic achievement and their non-Aboriginal peers.

Teachers are powerful agents for change. They teach with passion and commitment, often reaching to the heart of a community's aspirations for its children and working with students to enact their parents' hopes for their future. They build confidence where confusion and self-doubt have reigned and find ways to bridge that 'canyon' of cultural difference in spite of the toll this may take on them personally. The weariness and fatigue, the weight of historical guilt resting on dominant-culture shoulders, the occasional yet crushing sense of failure felt by teachers in the study, all is forgotten in the reflective stance of hindsight. When the barely literate student graduates, when the first person from a family starts university, when a student initiates an actual conversation that originated literally years before with the first tentative raise of a little finger to acknowledge the cheery 'hello'; these are the beacons of hope and light driving effective teachers forward, sustaining them through gloomier moments and brightening the many wins along the way, small and big. To do this massive work, teachers must have the support of their school, their peers and their governments, who ultimately determine if those wins continue or if their hard work is left to dwindle in the dust of inadequate funding and the ashes of uncompassionate policies.

Ultimately, the study requires the following Research Question to be answered: What is required at government level to utilise the goodwill of culturally competent teachers and link this with the educational aspirations of Aboriginal families, to produce a real improvement in the educational gap still evident in Australia in the field of Aboriginal Education?

## **7.4. Conclusion**

This dissertation presented an exploration of the journey to cultural competence as voiced by teachers and boarding staff in a boarding school in northern Australia. The research questions aimed to highlight key factors required for attaining cultural competence, including the essential skills, knowledge and characteristics acquired, developed and drawn upon by teachers who were considered effective in classrooms of cultural difference. The important interrelationship of motivation, causal attribution and cultural competence was presented in the unique context of the research site wherein

culturally responsive pedagogical practice was enacted by teachers in ways that were idiosyncratic, student-centred and strengths-focused. The need for teachers to gain a significant body of Aboriginal cultural knowledge relevant to the educational setting in which they teach was articulated, and examples of ways in which teachers utilised this knowledge in the classroom and boarding school were given and may be generally applicable in other educational settings.

Findings were discussed in the context of continuing racial discrimination in schools and historical educational inequity driven by ineffective government policies. Further research is recommended, with potential research questions identified concerning improvement in government policy associated with practice in Aboriginal Education; the level of cultural competence or knowledge in preservice teachers during their initial teacher training qualifications; and the provision of opportunities for schools to actively contribute to the professional development of teachers in becoming culturally competent.

In conclusion, the proven ability of teachers to make a difference was apparent in participants' voiced narratives. While only a fragment of these stories could be presented in this thesis, it is hoped that their experience of the phenomenon may assist other teachers to increase their pedagogical effectiveness in classrooms of cultural difference and for schools to take practical steps to enhance cultural responsiveness by engaging parents and community in meaningful ways. It is my personal hope that readers of this dissertation may gain an appreciation for the challenges, complexities and prodigious wonder inherent in Aboriginal Education and thus, to have the courage to make their own contribution to the future pathways of Australia's next leaders.

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Paperbark swamps provided the Bininj/Mungguy people with shelter, bandages and rafts  
Photo © Megan Spiers



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## Appendix A: Participant information letter

### **PhD Research Project: “Giving Back”**

Investigating causal attributes of cultural competence in teachers and boarding staff who have a direct pedagogical involvement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a boarding school in Northern Australia.

### **Researcher contact details: Ms Megan Spiers**

[researcher contact details]

School of Education, Edith Cowan University (ECU)

This research is being undertaken as part of the requirements of a PhD at Edith Cowan University.

### **Description of the research project:**

#### *Project Aims*

The research “Giving Back” focuses on understanding the relationship between causal attributes (beliefs people hold about why things happen) and teachers’ confidence in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The research aims to discover what beliefs, experience and practices are required for teachers to build positive and effective relationships with culturally different students.

The key concept underpinning this project is the statement from *A Share in the Future: The Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory*: “teachers constitute the single largest variable in student learning for which levers for improvement are available” (Wilson, 2014, p. 17). Learning happens when teachers know their students and how they learn, show a willingness to learn from students, and relate curriculum content to students’ cultural worldview and prior knowledge. However, teaching in culturally diverse classrooms can be challenging. Teachers can experience stress, burnout and compassion fatigue.

The research seeks to understand teachers’ experiences in their own words, to unpack their beliefs about diversity, cultural competence and self-efficacy, and to explore the ways they survive, thrive and make sense of challenging situations. Results have the potential to influence teacher induction programs, preservice teacher preparedness and development of culturally responsive schools, and may contribute to enhanced academic engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

#### *Selection of potential participants*

Teachers and boarding staff will be invited to participate, who have a direct pedagogical involvement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* states that effective teachers have “a powerful impact on students” and “teacher quality is the single most important in-school factor influencing student achievement” (AITSL, 2011, p. 1). Improving teacher effectiveness has a direct and positive impact on student wellbeing, their sense of belonging and belief in their own academic potential.

#### *Stages involved in the research project*

The research project has three stages:



1. Discover:
  - Survey – introduction
  - Interview, to explore your experiences and personal views
2. Experience:
  - Focus group sessions: focus on teaching and learning in culturally diverse classrooms; cultural knowledge and awareness; deeper understanding of the journey to cultural competence as experienced by teachers
  - Classroom observations: focus on teacher-student relationships
3. Reflect:
  - Interview, to reflect on your experiences and personal views

#### *Stages that participants are requested to participate in*

There are three stages of the research – discover, experience, reflect – which you are requested to participate in at various times in Semester 1 and Semester 2, 2017. Every stage will take place on-site in school hours, at times agreed with the researcher, either in your faculty, outdoors or in the classroom.

#### *Expectations and an estimate of the time involved*

At agreed times, you are expected to complete a written survey, take part in interviews, classroom observations, and contribute to focus group sessions. Schools are places of constant change so participants may enter or exit the research at any time during Semester 1 and Semester 2, 2017. However, participants are invited to be involved for at least one semester to complete all three stages.

#### *Potential discomfort or inconvenience and alternatives to participation*

Participation is not expected to cause any discomfort. You will be communicating with your peers and attending professional development activities. Some alternative points of view or approaches to teaching may be expressed. At all times, research activities are conducted in a safe space where participants work as a team and demonstrate respect, understanding and a shared willingness to learn. Inconvenience will be minimal. Activities will occur on-site at school, in work hours. The researcher will be available to respond to any problems or queries. Megan Spiers is a qualified teacher with more than fifteen years' experience working in culturally diverse environments in Australia and overseas, and understands the commitment, flexibility and resilience of teachers working in culturally different classrooms.

#### *Benefits of participation*

You will have opportunities to share your teaching knowledge, skills and experiences with a supportive audience. Your participation will contribute toward insights about the journey to cultural competence. Research findings may improve teacher induction programs and preservice teacher preparedness in Australia and overseas.

#### *Possible risks, and plans to minimise or avoid risks*

There is minimal risk to participants, professionally and personally, as all activities are conducted within the expected parameters of a teacher's responsibilities. All information provided is confidential. Research findings will be de-identified before being published in journals or shared at education-related conferences.

#### *Instructions for participants to join the research project*

Ready to participate? Great! Please sign the Informed Consent Document and return it to Megan Spiers by hand or via email [contact details].

**Confidentiality of information:***How information will be used, and who will have access*

Information will be collected, analysed and disseminated as part of the requirements of a doctoral degree. Only the researcher can access information provided by you in its original state. Any identifiable information will be removed prior to publishing. Other researchers, educational organisations and publishers may access the completed doctoral thesis via online repositories as a normal part of knowledge sharing.

*Confidentiality and privacy of information*

Participant information is confidential within the legal limits. Names and other identifiable data will be altered using pseudonyms or codes. Recordings will be deleted after transcription, or after exit of participant/s if not yet transcribed.

*Storage of data, and period of storage*

Data will be stored securely off-site in a locked office (hard copy) and password-protected cloud storage (electronic). Recordings and other data will be stored until the doctoral thesis is submitted, then electronic data will be deleted, and hard copies will be securely shredded.

The doctoral thesis will be stored in Edith Cowan University's library and online repositories for knowledge sharing purposes. No identifiable data will be included.

**Data collection involving audiovisual recording:**

Audio recording forms part of the data collection process. Only the researcher will have access to your recordings, which provide a valuable insight into personal views and experiences of participants. You may choose not to be recorded. On the Informed Consent Document, tick the option "I do not wish to be recorded."

*What will happen to recordings on completion of the project?*

You can withdraw your willingness to be recorded at any time during data collection. Recordings that have already been transcribed will not be excluded from data analysis. Appropriate permissions from the school will be obtained in advance.

**Further use of information, data and/or samples collected:**

Information and other data (de-identified) will only be used for the purposes for which it was collected.

**Results of the research study:**

As required for a doctoral degree, the researcher will share the results of the study in conference presentations and journal articles, including international platforms related to teacher education, indigenous education and cultural responsiveness. Further dissemination of findings may occur in other media, such as teacher forums and blogs; publications related to teaching and learning; and, training workshops. The doctoral thesis can be viewed via online repositories. All data is de-identified, unless consent has been obtained.

**Voluntary participation:**

Participation is voluntary. No explanation or justification is needed if you choose not to participate. Any decision not to participate, or to withdraw later after starting, will in no way affect your position at the school nor disadvantage you in any way.

**Withdrawing consent to participate:**

You are free to withdraw your consent to further involvement in the research project at any time. You can also exercise the right to withdraw information or material that has already been collected.

If you choose to leave the research or exercise your right to withdraw information, the relevant material will be excluded from data analysis except in the case of recordings that have already been transcribed for analysis.

The information that you provide is confidential and will only be used for the purposes of the research. Your identity will not be disclosed to anyone without your specific consent.

**Questions and/or further information:**

If you have any questions or require any further information about the research project, please contact Megan Spiers [contact details].

**Independent contact person:**

If you have any concerns or complaints about the research project and wish to talk to an independent person, you may contact:

Research Ethics Officer

Edith Cowan University

270 Joodalup Drive JOONDALUP WA 6027

[contact details]

**Approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee:**

This research project has been approved by the ECU Human Research Ethics Committee.

## Appendix B: Questions for interviews

The following list of questions is a guide. Interviews will be conducted in the style of a collegial conversation, nonjudgmental and nonlinear, almost rambling in style, adaptive and flexible according to themes and issues arising from participants' responses. Values of respect and confidentiality will be upheld in interviews with the overall tone being friendly and supportive. Questions in interviews are based on a list approved by ECU Human Research Ethics Committee.

### *Questions for all participants – Classroom / boarding management, positive environments*

1. How did you become confident / knowledgeable about teaching Aboriginal students?
2. What cultural experience / training / cultural awareness program have you completed?
3. Have you visited any remote communities / volunteered in boarding?
4. Can you give an example of an unexpected or confronting situation? How did you resolve the situation or issue?
5. How do you recover from stressful days or unexpected incidents in the classroom?
6. What support do you access? (please provide examples)
7. What effect did this acquired knowledge and skills have on your development as a teacher of Aboriginal students?

### *Questions for Teachers - Self-development, professional development, cultural experiences*

1. What knowledge / experiences / learning have been useful to you in becoming confident in teaching Aboriginal students? When did you begin to feel confident?
2. When incidents occur in the classroom, what support or guidance do you access? Can you give an example of an incident or concern, and the support you received?
3. What are the signs / indicators of students' engagement or disengagement with learning in the classroom? Can you give an example of how you respond to this?

### *Additional questions for staff self-identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander - Identity, self-efficacy, self-reflectiveness, critical thinking*

1. In what ways have you advised or supported non-Aboriginal teachers?
2. What does cultural competence look like in the classroom?
3. What would you say or suggest to early career teachers to help them build positive relationships with Aboriginal students?

*Questions for Experienced Teachers - recommendations for early career teachers and/or teachers who are inexperienced in teaching Aboriginal students*

1. What advice would you give to a teacher new to the school or inexperienced in teaching Aboriginal students?
2. What personal beliefs or approaches have you used that might assist other teachers to build positive relationships with Aboriginal students?
3. What does cultural competence look like to you / in the classroom / in the school?

In the interview process, other education related themes and topics may arise, including a teacher's personal philosophy of teaching or ruminations on how their pedagogical practice developed. Opinions, beliefs and ideals may be expressed. However, experiential detail is highly desirable in phenomenological research and questions will be formulated to seek the lived experience of participants through their stories, in preference to expressions of their opinions or beliefs. Staff and student names will not be used in interviews.

## Appendix C: Questions for focus groups

Focus groups will be semi-structured and nonlinear, comparable to a collegial conversation. Questions will be selected from the following list, approved by ECU Human Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Questions and the ensuing focus group discussion will be adaptive in response to themes raised by participants, in accord with phenomenological and ethnographic research processes.

### *Questions for all participants – Classroom / boarding management, positive environments*

1. How did you become confident / knowledgeable about teaching Aboriginal students?
2. What cultural experience / training / cultural awareness program have you completed?
3. Have you visited any remote communities / volunteered in boarding?
4. Can you give an example of an unexpected or confronting situation? How did you resolve the situation or issue?
5. How do you recover from stressful days or unexpected incidents in the classroom?
6. What support do you access? (may include mentoring, peer support, PD, other)
7. What effect did this acquired knowledge and skills have on your development as a teacher of Aboriginal students?

### *Questions for Teachers - Self-development, professional development, cultural experiences*

1. What processes / knowledge / experiences / learning have been useful to you in becoming confident in a cross-cultural classroom?
2. When you have issues of concern, what support or guidance do you access? Can you give an example of any issues / concerns / support you've received?
3. How do you recognise engagement or disengagement with learning in the classroom?
4. What advice would you give to a teacher new to the school or inexperienced in teaching Aboriginal students?
5. What personal beliefs or approaches have you used that might assist other teachers to build positive relationships with Aboriginal students?
6. What does cultural competence look like to you / in the classroom / in the school?

The focus group, being loosely directed by the researcher, may include a range of related themes and topics, including resource examples and anecdotes. Staff and student names will not be used in focus group discussions.

## Appendix D: Demographic information survey

This questionnaire was modified from Brace (2011) and provided to all participants.

### Demographic Information Questions

(based on Brace, 2011)

1. What is your age?  
20-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 60+
2. What is your cultural heritage? *(this question may indicate existing cultural competence / experience)*  
Indigenous      Non-Indigenous Australian / International: \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your gender? M F \_\_\_\_\_
4. How many years of experience do you have as a teacher?  
0-1 2-3 4-5 6-10 11-15 16-20 21-25 26-30 30+
5. How many years of experience do you have teaching Indigenous students?  
0-1 2-3 4-5 6-10 11-15 16-20 21-25 26-30 30+
6. How many years of experience do you have at this current boarding school?  
0-1 2-3 4-5 6-10 11-15 16-20 21+
7. Did you desire to teach Indigenous students when you began teaching at this school?  
Yes      No
8. What Year level are you currently teaching? (circle all that apply)  
Primary      Middle: 7 8 9      Secondary: 10 11 12      IB
9. What is your highest level of educational attainment?  
Bachelor Degree      Graduate Diploma      Master      PhD/Doctorate
10. Are you fluent in another language?  
Yes      No      Please list: \_\_\_\_\_
11. Have you attended any workshops / PD in multicultural education or cultural competence?  
Yes      No      How many? \_\_\_\_\_      With a focus on English language (EALD)? \_\_\_\_\_
12. Have you participated in any cultural or cross-cultural experiences?

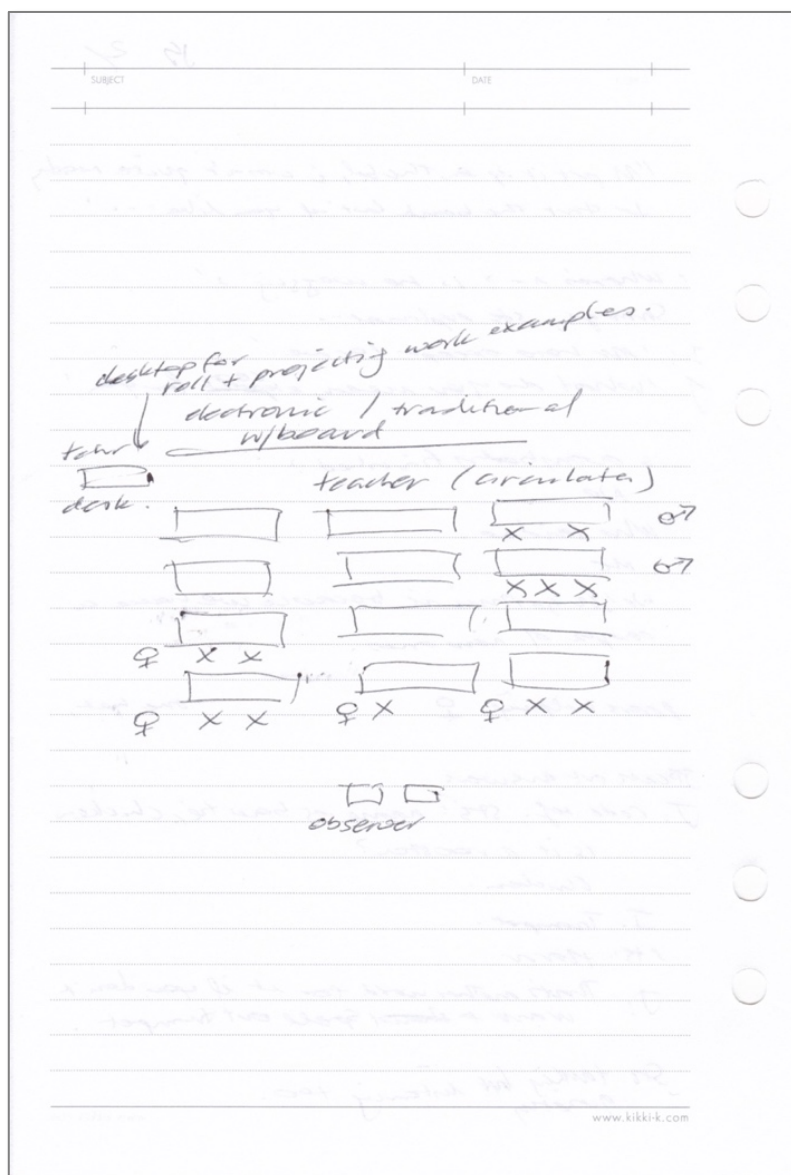
Visited remote communities	Yes	No
Worked in remote communities	Yes	No
Attended Indigenous festivals / events	Yes	No
Travelled overseas	Yes	No
International school / work / volunteer	Yes	No
Other: _____	Yes	No

Megan Spiers

Date: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

## Appendix E: Fieldnotes – classroom observation

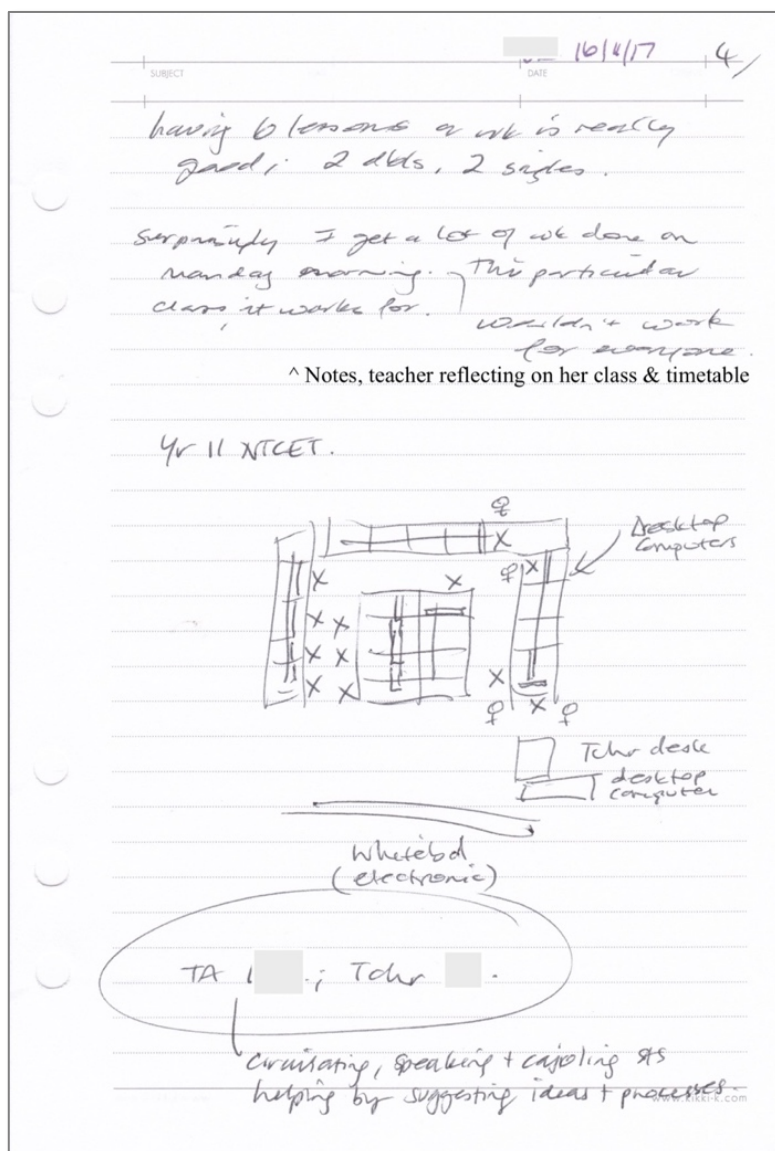
The researcher made the following illustration while observing a Year 10 Aboriginal Education Maths class. This ethnographic jotting is a form of memory device and contributed to recreating the teacher's movements and interactions with students. Jottings are an ethnographer's first impressions and observations, written as a form of mental shorthand. They serve as a mnemonic device, prompting memory or aiding the later creation of more detailed records. Containing "key words and phrases", jottings can be little more than "quickly rendered scribbles about actions and dialogue" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 29). Below, fieldwork jotting of classroom layout provides corroborative detail to enhance other recordings, ephemera and contemporaneous notes (15 November entry, M. Spiers, 2017c).





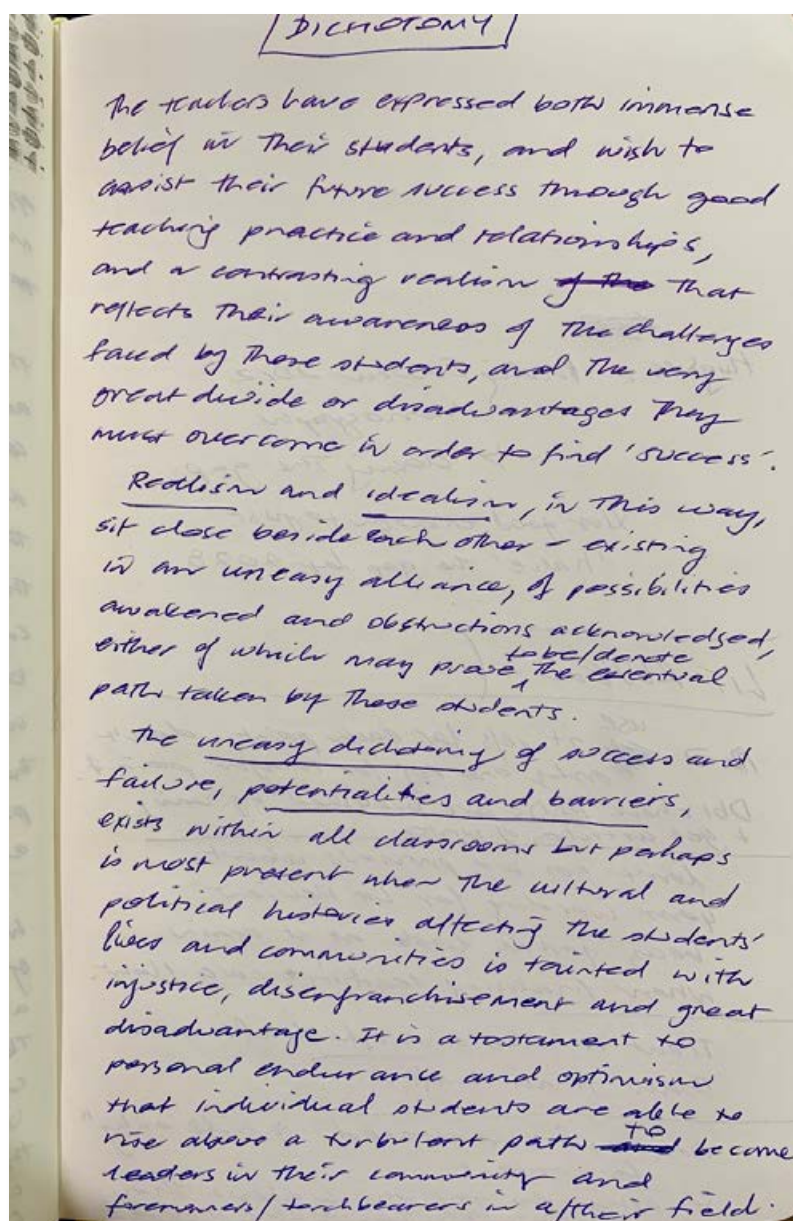
## Appendix F: Fieldnotes – classroom observation

The researcher made the following fieldnote while observing a Year 11 Aboriginal Education class. Students were completing an assessment task as part of the Northern Territory Certificate of Education and Training (NTCET). Jottings are forerunners for the preparation of rich descriptions, or “preludes” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 31), enhancing the detail of scenes and impressions that might otherwise be lost. Such notes capture the immediacy of the moment: “social scenes, recurring incidents, local expressions and terms, member’s distinctions and accounts, dialogue among those present, and his own conversations” (p. 31) comprise a fieldwork jotting. Below, phrases used by the teacher, TA tone and movement, and classroom layout are preserved. Positions of student seating, desktop computers and interactive whiteboard are recorded (16 November entry, M. Spiers, 2017c).



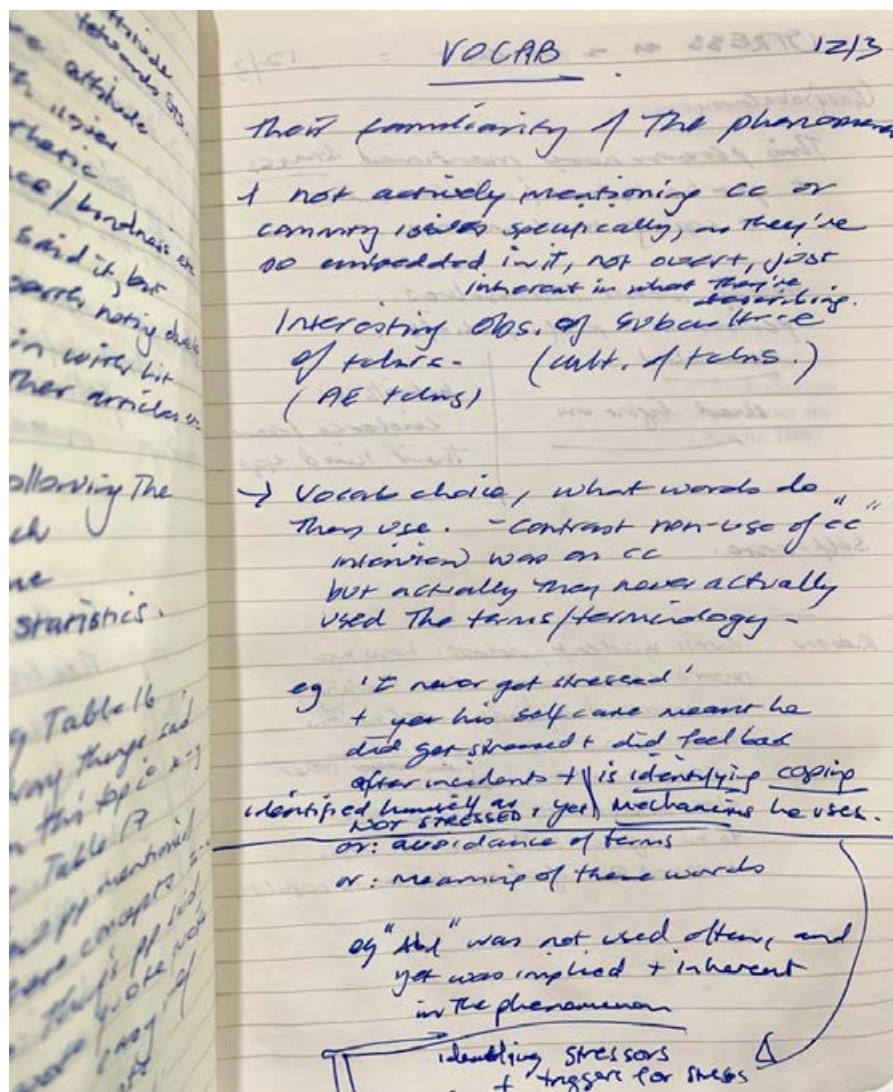
## Appendix G: Research journal sample

Research Journal (M. Spiers, 2017b): Ethnographic jottings pre-empt the composing of full fieldnotes, or the “fuller, richer recollection of events” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 52). A hurriedly penned note indicates the complexity of qualitative inquiry, and acknowledges the human element of the immersive process, in which the researcher must tread lightly and apply humanistic values, “express respect for and concern about others ... by being personally involved.” (Patton, 2002, p. 177). Here, an articulation of the relationship between teachers, students and context is recorded, in direct response to perspectives offered by *key informants* and the dynamic school environment. Jottings are evidence of how the researcher constructs an interpretation of data.



## Appendix H: Research journal sample

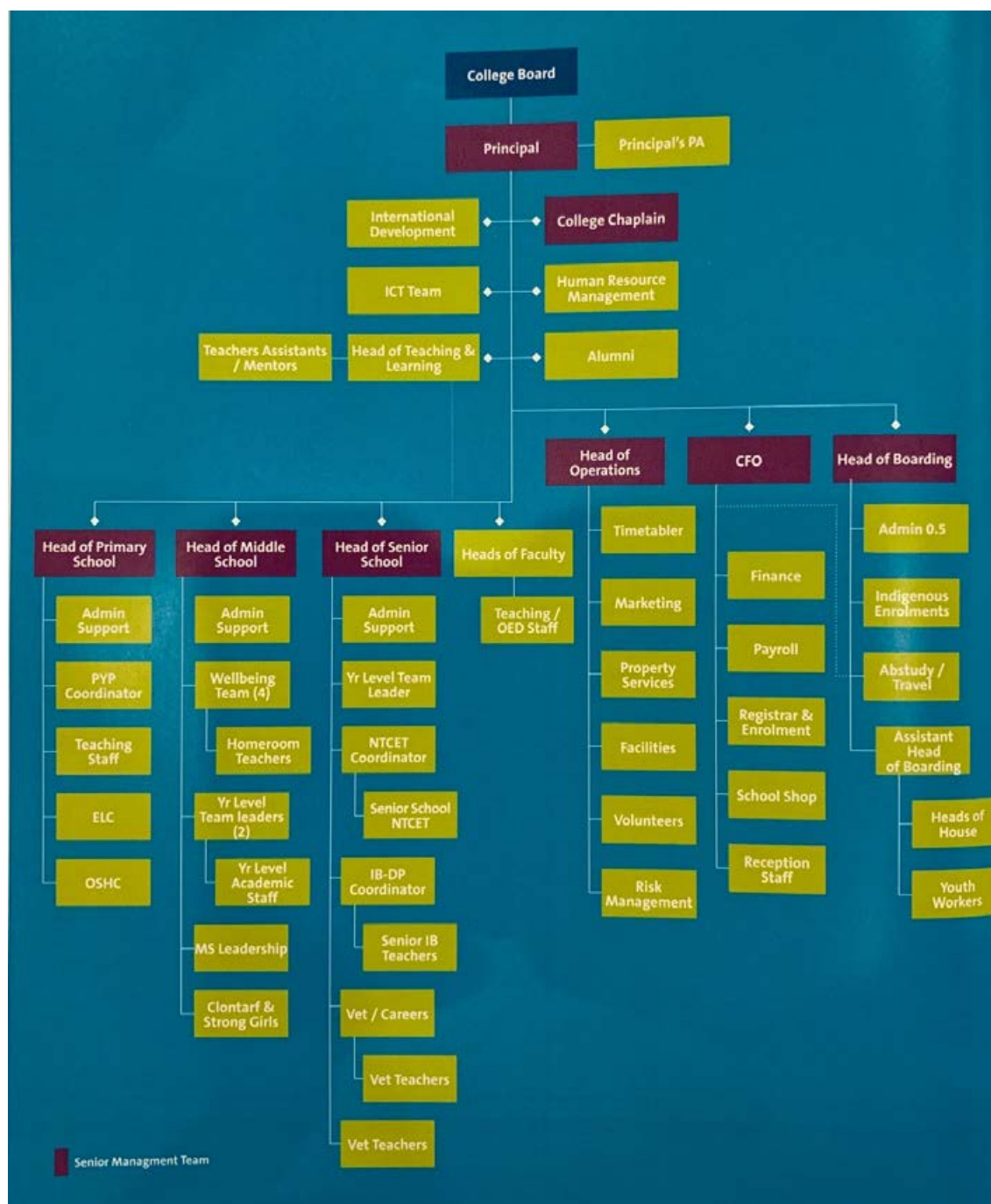
Research Journal (M. Spiers, 2017a): Ethnographic jottings can remark on research processes or their contents, in this case, a participant's interview responses. Specifically, vocabulary he did *not* use or avoided using. The researcher notes the phrase, "I never get stressed," was immediately followed by a description of coping strategies, e.g. he never missed a round of golf on weekends, an indication that there were in fact stressors in his experience of the phenomenon. This interviewee's proactive stance in managing his own wellbeing enabled him to return each day refreshed and capable of responding positively and with empathy to people and events, something he expressed pride in being able to do. Research processes were flexible, to reduce the impact of participation. Collegial support was expressed, reflective of Patton (2002): "attend to relationships throughout fieldwork" (p. 331).





## Appendix I: The School organisational chart

The Senior Management Team (SMT) is highlighted in this chart, relative to other hierarchical tiers in the Day schools – Primary, Middle and Senior – and Boarding ('The School', 2016).



## Appendix J: Managing cultural sensitivities

A selection of participants' stories, their observations of cultural sensitivities in the classroom and in boarding, and their pedagogical response. Cultural sensitivities adapted from Queensland Health (2015).

Cultural sensitivities	Participant observation	Participant response
<p><b>Rapport</b></p> <p>In many traditional cultures, a high sense of value is placed on building and maintaining relationships. Taking a 'person before business' approach will help form this relationship and build rapport. (Queensland Health, 2015, p. 1)</p>	<p>The kids had some activities where they had to separate cards into groups of positive and negative thinking, and you'd be amazed at how many kids get it wrong. They don't know what positive thinking or positive self-talk is. Somewhere they've learned that everyone's gonna laugh at them, they'll never do anything right: "No-one wants to talk to me if I get it wrong." So, they see education as a real negative experience. And I actively will make students not use an eraser. And I'll say, "I don't care if you make mistakes. Cross it out. Put the correct answer in there." And as a teacher, I don't care. I keep drumming that into them. So that's just changing the environment into a nurturing, positive environment as much as I can. So, you know, positive, positive, positive, as much as possible. (Brad)</p>	<p>I think I was always very confident around that and I did see how some other staff would fall down and not speak to <i>every student, every day</i>. My ethos, my welfare issues are toward each and every staff member, and each and every student whether they're boarding students or day students. So, the students would get used to me saying "Good morning, how are you?" Have a little positive comment even if I didn't know them terribly well. I will never walk past them without a welcome or a greeting to the whole group or any specific student on the way past. Because it is about them knowing you want to have a relationship with them, and you are interested in them. It's not just for that time when you're in a classroom or that time when you're in clinic, it is the whole thing. It is the whole picture. (Tania)</p> <p>Indigenous kids are pretty intuitive. They can gauge you pretty quick. Again, it's the little things – you smile as you walk past, say hello. (Woodrow)</p>
<p><b>Language / EALD environment</b></p> <p>Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not speak English as their first language. Some also speak English in different dialects such as Kriol, Aboriginal</p>	<p>Because most of the kids are so functional in English, in terms of their spoken English, it's easy to forget. They're often just treated as low literacy kids and not as genuine ESL kids. I can see certain problems that kids are having and you can</p>	<p>You want them to access the problem. You don't want them to get stuck on a word or a name or something that they don't recognise. (Reuben)</p> <p>In terms of how you structure the lessons, it's quite different. [For] a lot of these kids, it's more about</p>

English and Torres Strait Creole. (p. 1)	<p>say, “Oh, that’s totally ESL.” And you can teach to that. (River)</p> <p>But you’ve got to gauge it. They get pretty tired pretty quick. They’ll tell you it’s painful, it hurts, learning in English. (Brad)</p>	getting them to settle and focus, and listen, and focus on their writing, or speaking correct Standard Australian English. Teaching them the difference. (River)
<b>Time: giving of, taking time</b>	<p>This is my eighth year here; I’m only now starting to think that I’m reaching the end of my patience for some of the behaviours that slow down the lesson. I know some people reach that limit in the first year, some people reach it in the second, third. Most people, in the first five. (Reuben)</p> <p>They work in a different time and space. It’s a strange thing. (Woodrow)</p>	But the thing is, you see some students do very, very well and I just think the most important thing is <i>time</i> . If you don’t put time in with the students, you’ll never be a good [boarding staff member]. These children – I don’t spend much money at all, maybe a fifty-cent ice-cream but to them, taking a coach out, going for walks – just let them do stupid things, let them do kid things. Let them be kids. (Harley)
<b>Non-verbal communication</b>  Some non-verbal communication cues (hand gestures, facial expressions etc.) used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have different meanings in the Western context. (p. 1)	I think the first part of the conversation will be around the number of Aboriginal <i>cues</i> , which are very complex and interesting and very different... The mouth gestures, the head gestures, the hand gestures form a large part of the communication of students with other students and family members. (Tania)	Often, I will use the nonverbal cues, like the eyebrow or the mouth or the hand. And that is something that has been learnt over nine years. And it’s as worthy as a sing-out across the field, as a “come over here”. In the beginning, it felt very odd but now the students will respond in kind with the nonverbals. (Tania)
<b>Personal space, and touch</b>  While the guide produced by Queensland Health (2015) referred to the need for health practitioners to seek permission from Aboriginal people before engaging in close contact, the concept discussed here is physical contact initiated by students, requiring teachers and boarding staff to navigate these incidents or situations with respect and diplomacy.	<p>I mean, [student] held my hand all the way through that nature park at night-time. And she just said, “[Harley], can I hold your hand?” And I think to myself, “Hm. Ok.” I’m looking around, trying to hold her hand but she didn’t, she was holding my arm because she was scared at night-time. (Harley)</p> <p>They come up and hug you. ... I have a rather hairy arm, as you can see. I guarantee you, pretty much every Indigenous student that I’ve ever helped on the desk has given it a pat, just to see how hairy it is. The</p>	<p>We understand fully why, but there is times where they need a good hug. ... You always have to be aware of your role and react in the right time, in the moment, and sometimes that’s difficult. (Max)</p> <p>Some people are friendly and will put their arm round someone and give them a cuddle and whilst it’s not something I would do, if a child was really upset, I would say, “Come on, come with me and we’ll do something.” ... I try and keep that divide. (Corey)</p>

<p>Professional teaching standards and workplace health and safety standards mandate consideration for the personal space and comfort of others. This required careful navigation and mindfulness of expectations and appearances, student histories and past experiences, and the potential for a triggering event to occur.</p>	<p>first couple of times, it was a surprise. (Reuben)</p> <p>Woodrow: I've had them touch the top of my [bald] head and say, "Why did you shave the top of your head?" I go, "What are you talking about?"</p> <p>Brad: I've had them rub my belly! For good luck!</p> <p>Woodrow: Did it work? (Teacher Focus Group)</p>	<p>This is a cultural competency issue. We have to know where we're allowed to draw that line. I've had plenty of kids grab me, none of them aggressively, but if I was Down South you might construe it in a sexual way. Taking me by the arm as we then walk down the hallway. I'm not instigating it; I just find an arm all of a sudden locked in mine. And what do you do? (Reuben)</p>
<p><b>Being genuine and authentic</b></p>	<p>Try hard to be more of yourself, less culturally appropriate. Aboriginal students really are like adults already. They can tell when you're being genuine. Don't touch them. Leave them alone. It will come. Wait until they approach you, then you'll know they're giving 100%. (Prue)</p>	<p>They were so shy and shame, they would not acknowledge me. But if you are a good person, ultimately, they will accept you. You need to demonstrate brave confidence that it will be fine. It takes months but it will happen. I always say to them, "We're gonna be great, you and me. It's just gonna take time." (Prue)</p>
<p><b>Eye contact</b></p> <p>Avoidance of eye contact is customarily a gesture of respect in this context. For non-Aboriginal people, this can be rude or construed as disengagement. In rural settings, it is a mark of respect or non-intrusiveness, and in confrontational situations, lack of eye contact signals calm.</p>	<p>Often, the eye contact or lack of eye contact around male and female gender differences, or seniority and the feeling of respect around that, often people misread that as being disrespectful where in fact they're being respectful because they're allowing you to speak and not looking at you directly in the eye. (Tania)</p>	<p>In terms of barrier, the kids looking in your eye or not wanting to meet your eye, it's a cultural thing. And getting that sort of concentration, when they don't want to look at you, it's not really a cultural thing to maintain eye contact. And I sometimes cringe when [mainstream colleague] says, "Look me in the eye so I know—" It's not necessarily the best way to communicate with these kids because it's a really big effort for them. (River)</p>
<p><b>Titles</b></p> <p>(p. 2) In Aboriginal cultures, terms like 'Aunty' or 'Uncle' show respect for older persons. Kinship is not necessarily a defining factor of the term, and recipients of these titles are not necessarily an Elder.</p>	<p>Like [colleague]'s saying, you get called Grandpa or Uncle, it is actually just a sign of affection or a sign of respect. It's not 'old man,' it's Grandpa. You know the quality of the whole thing. (Max)</p> <p>I get called Dad, not Granddad. (Harley)</p>	<p>"You're my Mother, you're my Grandmother, you're my Father..." When kids start saying that to you, you know you're in. When you get that stamp, you know you can growl, you can love, you can encourage, you can tell them. You know you've got it. And that's the only thing that you're absolutely sure of in these times. (Colleen)</p>

<p><b>Shame</b></p> <p>The concept of ‘shame’, deeply felt feelings of being ashamed or embarrassed, for Aboriginal people may result from sharing private or personal information, cultural beliefs and from breaches of confidentiality. (p. 2)</p> <p>Harkin (1990) studied the Aboriginal concept of ‘big shame’ ... a combination of self-concept, shyness, embarrassment, lack of confidence and a desire to avoid or withdraw from situations which are or may become threatening to the Aboriginal individual (McQuade, 1992, p. 40).</p>	<p>And then again, that is their perception of shame. Whereas we would say it’s a little embarrassing, they will use the term ‘shame’ and it means a whole lot more to them than to us. So, it’s getting them past that and getting involved. (Max)</p> <p>But that one, just the ‘shame’ concept that they have, is a very big barrier. Getting them to step outside their comfort zone and to ‘have a go’. Because they don’t want to try, they don’t want to make mistakes, because they’re shame. That’s probably the biggest cultural barrier that you have with them. (River)</p> <p>We need to have an understanding that we have students who are fantastic at sport, art, language, culture, music, because they’re things they do in community all of the time. ... We have some students who went on a dance tour of China and I’ve mentioned to the teachers, “They’re struggling in Maths and struggling in English and they’re walking out of classes because they’re not engaged. <i>This is what they are really good at:</i> they’re really good at cultural, spears, art, fishing, those sorts of things, but also, they are fantastic dancers. They perform. They speak in public.” And because they never speak in class, because they’re too shame because they don’t have the knowledge of skills in Maths and English, they just walk out all the time. (Tania)</p>	<p>Because as soon as they stand up, the whole boys or girls start laughing, and then they go into shame. So, we have to do it as in nobody’s allowed to laugh, talk or anything except for the one student. And that’s starting to work, for sure. Probably taken eighteen months for them to stand up and talk for three minutes about themselves, fishing, family, just to give them some self-confidence. But that means all my students have to sit there and regimentally say nothing. And afterwards, clap. Because as soon as one person sniggers, that’s it, shame. And they will sit back down again, or they could smash a window or get upset just because of that one. And then I’ve brought it on myself. So, you’ve got to be very, very careful. (Harley)</p> <p>I encourage the boys: “You can talk to anybody. You can go to any of the other male staff.” But that automatically puts us [female staff] at a disadvantage. The information comes back to us, sure, but then you can’t let the child know that you know that, because that’s still as much of an insult to them as ‘they won’t talk to you about it’ so it is really difficult. (Colleen)</p>
<p><b>Alternative ways of connecting</b></p>	<p>It’s hard when you’re starting out. Just getting to know each kid, letting them trust you, being around long enough for them to be able to recognise you, because we do have quite a high turnover of students and a high turnover of teachers. Just building that familiarity so they know who you are. I go play footy</p>	<p>So, even sitting down relaxes them but they won’t do [or] always want a face-to-face. The best way is to walk and talk with them or take them out in a vehicle. Because you haven’t got any eye contact, they like it, they seem to settle down much quicker. (Harley)</p>



	with them, boys in the morning, just do things like that. (River)	Until they feel totally ready, they're never going to speak. That doesn't mean they're not engaged. If they're not comfortable, they will not do anything. There are other ways to have conversations. (Prue)
<p><b>Flexibility; adaptation and differentiation; repetition</b></p> <p>In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, indirect questioning is the approach most preferred. Direct questioning may ... discourage participation and make it difficult to obtain important information, particularly [if] a person is communicating in non-Standard English. (p. 2)</p>	<p>They do often work well in groups. I've seen teachers where they'll have four in a group, and they'll give a task to the four, and the four will come up with an answer, because then it's 'we' got it wrong, not 'me'. (Brad)</p> <p>For example, all Houses do homework and that is the one time where we're structuring a system where they're sitting down and having to write, follow instruction. In the beginning, that was excessively hard. (Max)</p> <p>They have a much higher tolerance to seeing something over and over. (Brad)</p>	<p>You try and not single kids out, and give them opportunities to show what they can do in another situation whether it be one-on-one or let them write, rather than having to talk in front of the class. So, just adapting them like that. One [option] is to record audio-visual rather than to present in front of the class. Put audio to a PowerPoint, for example, so they can do a presentation like that rather than in front of the class. (River)</p> <p>But often it's just repetition, of doing something over and over and over, especially in the Art. (Woodrow)</p> <p>They have a different cultural mindset, a different perspective in the way they accept learning. I can only describe it as whole part learning. As a teacher, you have to teach the whole thing then refine it later. For example, the students start playing a whole football game then you refine the tactics and specific skills. (Brad)</p>
<p><b>Critical reflection, in the moment; changing tack</b></p> <p>Aboriginal people have a tendency to agree even when they [don't], and may answer questions the way they think others want. People may say "yes" to questions to end the conversation so they can leave, to deal with other priorities, or because they simply feel uncomfortable. (p. 2)</p>	<p>They're not good risk takers. They're not prepared to get it wrong. So, getting it right, if you say, "Does everyone want to do this?" They'll go, "Yes." Because 'yes' is a great answer most of the time. So, I will agree or accept something that they might not even like. (Ian)</p>	<p>You might've done the same thing, "[Student], you didn't do your work. Just stay in a couple of minutes and finish that one for me," or something like that. And some days, they'll just do it and next day, you don't know what's going on in the Boarding House or out in the playground, and they'll get up and throw a desk. Those kind of things don't worry me. Something else is going on. (River)</p>

		<p>It's hard work, because we've got quite a number who will just switch off as soon as they're lost, or don't know what to do. You've got to quickly bounce around and explain to them, then go to the next person, so they can all achieve the next thing. It's more the proximity. You've really got to direct. "Ok, this is what's next. Do you think you can do that?" and they'll have a go at it. (River)</p>
<p><b>Fostering self-efficacy and ownership</b></p>	<p>I'll just say to the child, "You're better than that. You don't need to behave like that." They'll look at me and they'll puff out their chest and carry on, but eventually they settle down. They still come to class. I have the highest attendance rate in my classes so I must be doing something right. (Summer)</p> <p>But we also offer up rewards. "If you guys do the right thing today, this is what we're going to do. We'll do this at the end of the week though, so that means you've got to come to class every day until Friday. It doesn't mean come on Friday. You've got to come Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday..." (Summer)</p>	<p>They're very, very clever. They'll watch you. They won't talk to you, they'll just ignore you. I mean, I've been up here with soccer balls, with footballs – and not one person wanted to come and join me. I had all the cones set up. Then next week, I had two girls join me. Then a month later, I had probably twenty there, because they enjoyed the session. But they're not very good at coming forward to say, "Yep, I'll pick up." (Harley)</p> <p>Teach them the fundamentals of life skills, explaining to them why we do it, giving them the ownership, I think that's the key. Any work, any artwork, or anything we do within the dorm is to give them responsibility, their ownership. (Harley)</p>
<p><b>Understanding kinship connections</b></p>	<p>That's the part that I find – in the sense that, ok you might have to growl a kid, you might have to give them a little behaviour talk – then you'll find out they're defending someone that's related to them, that you had no idea about. You know, just the connections are so far removed from our knowledge. (Max)</p>	<p>It's also understanding who can talk to each other. Boys going through ceremony... Students will come and say, "Can you tell—" They can't even say his name at that stage. Straightaway, if you know those connections, you know that it's only a few kids they're talking about. But unless you know those connections... (Max)</p>

<p><b>Community visits; contextual awareness; cultural inclusiveness</b></p>	<p>And once the parents are ringing up, like [colleague] is saying, they're humbugging you all the time, they're ringing up, they want the student all the time, and now that you've got mobile phones, we have a bigger problem. Because the student's here in body but not in mind. And culturally, when kids have culture, that is huge. Because they lead by their heart, nothing else. It's always their heart. (Colleen)</p> <p>There were a lot of really good programs when I started here. I [volunteered] in the Boarding House in my first year. There have also been some large programs put in place by teachers over there. (Reuben)</p>	<p>It's about finding <i>twelve-thousand paths</i> to the same point. It's about respecting the female and male divide. Students are welcome to speak language in class. I'm always asking them about their knowledge. (Prue)</p> <p>Find out what cultural words not to say, what girls are not to say in front of boys. (Isabelle)</p> <p>We are all women in our Boarding House, there are no males. So, if there's an issue with a male, I will either speak to [Assistant Head of Boarding] or to one of these fellas here. Because that's not an area for me to go to. That's like taboo. You just don't go there. (Colleen)</p> <p>The community visits really helped me because you get to know their families, where they're from. It's helped me build those relationships with mum, dad, guardians, their grandmas, granddads. (Harley)</p>
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**Warning to Aboriginal readers of this dissertation:**

The following page contains a quote from an Aboriginal Elder who is deceased. His words have appeared in print since the 1980s in books, websites (AIATSIS, 2014a; Vyver, 2014) and archival film footage, including his mortuary ceremony (AIATSIS, 2014b; Moving Image Archive News, 2014). In accordance with his wishes, his words and image continue to be cited, even after his death, in order to share his knowledge and culture with future generations, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

I have therefore quoted, with the greatest respect, to continue the sharing of his wisdom – the words, *this feeling* – of an Aboriginal man, a prominent spokesperson among his community, who believed passionately in the value of lifelong teaching and learning.



I love this country and this earth.

This story for all people.

Everybody should be listening.

Same story for everyone,  
just different language.

‘Big’ Bill Neidjie

(Neidjie, 2002, p. 48)

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