Exploring Transformative Opportunities in the Intercultural Spaces of Indigenous Education

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Doctorate of Cultural Research Portfolio

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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David Spillman (signature)

Table of Contents

Abbreviations

CCCP	Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project
DCR	Doctorate in Cultural Research
DECS	Department of Education and Children's Services
DEET	Department of Education, Employment and Training
ILN	Indigenous Leaders Network
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
NTER	Northern Territory Emergency Response
SSI	Stronger Smarter Institute
SSLP	Stronger Smarter Leadership Program

Abstract

This thesis offers an exposition of the patterns of communication and interaction among participants in the Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project, a professional learning project undertaken in 2008 by the Northern Territory Department of Education, Employment and Training. The research aimed to highlight and discuss ways that disabling patterns and discourses were transcended, leading to transformative opportunities for individuals and groups. Drawing together research from the field of organisational complexity with various Indigenous ontological perspectives, this thesis offers learning to inform the fields of Indigenous education and, to a lesser extent, outdoor education. In this regard, three distinct though not mutually exclusive impacts are offered, including (1) the importance of rethinking and re-creating power relations through enhanced self-awareness, resulting from self-reflexive practice and transformational learning, (2) the usefulness of enacting a nuanced relational approach in the intercultural complexity of educational organisations, one that focuses initially on the question of 'how we are together' rather than the 'who am I/are we' often dictated by identity politics, and (3) the value of utilising cultural continuity processes to draw on and co-creatively modify Aboriginal perspectives and cultural practices to meet contemporary challenges.

Preface

In 2010, I excitedly embarked on this research project to interrogate how patterns of communication and interaction among participants in the Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project (CCCP) worked to enable and/or disable their attempts at creating positive learning environments for both themselves and their Aboriginal students. In particular, this research explored instances where disabling patterns were transcended either intentionally or inadvertently. The CCCP represented a unique attempt to work with a group of 22 invited Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants within the Northern Territory (NT) Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET) in 2008. Through three forums, totalling nine days over a period of six months, participants were set the challenge of identifying and/or devising ways to facilitate 'culturally competent collaboration within NT DEET workplaces' to enhance the quality of school-based learning environments. At the time, I was contracted to co-design and co-facilitate the CCCP. Thirty-six hours of video footage of CCCP conversations, presentations, and interviews were captured to contribute to the production of a professional learning program for NT DEET. This footage became the primary dataset for the research.

Both the CCCP and the initial research were grounded in the organisational dynamics and complexity research of Edgar Schein (1992) and Ralph Stacey (2003, 2011). Stacey's (2011) 'complex responsive processes of relating' perspective focuses on the iterative, emergent nature of localised interactions and power relations. For Stacey, this is the most realistic way of understanding organisations, through the specific and cumulative impacts of the multitude of local, iterative processes of relating and communicating occurring amongst organisation members. As an initial theoretical basis for this research, Stacey's perspective predicted a high degree of unpredictability as iterations of research learning and conversation unfolded. Such emergent unpredictability is enhanced in the undertaking of a professional

doctorate where the focus on both academic scholarship and organisational interest means the research is contingent on the political and managerial ebbs and flows of organisational life. This expected unpredictability first emerged through the political confluences of the NT in 2012, which worked to switch the host organisation for the research from NT DEET to the Stronger Smarter Institute, and significantly shift the focus of research publications. These events are described in more detail in this thesis.

Through these iterative, research processes of analysing data, reflecting, and conversing with others in a variety of professional and organisational spheres, gaining different perspectives, and reading new and different texts offered through such interactions, I was increasingly drawn to Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge about living and learning as critical to our efforts in Indigenous education. As will be detailed in the following pages, the relatively recent findings of Stacey (2011) as briefly outlined above, are complementary with far older ontological perspectives of Yolngu (Bawaka Country et al., 2016), Ngemba (Callaghan, 2014), Warlpiri (Patrick, Holmes, & Box, 2008) and Mithaka (Gorringe, 2012). I have drawn from some of these perspectives along with Stacey (2011) to write this thesis as a story of 'emergent co-becoming' (Bawaka Country et al., 2016), where personal, professional, and organisational confluences bleed into each other through processes of continuous co-evolvement.

Being immersed in such processes whilst analysing conversational patterns and shared underlying assumptions from the CCCP led me, seemingly almost naturally, to reflect upon my own patterns and assumptions and their sources of socialisation. Here, this research has become in a significant way, though not primarily, the story of my growing self-awareness and transformation. This part of the research story is voiced in this thesis through description and analysis of two such episodes where self-reflexive analysis (Stacey, 2011) led to an

engaged disorientation followed by significant personal shift as described in transformative learning theory (Taylor, 2007).

As briefly suggested, this research draws together and extends upon a broad array of scholarly work to inform the field of Indigenous education and, to a lesser extent, outdoor education. In this regard, this research offers three distinct though not mutually exclusive impacts.

First, this research highlighted the critical importance of equal power relating to self-reflexive learning. Such relationships are characterised by mutual perceptions of safety and trust, thus enhancing the possibility of learning through more robust, critical conversations. This kind of self-reflexive learning that results in a deepening awareness of one's socialised habits of perceiving, thinking, and doing, and thus the possibility of shifting these habits, has been termed 'derepression' (Fromm, 1962). Extending on transformative learning theory, this research also provided evidence that personal transformations and group shifts are often contingent on each other. These key learnings were central to Organisational Report 2, created for the Stronger Smarter Institute. This report contributed significantly to the formal conception of *high-expectations relationships* as the cornerstone of the Stronger Smarter approach, as outlined in their first position paper (SSI, 2014). Second, this research demonstrated the value in the intercultural complexity of educational organisations, of initially focusing on the question of *how are we?* rather than the *who are we?* often dictated by dominant identity politics in Indigenous education contexts. Engaging the question *how do we need to be together?* by drawing on the things that keep us strong, through processes such as *Engoori* (Gorringe, 2012), enables the co-creation of conversational spaces where equal power relating is valued and prioritised. Third, the research demonstrated the value of using cultural continuity processes to draw on and co-creatively modify Aboriginal perspectives

and cultural practices to address challenges and needs within the linguistic, social, and cultural complexity of contemporary Indigenous education contexts.

Whilst this research was driven by a desire to contribute positively to the school-based education of Aboriginal students, its conduct and findings are not entirely unproblematic. First, while I had been immersed in the social complexity and cultural worlds of remote Indigenous education for many years prior, this research was largely established on Western theoretical perspectives of organisational complexity research (Stacy, 2003). Through the iterative, emergent nature of this perspective and its associated self-reflexive practice, and as the research unfolded, I became cognisant of and drawn to various Indigenous theoretical processes and perspectives included in this thesis. I am aware that subsequently this work might be read as an attempt to legitimise Indigenous processes and practices through Western theoretical positions. I would rather it be seen in part as a personal journey of colonial derepression, and also as a genuine attempt at cross-cultural synthesis. I would certainly commence from a different theoretical standpoint in the future. Second, in terms of scalability, the nine-day intensive CCCP was an unrealistic model. Attempts to scale up such approaches within the day-to-day realities of teaching and learning in schools in Australia have not succeeded. The Cultures of Collaboration program, the primary organisational output of the CCCP, had limited uptake in the NT, and an independent evaluation of the nationwide Stronger Smarter Learning Communities project found little quantifiable effect (Luke, Cazden, & Coopes, 2013). Scalability of approaches such as those advocated through this research remains a major challenge.

CHAPTER 1:

Overarching Statement

1.1 Introduction

This portfolio is submitted as the primary evidence towards the professional Doctorate in Cultural Research (DCR) at Western Sydney University. In accordance with the DCR policy, this thesis, *Exploring Transformative Opportunities in the Intercultural Spaces of Indigenous Education*, constitutes one research project. Two organisational reports were prepared: one for the primary organisational participant, the Northern Territory (NT) Department of Education and Community Services (DECS) (see Chapter 2 'OR1'), and the other for the Stronger Smarter Institute (SSI) (see Chapter 3 'OR2') which was directly involved in Indigenous educational leadership in the NT and for whom I was a full-time employee or consultant for five of the eight research years (2010–2014). Three academic papers were accepted for publication in relevant peer-reviewed journals (see Chapter 4 'JA1', Chapter 5 'JA2', and Chapter 6 'JA3'). Whilst my intention at the outset was to couch this research project entirely within the professional life, work, and learning of one host organisation (NT DEET), the creation of a second organisational report and the varying topics and target audiences of academic journal publications and conference presentations clearly indicates this has not been the case. The factors influencing the shifting nature of this research are outlined in the following pages.

It is important to say here that while the various shifts and turns that occurred during this research were unpredictable at the outset, they were nevertheless expected, though sometimes surprising. One of the main theoretical foundations for this research was Stacey's (2011) work on complex responsive processes of relating. Stacey critiqued the dominant Western notion of organisation as a 'whole system' separate from, yet inhabited by, autonomous individuals. Rather, he proposed it more realistic and efficacious to focus on the

multitude of local processes of relating and communicating among organisational members that cumulatively constitute organisational life. It is through such interactions that identities, strategies, purposes, challenges, and commitments emerge. Here, humans are 'always fundamentally and inescapably interdependent' (p. 292). Rather than human minds being thought of as existing inside a person and society existing outside a person as a system, mind and society are perceived as reciprocally co-evolving. As Stacey put it, 'There is no possibility of human society without human minds and no possibility of human minds without human society' (p. 293). Every particular interaction and conversation stimulates reflection and thinking leading to further interactions and conversations, and so on. The cumulative progression of these iterative processes of relating and communicating create both human minds and society (organisation). As will be discussed in the following sections, these relatively recent findings from the field of organisational complexity work to reinforce the notion of 'emergent co-becoming' central to far older Aboriginal ontologies (Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Jackson, 1995; Rose, 2011). Suffice to say here that this research approach embraced these kinds of iterative, emergent processes of relating and communicating.

Commencing in 2010, the research outlined in this thesis offers a retrospective interrogation of approximately 36 hours of video footage of conversations, presentations, and other shared experiences from the Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project (CCCP). The CCCP was an innovative, longitudinal professional engagement and learning project, undertaken within the 'People and Learning' directorate of the NT DEET in 2008. At the time, I was contracted to lead the co-design, co-facilitation, and co-evaluation of this project. Eleven Indigenous/non-Indigenous pairs of NT DEET employees were invited to participate. They came together for nine days of sharing, conversation, and learning in three forums (four days, three days, two days) over a six-month period. The stated aim of the CCCP was to

‘significantly enhance levels of culturally competent collaboration within DEET workplaces to improve student outcomes and service delivery’ (NT DEET, 2007, p. 2). To this end, the group was mandated the task of designing a professional learning program for all NT DEET employees.

Initially, this research embarked from an examination of

1. the ways dominant discourses in Indigenous education impacted the thinking and conversations of CCCP participants;
2. the degree to which participants’ experiences and the conversational processes employed in the project facilitated participants’ awareness of these often limiting and pervasive patterns of thinking, talking, and doing, including the ways they confer power relations; and
3. the ways and extent to which CCCP approaches and processes were able to create opportunities for participants to recognise and transcend such limiting discourses.

Such were the research questions identified in my Confirmation of Candidature document (2011). Yet, as flagged above, over the research period the focus shifted and broadened due to a variety of interrelated circumstances, influences, and learning.

A professional doctorate is designed to ‘serve both organizational interests and interdisciplinary fields of academic scholarship’ (McLean, 2011, p. 1). The intertwined nature of these distinct fields of interest ensures that the academic research will both impact and be subject to the political, economic, and managerial currents of organisational life and endeavour. Part of my motivation in undertaking both the lead role for the CCCP and this research was to continue contributing positively to the school-based learning of Aboriginal students in the NT. This followed seven years of living with my family and working in remote Indigenous education in the NT, a time that greatly enriched both professional knowledge and practice, and personal and family life. Yet, as will be outlined in Section 1.3

‘The Research Story’, a significant shift in the political environment of the NT in late 2012, with the election of a new government, necessitated a strategic rethink in terms of the focus of reports and journal publications in order to optimise potential impact.

Further, and in retrospect, I now realise that at the outset of this doctoral work, I was probably a little underprepared for the extent and depth of personal learning that would occur directly through the research process, despite the fact I was expecting and seeking some such learning. At times, this learning has challenged and shifted the ways I have seen, thought about, and approached the research. It has also challenged and shifted the ways I have thought about and approached my life and work more generally, and has contributed significantly to shifts in my sense of self, life’s purpose, and subsequently professional direction and focus. This self-learning has also impacted other aspects of my life over this period of time, including personal relationships and endeavours. In these ways, the research approach and focus, and the realms of both professional and personal learning, have continuously and reciprocally co-evolved over the research period, again reinforcing the iterative, emergent nature of this learning. At the end of Semester 1, 2014, four years into the research and as a result of the co-evolvement of these various interrelated aspects of my life, I took 12 months’ leave from the DCR, feeling no certainty at the time that I would return to it. Yet this 12-month hiatus also represented a major turning point in the focus of this research.

It now seems somewhat ironic that at the outset of this research, when selecting the title *Exploring Transformative Opportunities in the Intercultural Spaces of Indigenous Education*, and whilst seeking personal learning, I had little idea that a significant number of the ‘transformative opportunities’ would be my own. As real ‘exploring’, this research has led me (and others) into the out-of-awareness realms of our consciousness into what Fromm (1962) called our ‘social character’. In a significant way, this social character can be viewed as the personal interface of the dynamic interplay between human mind and society as

investigated by Stacey (2011). It is characterised by 'basic cultural assumptions' that are the products of our socialisation through upbringing, schooling, and professional training (Schein, 1992). These underlying cultural assumptions that exist out-of-awareness create habits of perceiving, thinking, judging, and behaving (Schein, 1992). These habits also remain out-of- awareness until a particular experience or dilemma creates transformative opportunity for self-awareness and shift (Taylor, 2007). Some such autobiographical accounts are offered in this overarching statement. Rather than designate a separate section for these instances of personal learning and transformation, they will be woven into the broader research narrative as context and situation dictate.

In Section 1.2 'Guiding Perspectives', I offer a framework for the way this thesis represents and reports the CCCP research. In a significant way, this framework constitutes a cross-cultural synthesis of worldviews and theoretical perspectives, bringing together the strong focus on *story* as continuously co-evolving connectedness and obligation from Aboriginal perspectives (Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Callaghan, 2014; Rose, 2011) with that of emergence and *self-reflexivity* from more recent research and theory within the field of organisational complexity (Stacey, 2011). This framework recognises story as personal historical perspective, always deeply and historically intertwined with stories of other and place through processes of continuous co-evolvement. In this way, stories are never done, always evolving or 'rolling-on' (p. 14) as Rose (2011) put it. This framework also proposes how we can come to know our stories more deeply through the transformative opportunities of self-reflexivity and critical self-reflection (Stacey, 2011; Taylor, 2007) Utilising this guiding framework, Section 1.3 'The Research Story' outlines critical organisational moments and the ways they impacted the focus or direction of this research, along with some professional and personal historical accounts that work to situate and contextualise the CCCP and ensuing doctoral research. This section is organised into three historical moments: 'Pre

CCCP: Working and Learning in Remote Indigenous Education in the NT', 'The CCCP' and 'Post CCCP – The Research Phase'. In Section 1.4 'Theoretical Perspectives and Methodologies', I locate the various bodies of theory that influenced the research conception, design, and processes within the research story. I offer a brief overview of each, including how they contributed to research processes. Some autobiographical accounts of transformative learning resulting from critical self-reflection using these theoretical positions is offered throughout. Section 1.5 'Publications (Reports and Papers) and Communications (Conferences)', outlines the context and purpose of the two organisational reports, three journal articles, and three conference presentations. Finally, in recognising story as a process of continuous co-evolvement, in Section 1.6 'Summary and Questions to Keep the Story Rolling', some concluding perspectives and questions are offered to reflect my learning and commitment to continue learning, working, and researching in the intercultural spaces of Indigenous education. Appendices 1 and 2 offer reports written for the CCCP participants and key personnel within NT Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) in 2013, respectively. They were created to present interim findings and garner feedback from these two critical groups. Appendix 3 provides the abstracts or overviews for the three conferences at which I facilitated workshops as part of this research process.

1.2 Guiding Perspectives

> We don't appreciate that we are a story, a very important story. A story has flow and connection. . . . The Old People tell us 'All we leave behind when we finish walking this land is our story'. (Callaghan, 2014, p. 27)

> Your past is important. If you don't know your past, if you don't know your story, if you don't know where you come from, then you will be sitting in the present moment lost. . . . A lot of people think they don't need to know their story . . . that the future is all that matters. How can you move forward into the future if you don't know where you have come from? What are you taking with you into the future if you aren't taking the past with you? The past is all you have. (Uncle Paul Gordon, cited in Callaghan, 2014, p. 28)

In the first quotation above, Callaghan (2014) proposed, ‘We are a story’. Here our story is our being, our identity—‘all we leave behind’. Further, our story, our identity is one of ‘connection’. For Ngemba loremen Callaghan and Gordon, everything on one’s country—plants, rocks, animals, fire, water, stars, and so on—has a story of how it came to be, what its purpose is, and how it is related through connection and obligation to human and other-than-human entities (Callaghan, 2014). Every story has a ceremony—a song and a dance. Cumulatively, these stories and their associated songs and dances make up the lore for one’s Country (Callaghan, 2014). Here identity as story is relational, being conferred through connectivity and obligation. These perspectives were reinforced through a conversation that occurred during the CCCP, reported in the second journal article (JA2, p. 18). During a discussion about identity, a Yolngu and a Warlpiri participant both indicated that in their languages there is no word or phrase for the individual self, identity rather being thought and talked about as specific connections (and obligations) to country, kin, language, law, and ceremony. In 2008, the same year as the CCCP, two Warlpiri participants co-authored a publication focusing on this interrelatedness called *ngurra-kurlu*. Translating as the ‘home within’, *ngurra-kurlu* is also seen as a ‘process for building identity and self-esteem’ (Patrick, Holmes, & Box, 2008, p. 1). *Ngurra-kurlu* is further discussed in the third journal article (JA3, pp. 11–12).

Along with the focus on story as ‘connection’, Callaghan (2014) also proposed that stories have ‘flow’, implying that through connectivity they are continuously co-evolving. In practicing one’s lore, through the ceremonial retelling and reliving of these stories, one is contributing to the continuous co-evolvement of country and its inhabitants, or as Warlpiri put it, ‘singing up country’ to bring it alive again (Jackson, 1995). Bawaka Country et al. (2016) provided more in-depth detail of how a Yolngu worldview perceives place/space relationally, as emergent co-becoming. Here it is the act of going on country when called by

gukguk [pigeon] with wires and bags to search for, sing, and dig *ganguri* [yams] that brings the human participants the pigeon, yams, and the place/space into being. In Bawaka Country et al.'s (2016) words, 'co-becoming is our conceptualization of a Bawaka Yolngu ontology within which everything exists in a state of emergence and relationality' (p. 456). This notion of emergent co-becoming is further taken up in Section 1.5.5 'Aboriginal Lore and Ecocentrism'.

In a slightly different but complimentary fashion, Rose (2011) discussed the notion of stories 'rolling on' (p. 14). She was introduced to this notion by Edward Johnson, an Aboriginal man, in the Simpson Desert. Johnson was referring to the cultural practice of groups of people handing 'Dreaming' stories over to neighbours to talk or sing them across their Country, thus 'sustaining that same rolling' to sing up and reinvigorate country by 'keeping them [stories] moving' (Rose, 2011, p. 14). Implicit in Rose's description is this notion of the emergent co-becoming or continuous co-evolvement of people and Country. Rose pointed out through conversations with other Aboriginal people that these stories are not closed systems. As continuously co-evolving, they are kept open to the world by 'refraining from formalising' (p. 14) them. Rose flagged the intention in her writing to honour these old men by 'keeping the wisdom rolling, allowing it to accumulate, and refraining from declaring final meanings' (p. 15). In a significant way, this thesis constitutes my research story, representing the ongoing co-evolvement of organisational, professional, and personal confluences before, during, and after the CCCP through the research phase. I also wish to honour the wisdom of Country and our old people by 'refraining from declaring final meaning'. There are some summary statements of findings in the final section of this overarching statement, but more importantly, questions that provide impetus to keep this research story flowing and rolling on.

In the second quotation, Uncle Paul Gordon (cited in Callaghan, 2014) suggested that knowledge of our story, our past, is necessary for living in the present and dreaming our future. Our story includes all our past experiences, all that we have learned and know, the things we value and respect, our strengths, weaknesses, preferences, and desires. How have these formed? Where have they come from? How are we connected with them? Do I know these things about my story? Do I share this story? Our story tells us about our place, our home, that eventually is carried everywhere with us as the 'home within', *ngurra-kurlu*, so we always know how to get back home. Gordon pointed out that many people in Australia, including some Aboriginal people, think the greatest contemporary challenge for Indigenous Australians is letting go of the past, that the future is all that matters. Gordon argued that whilst we cannot change the past, if we do not know our story then we will not understand things that may be hurting or holding us back, like low self-esteem, anger, or sadness. We may have repressed such experiences and feelings. If we do not understand them or know where they come from, then we cannot work to shift them in the present (Callaghan, 2014). This view makes sense of the oft-quoted remark from the late Charlie Perkins: 'We know we cannot live in the past, but the past lives in us' (Vibe Australia, 2018, p. 1).

Clearly implied in this discussion is the belief that we can come to know our story more deeply through retrospective analysis. As indicated in the 'Introduction', I offer some such autobiographical accounts through this research story. These episodes demonstrate my deepening self-awareness as a result of the reflective analysis stimulated through this research process. This has largely occurred through a recognition and analysis of the ways underlying cultural assumptions, the products of my socialisation through family upbringing, schooling, and professional training, have worked to direct my perceptions, thinking, judging, and acting within the field of Indigenous education (Schein, 1992). These have been cumulatively coined 'social character' (Fromm, 1962). The notions of social character and

their underlying cultural assumptions, how they form and operate through the dynamic self/society interplay, is discussed in Section 1.4 ‘Theoretical Perspectives and Methodologies’. Here is one small example from this research.

As a consultant contracted to NT DEET in 2008, I was the lead designer and facilitator of the CCCP. Through this research process, I have come to realise that in that role, I imagined myself as a ‘consultant expert’ in a position of knowledge and power, assuming my primary responsible as facilitating participants’ learning and the subsequent creation of a professional learning program for NT DEET employees. For me at that time, it was all about the learning of ‘others’—the CCCP participants and the NT DEET employees. Through reflective analysis, I came to realise that I had been socialised into habitually seeing and positioning myself this way through both my induction into a consultancy organisation and through the patterned perception and discourse among NT DEET employees, regarding external consultants. There were significant opportunities for critical self-reflection and learning during the CCCP that mostly I failed to perceive due to this strong habitual focus outwards. This may have contributed significantly to my under-preparedness at the beginning of the research for the extent and depth of personal learning and transformative opportunities that would ensue. In such a way, I can now see this perception and positioning as ‘consultant expert’ as both enabling and limiting at the same time.

Enhancing awareness and understanding of our story in the ways outlined above requires critical retrospective analysis and learning. In the sixth edition of his volume on organisational dynamics and complexity, Stacey (2011) introduced the capability of *self-reflexivity:*

> The most powerful ‘tool or technique’ available to managers, indeed to any human being . . . is the self-conscious capacity to take a reflective, reflexive attitude towards what they are doing. In other words, the most powerful ‘tool’ any of us has in our ability to think about how we are thinking—if only we would use it more and not obscure it with a ready

> reliance on fashionable tools and techniques which often claim to be scientific even though there is no supporting evidence. (p. 5)

For Stacey (2011), self-reflexivity requires deep critical self-reflection. It builds on a recognition that my account of personal experience, rather than being an objective perception, is a product of who I am at a point in time, as determined by my history. And of course my history is interwoven with the histories of other beings and places, all of which are also shifting with time. Here Stacey (2011), like Bawaka Country et al. (2016), Gordon (cited in Callaghan, 2014), Callaghan (2014), and Rose (2011) are embracing the notion of identity (story) as emergent, iterative, and continuously co-evolving. Self-reflexivity necessitates an acceptance of (ideally delight in) this social complexity. Rather than standing outside my experience or my web of relationships and objectively observing or analysing them, I can only ever be an inquiring participant who at best rigorously reflects on experience to make the best sense of it possible (Stacey, 2011). This is a position that values the quest for multiple perspectives over the quest for objective truth. It recognises, as Uncle Paul Gordon would remind us, that we all have our own truth, our own story (Callaghan, 2014). Indeed, the quality of the story I tell, its depth and complexity, the nuances it captures, is largely reliant on my self-reflexive capability, which was for me strongly facilitated through this research process. Listening to different stories and perspectives offers new ways to reflectively interrogate our experience, enabling the possibility of transforming our own story. As with the Aboriginal perspectives discussed earlier, self-reflexivity contributes to the continuous meander and co-evolvement of personal stories. It helps keep them rolling on.

In this regard, two such major self-reflexive episodes occurred because of the research process and events. The first occurred as a result of reading and analysing McConaghy (2000) as part of the early research investigation. McConaghy's brief description of an episode whilst living and working in remote communities in the NT resonated with my own.

Her analysis of dominant discourses in Indigenous education in the NT challenged me, leading through self-reflexive practice to an awareness of my 'culturalist self', part of my professional social character, of the ways I had been socialised through professional experiences in Indigenous education in the NT, into focusing on bridging the gap between two largely homogeneous cultural groups—Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Culturalism is discussed and critiqued in more length in Section 1.4.1.2 'Culturalism and the Dilemma of Cultural Binaries'. The second episode resulted from my work with SSI throughout most of the research period. Here I came to associate with many Aboriginal men, in particular a Ngemba man named John Oates who began introducing me to Ngemba men's lore. Along with a significant text offered to me by another Ngemba loreman (Quinn, 1992), I gradually became aware of my 'anthropocentric self' where I (along with the majority of Western society) assume human beings to be the most evolved, most important species on the planet. This awakening and the impacts it had on the research and my sense of self and purpose is discussed in Section 1.4.5 'Aboriginal Lore and Ecocentrism'.

My intention for both the CCCP and this research has been to create and explore spaces for cross-cultural interaction, dialogue, and transformation, to elicit the kind of cultural creativity and fluidity characteristic of 'third cultural spaces' proposed by several researchers (Bhabha, 1994; D'Arbon et al., 2009; Davis & Grose, 2008; Haig-Brown, 2008). All (three) journal articles published from this doctoral research focus, in different ways, on the essential nature within the complexity of intercultural education, of creating strong relational spaces for collaborative, generative dialogue in local contexts, constituting the 'doing with' approaches advocated by Sarra (2012) and others (Davis-Warra, 2017; Choy & Woodlock, 2007; Singh & Major, 2016). These kinds of approaches are also most likely to work to prevent or diminish the appropriation of Indigenous knowledge by non-Indigenous researchers, educators, and institutions so endemic to the colonial endeavour (Williams &

Stewart, 1992). Williams and Stewart (1992) used the metaphor of miners extracting minerals from Country to highlight the ways Aboriginal knowledge has been taken for the benefit of individual researchers and institutions and used for the continued exertion of power and control over Indigenous people. This appropriation of knowledge often works to perpetuate discourses of deficit and/or romantic idealism about Indigenous people (Harrison, 2012). In response, Williams and Stewart (1992) reiterated Apple's (1991) call for 'processes that are supportive, facilitatory and collaborative, and allow people to speak and act for themselves, in a self-sustaining process of critical analysis and enlightened action' (p. 6). To this end, Singh and Major (2017) proposed research methodologies that demonstrate 'empathy, respect and ethical treatment of participants' (p. 13). They took up Kovah's (2015) four key elements, including the recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate, research that is relational and respectful, collectivity, and reciprocity, and that uses Indigenous methods. Indeed, through discussion of conversational circles and strengths-based conversational processes such as Engoori, all (three) journal articles propose 'cultural protocols, values and behaviours as an integral part of methodology' (Smith, 2012, p. 15–16) and educational process.

Yet clearly through this research process, I also now understand that as designer and facilitator of conversational processes for the CCCP, a lack of self-awareness regarding certain aspects of my social character at certain times has prevented the creative and transformative potential of these third spaces from being fully realised. The autobiographical account briefly outlined on page 10 offers an example of this, as do the two examples discussed on pages 11-12, and to be more fully detailed in Section 1.3. This further highlights the necessity when working and facilitating in these complex intercultural educational spaces, or rigorously engaging in ongoing practices of self-reflexivity.

The guiding perspectives outlined in this section offer a representational framework that is a cross-cultural synthesis of Indigenous and Western ways of knowing. Through processes of self-reflexivity and critical analysis, this thesis has 'become' not something different in purpose to how it began, but more encompassing. It has, in a way, unfolded. In a similar stance to Bawaka Country et al. (2016), and along with the research questions outlined in the 'Introduction', this thesis has become a striving to 'challenge the notion of separate (and unequal) academic and non-academic Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems' (p. 457), rather, advocating the value of working together to honour multiple (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) perspectives.

1.3 The Research Story

This section provides a brief description of my story in Indigenous education prior to the CCCP and how particular organisational episodes and various personal and professional experiences worked to direct and shift both the creation of the CCCP and the research process.

1.3.1 Pre CCCP: Working and learning in remote Indigenous education in the NT

A brief account of my formative experiences in remote Indigenous education in the NT commencing in 1995 can be found in the third publication of this portfolio (JA3, pp. 4–5). In addition to that commentary, these early experiences were substantially different to my previous remote teaching experiences with Aboriginal children in Queensland. I had not previously worked with Aboriginal children for whom English was a second, third, or fourth language. Nor had I lived on or near a remote Aboriginal community, rather residing in a small remote township with a high Aboriginal population. The world that these Luritja-, Pitjantjarra-, and Aranda-speaking children and their families perceived and occupied seemed increasingly different to mine. I co-created a strong relationship with my teaching assistant, an affable, knowledgeable, and generous local Pitjantjarra loreman (who has since passed).

He began teaching me language. I asked him many questions about the ways his people saw and lived in the world. Stark contrasts began to emerge, as did my awareness of the subsequent multitude of possibilities for great miscommunication and misunderstanding between local Indigenous people and local station and government workers, not to mention school staff. Indeed, I witnessed many such interactions and contributed to some. Reading McConaghy's (2000) experience 15 years later brought back some of these more-than-cringeworthy memories. At the time, I sought books and stories we could use in class to help the children begin to more clearly understand some of these lived cultural differences. I found none, so wrote two children's books in that time. In subsequent years, they were published (Spillman & Wilson, 2001; Spillman & Wilyuka, 2006).

In those first few years, my principal at Titjikala and dear friend, Jacky Costanzo, and our families socialised strongly with our colleagues working in bilingual schools at Papunya, Utju, and Yuendumu. This contributed greatly to our understanding of cultural similarities and differences, including those of families' expectations of and aspirations regarding schooling. It also served to lay down some strong assumptions about bilingual and two-way education processes, assumptions that I would come to see through this research process as substantially 'culturalist' in nature and therefore as both enabling and limiting (further discussed in Section 1.4.1.2 'Culturalism and the Dilemma of Cultural Binaries'). In 1999, with representatives of the 23 main families at Titjikala, we co-created the *Titjikala School Tjukurrpa*, outlining the educational aspirations of local families for their children. This became an important document for school governance for several years after we left.

In 2003, Jacky and I carried our strong beliefs regarding the value and power of local governance of schooling into our work as the executive of a large remote Indigenous school in Central Australia, Group School East. We created a conversational process framework for local school staff to talk and negotiate with local families. We called it the 'learning

communities framework' (see Spillman & Costanzo, 2004a, 2004b, for further detail). In 2003, and as the newly appointed deputy principal of that school, I participated in an NT DEET emerging leaders program. During that program, I was introduced to the organisational cultural analysis framework of Edgar Schein (1992) and the organisational complexity perspectives of Ralph Stacey (2003). Both these theoretical perspectives, grounded in organisational research, had an indelible impact on the approach I took to the future consultancy work I was about to be thrust into, including the CCCP. These theoretical frameworks are outlined and discussed in Section 1.4 'Theoretical Perspectives and Methodologies'.

In 2005, our family moved back to Queensland so that our three Alice Springs-born children could grow up with their grandparents, a move strongly endorsed by close Aboriginal families at Titjikala. I took up the offer to join Imagine Consulting Group International to continue working in Indigenous education in the NT. Here, working with Claire Kilgariff the director of the 'People and Learning' directorate of NT DEET, we established the first Indigenous Leaders Network (ILN), initially a forum of 35 Indigenous education leaders from across the NT, which grew to over 60 through three ILN programs from 2005 to 2007. After many days of sharing and yarning, the first ILN group identified bicultural competence, trust, and decision-making as the core challenges for NT DEET regarding Indigenous education. These challenges provided the impetus for the establishment of the CCCP in 2008.

1.3.2 The CCCP

These experiences in remote Indigenous schooling in the NT equipped me with some clear imperatives to carry into the design of the CCCP. These included a strong belief in the value of approaches that draw together the cultural strengths of different groups to co-create a third cultural space or 'intercultural space' (D'Arbon, Fasoli, Frawley, & Ober, 2009).

Ideally, such spaces offer both processes for 'an awareness of the limits that are inherent to our own cultures and worlds' (Coll, 2004, p. 28) and a platform for meaningful dialogue, moving from the known to the unknown to 'shape and negotiate' (D'Arbon et al., 2009, p. 39) ways of moving forward together. In a way, this is what Jacky and I had somewhat successfully attempted in 2003 to 2004 with our learning communities framework (Spillman & Costanzo, 2004a, 2004b). I believed that the creation of such an intercultural space within the CCCP would provide the dialogic platform for the creation of positive approaches to enhance bicultural competence and improve the levels of trust and collaborative decision-making flagged by the ILN. By this stage Mithaka man, Scott Gorringe, and I, with permission from his old people, had also recreated *Engoori,* a Mithaka, Tjimpa strengths-based conversational process, to establish such positive intercultural spaces and co-create positive ways forward (Gorringe, 2012; Gorringe & Spillman, 2008). Further, the organisational complexity perspective (Stacey, 2003) and cultural analysis framework (Schein, 1992) appeared to contribute additional rigour and depth to this endeavour.

Details of the CCCP are outlined and discussed in OR1 (p. 6) and OR2 (p. 4), and in all three journal articles of this portfolio (JA1, p. 142; JA2, p. 15; JA3, p. 2). *Engoori* is also outlined and discussed in JA1 (p. 2, 7) and JA3 (p. 11).

1.3.3 Post CCCP: The research phase

I first enrolled in the DCR part-time in February 2010. Eighteen months later, my candidature was confirmed. The Northern Territory Department of Education and Training and the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee granted research approvals in April and June 2011, respectively. Tracking down all past participants, three years after the CCCP, took several months. As some of the original Indigenous CCCP participants were English, second, third, or fourth language speakers, it was important that they were contacted initially by phone. This was completed by October 2011. Information

and permission forms were then emailed or in some cases mailed. All but one of the original 22 CCCP participants indicated a desire to continue their participation in the research.

Most of 2012 was spent thematically trawling and analysing the CCCP video data. Three passes with coding and annotations were initially completed of the 36 hours of footage. Specific conversations, presentations, interviews, and episodes were then revisited for more detailed interrogation. By early 2013, a draft CCCP *Key Learnings Report* was created for original CCCP members (Appendix 1) and key NT DECS personnel (Appendix 2) to consider and provide feedback. Of the 21 original CCCP participants who had, in 2011, indicated a desire to continue their participation in the research, 14 provided either written or verbal responses to the *Key Learnings Report*. Five key personnel from the Northern Territory Department of Education and Community Services and two from Charles Darwin University participated in a Key Learnings forum in April 2013.This consultation process was completed by May 2013. The results from this feedback were then incorporated into an *Interim Organizational Report* for NT DECS. I emailed this report to the newly appointed chief executive of NT DECS, formerly the deputy chief executive, in Darwin on July 2013, and then met with him in Darwin the following month.

Yet in late 2012, as I was completing the draft *Key Learnings Report* for CCCP participants, a new Country Liberal Party government was elected in the NT. At my meeting with the chief executive of NT DECS in August 2013, I was informed of the commissioning of a new review into Indigenous education in the NT and big changes in approaches to Indigenous education afoot. I remember a kind of sick feeling in my gut and the thought that these changes were probably not going to be the kind I was hoping for as a result of my organisational report. I was correct. *A Share in the Future: Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory* (Wilson, 2014) was released early in 2014. It represented an exemplar of the neoliberal, standardisation approach to education of Indigenous children

(JA1). That changing political current impacted my research in several ways. First, it substantially reduced my formal involvement in Indigenous education in the NT and determined that the interim organisational report would by default become the final organisational report (OR1). My ideological position of schools as localised, complex, intercultural spaces of dialogic sharing and learning was no longer in favour. Second, in consultation with my supervisors, it resulted in a decision to change the focus of the first research publication to a critique of Wilson's (2014) review and its policy proposals, juxtaposing them with the learning and approaches of the CCCP. Third, again in consultation with my supervisors, I decided to shift organisational focus away from NT DECS, where there seemed little opportunity to influence positive change, towards the SSI where I had been designing and facilitating Indigenous education leadership programs for several years.

In 2006, Chris Sarra established the Indigenous Education Leadership Institute, renamed the Stronger Smarter Institute in 2009. Built upon the foundation of the 'Strong and Smart' philosophy developed through his time as principal at Cherbourg State School from 1998 to 2004 (Sarra, 2005), the work of the SSI focuses on transforming professional educational leadership within the field of Indigenous education. Steeled by and focused through his own experiences of educational oppression, Sarra witnessed the same kind of deficit assumptions and perceptions of Aboriginality at Cherbourg State School. These assumptions manifest visibly through the culture and practices of 'low expectations' at the school. Many students and families had also bought into these deficit perceptions as a sense of Aboriginal identity. Sarra created the Strong and Smart philosophy to challenge such perceptions, shifting the school culture and practices to embrace the new philosophy, badged as being 'strong' in cultural identity and 'smart' enough to match it academically with non-Aboriginal students anywhere in Australia (Sarra, 2005). Whilst positive shifts in school culture and student academic results have been documented at Cherbourg State School

(Sarra, 2005), as well as the positive impacts more broadly of the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program being identified and acknowledged (Luke, Cazden, & Coopes, 2013), Sarra's approach has not gained unanimous support. It has been criticised for promoting an explicitly racialised view of Aboriginal identities, one critiqued as simplistic, potentially divisive in the broader Australian community, and that may lead Aboriginal children to the delusion that racial pride rather than effort will lead to achievement (Pearson, 2011). In addition, a four-year, Australia-wide research trial studying the impact of the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities project failed to demonstrate an explicit stronger smarter pedagogy or any broadscale positive shifts in teaching and learning approaches or improved student achievement (Luke et al., 2013). That project, however, was distinct from the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program, though not mutually exclusive. Stronger Smarter as an example of a culturally responsive pedagogy may also be critiqued as an approach that lacks the explicit academic rigour necessary for optimal achievement (Hughes & Hughes, 2010). Whilst all these claims are contestable to differing extents, this is not the purpose of this thesis.

I began co-designing and co-facilitating the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program (SSLP) in 2009. This eight-day residential leadership program was first convened in the Ration Shed Cultural Precinct at Cherbourg Community. It was most often delivered in two forums (six days, two days) or three forums (three days, three days, two days). Here we worked with participants, largely school executives and Indigenous education workers from across the country, to co-create trustful, robust, dialogic spaces, as had occurred during the CCCP. These safe spaces enabled participants to confront and discuss the history of Cherbourg community and school as a microcosm of race relations and policies more generally within Australia, challenging their own perceptions and assumptions regarding Aboriginality, and questioning their level of expectations of Aboriginal students and that of

their staff and communities. ‘High expectations’ was central to the strong and smart philosophy, and its strong relational basis is clear in Sarra’s writing and practice (Sarra, 2005).

In the context of both the political shift in the NT in 2012 and my then-current work with the SSI as outlined earlier, late in 2013 I wrote a second organisational report focusing CCCP research findings on articulating dispositions and capabilities for the creation of ‘high-expectations relationships’ in Indigenous education. This report, submitted in December 2013, was subsequently accepted by the SSI board of directors and had significant impact. It served to reinforce and extend upon the substantial body of research and work regarding ‘high expectations’ undertaken by Sarra (2005). It contributed to the uptake of the concept of high-expectations relationships by the SSI as the centrepiece of the stronger smarter philosophy, as indicated by the publication of the SSI’s first position paper in 2014, *High-Expectations Relationships: A Foundation for Quality Learning Environments in all Australian Schools* (SSI Limited, 2014). In the ‘Preface’ of that paper, it states, ‘The paper draws specifically on the published and unpublished work of Chris Sarra and David Spillman’. A further journal article titled ‘High-Expectations Relationships: A Foundation for Enacting High Expectations in all Australian Schools’ (Sarra, Spillman, Jackson, Davis, & Bray, 2018) outlines ongoing research undertaken by the SSI into the value of focusing on high-expectations relationships within Indigenous education contexts to create the kind of educational environments that will best enable Indigenous students to achieve academic performance outcomes.

Working as a Stronger Smarter facilitator from 2009 to 2014, I travelled to urban, regional, and remote locations in five Australian jurisdictions. The Hunter/Central Coast education region of New South Wales (NSW) was one of our most regular clients. Over a five-year period, I co-facilitated 14 Stronger Smarter Leadership Programs (SSLPs) there.

The NSW Department of Education's coordinator for these programs, and my most often co-facilitator, was the regional senior education officer for Aboriginal education, a Ngemba man named John Oates. After the first few programs where we got to know each other more than a little, 'Oatsey' began asking me to come down early or stay an extra night so we could get out on Country. Over those five years, I met some amazing Aboriginal men, visited several special Aboriginal sites, and listened to many ancestral stories around the campfire. Here I was gradually and lovingly introduced to Ngemba men's lore.[1] In April 2014, I was conferred the privilege and obligation of being taken through ceremony into that lore. Mostly incidentally (as far as I am aware), this phase of my life also coincided with personal relational upheaval and renewal with my wife, Gretta. I deferred from study for 12 months, believing at the time I would most likely exit completely.

The initiation into Ngemba men's lore and the ensuing learning opportunities worked to once again challenge and shift my focus, personally and professionally, to keep my story rolling on. Here I was offered a different way of viewing human life and endeavour and our relationships with the natural environment. In particular, I came to understand the anthropocentric assumptions underlying much (though not all) of Western worldview, assumptions that were clearly part of my story of socialisation and social character. I was also offered a more encompassing, more ecocentric way of positioning ourselves in the world, one that, in the face of our massive current ecological and social challenges, might provide a more sustainable way forward. Anthropocentrism and ecocentrism are further explored and discussed in Section 1.4.5 'Aboriginal Lore and Ecocentrism'.

Notably, Ngemba lore taught me the importance of committing energy and effort to care for the Country (including human and other-than-human inhabitants) that I inhabit. In

[1] Ngemba-speaking Aboriginal people are from Central West region of NSW, Brewarrina in the north to Lake Mungo in the south.

2016, I took up the opportunity to work locally at Maroon Outdoor Education Centre to embed such considerations and perspectives within outdoor education practice. I was invited to present at the National Outdoor Education Conference in April that year at Sunshine Coast University. The second journal publication in the *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education* (JA2) was a direct result of that workshop and collaboration. This work also led me to new relationships within the outdoor and environmental education fields. Subsequently, I was invited to conduct a workshop at the Inspiring Earth Ethics Conference, Griffith University in November 2017.

As I revise this thesis, I am working half-time with local primary and secondary students to understand and connect more consciously with our country and consider ways we can care for the places we live. In so doing, I am fulfilling cultural obligations. In addition, I am working with whole-school staff from several government and private schools in the region (and further afield) to critically reflect on their underlying cultural assumptions regarding Indigenous children and families and the collaborative nature and quality of their staff and classroom cultures. In these ways, my current work draws heavily on learning from the entire research process. In these practically lived ways, this research story, my story, is rolling on, 'accumulating wisdom' (Rose, 2011, p. 15) and learning.

1.4 Theoretical Perspectives and Methodologies

Along with the perspectives offered in Section 1.2 'Guiding Perspectives', this section outlines the various bodies of research and theory that influenced the underlying theoretical positioning and methodological approaches taken in this research.

1.4.1 Culture, cultural analysis and culturalism

The aim of the CCCP was to highlight and develop ways to facilitate culturally competent collaboration within the Indigenous education contexts of the NT. The initial research focused on exploring the ways certain discourses and their underlying assumptions

operate to enable and limit this work, and ways of creating transformative opportunities to enhance awareness and transcend disabling or limiting patterns of perceiving, thinking, and acting. Thus, both the notion of 'culture' and the ways it works to impact perceptions, intentions, thinking, and behaving were of primary concern throughout the CCCP and in the initial stages of this research.

Yet in the planning of the CCCP, I was vaguely aware of a tension (though not a mutually exclusive one) in the taken-for-granted assumptions about 'culture' when focusing on 'Aboriginal culture' in Indigenous education, as contrasted to the assumptions 'at play' when focusing on 'organisational culture' or 'school culture'. With the former, thinking is often founded on assumptions of an anthropological, ethnic, or race-based nature where the focus is on *who* Aboriginal people are. This was certainly reinforced by McConaghy's (2000) research and writing on 'culturalism'. Regarding organisational including school culture, the underlying assumption is often a relational or behavioural one, focusing more on *how* people are together (e.g., Stoll, 1998). The organisational-focused research and writing of Schein (1992) and Stacey (2003, 2011) also reinforce this more relational or behavioural view. Throughout the early years of this research, I had many conversations about this dilemma with Scott Gorringe, my 'brother', consulting partner and SSLP co-facilitator, a Mithaka, Tjimpa man from far South West Queensland. As the CCCP focused on enhancing collaboration within intercultural education contexts, clearly consideration of both notions of culture was relevant. Our conclusion, supported by this research, is discussed in Section 1.4.4 '*Engoori:* Focusing Our Initial Work in Indigenous Education on the Question, How Are We Together?'

As previously mentioned in Section 1.3 'The Research Story', participation in an emerging leaders program as an NT DEET employee in 2003 introduced me to the organisational cultural analysis research of Edgar Schein (1992). These perspectives

contributed significantly to the design and facilitation of CCCP, to my research methodology in the early stages of this research, to our considerations regarding the dilemma of differing assumptions about 'culture' flagged earlier, and ultimately to self-reflexive analysis.

An outline of Schein's (1992) cultural analysis framework is offered in OR1 (p. 7). A brief review is warranted here. Schein (1992) proposed that to best understand and transform organisational cultures, we need to collect data and analyse 'three levels of culture' (p. 17). The most superficial level is that of *artefacts*, the 'visible organizational structures and processes' (p. 17) including, for example, patterns of behaviour and modes of interaction, and the physical layout of space, dress code, displayed objects, and so on. Whilst artefacts are the most obvious level of culture and easy to collect data on, they are difficult to decipher without further cultural information. The next level, *espoused values,* are constituted by organisational 'strategies, goals and philosophies' (p. 17), which articulate the 'what' and 'why' of the organisation. Artefacts and espoused values are both within awareness and can therefore be relatively easily reflected upon. *Basic underlying assumptions* or underlying cultural assumptions are 'unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings' (p. 17) that are transferred to organisation members through socialising processes. Schein's (1992) research demonstrated how these underlying cultural assumptions are ultimate drivers of values and actions. Schein (1992) focused on these underlying assumptions when defining culture:

> The **culture** of a group can now be defined as:
>
> A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaption and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems. (emphasis in original, p. 12)

Whilst these underlying cultural assumptions represent the most foundational layer of culture in Schein's framework, his definition proposed culture to be primarily an out-of-

awareness (subconscious) phenomenon. In defining culture this way, he mentioned but did not focus on the most 'visible' aspects of a group's culture; that is, the group's patterns of interacting, behaving, relating, and manipulating their environment (artefacts) or the rationales provided for the way things are thought about and done (espoused values).

Sutton (2001) made these layers of culture a little more explicit when he proposed,

> Culture is not merely a consciously assumed personal attitude that may be donned or doffed at will . . . it is neither fully conscious and subject to voluntary control nor wholly unconscious and beyond being brought to mind . . . [It] consists of the interplay between 'unreflexive daily practice' and our partial awareness of what we are doing and thinking. (p. 135)

Such a definition highlights the dynamic interplay between Schein's three levels of culture, particularly the artefacts and underlying cultural assumptions. To introduce and begin cultural analysis work in CCCP, we chose to embark from the most tangible layer of culture, the artefacts, to stimulate participants' curiosity by highlighting group patterns. Drawing from Sutton's definition, we focused our attention on becoming aware of 'unreflexive daily practices', through perceptual and reflective capabilities, by tuning in to these patterns of perceiving, thinking, and doing. Thus, the definition we chose to use in CCCP was: 'Culture: The conscious and subconscious patterns of perceiving, thinking, judging, responding and behaving that characterise any group of people'.

Here, underlying cultural assumptions are implicitly included as subconscious drivers of habits of perceiving, thinking, judging, responding, and behaving. Using Schein's framework, the focus of this work during the CCCP was to facilitate participants to notice their group patterns of thinking, talking, and behaving and those of other collectives within Indigenous education, particularly their unreflexive daily practices, and then to curiously investigate the basic shared assumptions that underlie and drive these patterns of practice. In this regard, there is one well-documented, pervasive discourse within the field of Indigenous

education—deficit discourse—and one less-widely recognised but with clear importance to this research—'culturalism'. In thinking about discourse here, it is suffice to take up Hall's (2007) definition, in which discourse is seen as dominant patterns of thinking, talking, and practice that confer power relations. In particular, by directing perceptions, attitudes, and judgements, discourse works to construct and maintain subjective identities within one's world (Fogarty, Wilson, Lovell, & Fforde, 2017). Whilst McConaghy (2000) subsumed deficit thinking and talking within a culturalist discourse, the former has received such substantial treatment in Australian and international educational research, it warrants being dealt with separately.

1.4.1.1 Deficit discourse

Deficit discourse is an entrenched social pattern of perceiving, thinking, and judging that conceives and perpetuates Indigenous identities as entirely deficient and disadvantaged (Fforde, Bamblett, Lovett, Gorringe, & Fogarty, 2013). In Australia, it is a vestige of colonisation having its foundations established on relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people since first contact. As a mode of seeing and thinking about Indigenous people, it constitutes a racialised construction of the Western (colonial) gaze, with no consideration of how Indigenous people saw or see themselves (Fogarty et al., 2017). Dodson, (1994), Fforde et al. (2013), Fogarty et al. (2017), Fogarty, Lovell, & Dodson (2015), Langton (1993, 1999), Paradies (2006), and Vass (2013) have all traced this long history in Australia, regarding the embedding of deficit discourse within Indigenous affairs policy. In this regard, Fogarty et al. (2017) used the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) as an example of how policy makers, whilst aiming to 'alleviate disadvantage' (p. 10) are so unconsciously immersed in this discourse of deficit that Indigenous people come to be seen, and subsequently often see themselves, as the problem. The resultant repression of Indigenous agency and aspiration leads to 'a reductionist and essentializing vision of what is

possible' (p. 10), promulgating a self-perpetuating cycle of deficit, disillusionment, and failure.

Fogarty et al. (2017) proposed that deficit discourse displays all the characteristics of a discursive formation, in the Foucauldian sense, operating within and being 'intricately entwined across different sites of representation' (p. 13). As such, its power is pervasive, being exerted through generic ways of knowing and specific practices and applications that confer regulation and control. It seeps into every nook and cranny of our social fabric, impacting us all and cutting to the heart of how Indigenous and non-Indigenous people come to know each other in Australia. With this in mind, and following Foucault, Fogarty et al. (2017) identified the importance of investigating 'the more subtle forms of deficit discourse' (p. 14) in policy settings and localised practice aimed at alleviating Indigenous disadvantage.

Deficit discourse remains one of, if not the, major challenge(s) in enhancing wellbeing, learning, and achievement of Indigenous children through Australian schooling. Drawing on research from both New Zealand and Australia, Fogarty et al. (2017) identified evidence of a causal link between deficit discourse in education and 'limited educational outcomes' (p. 11) for Indigenous students. With the vast majority of teachers in Australia coming from Anglo–European, middle-class backgrounds (Mills, 2008), and recognising the powerful socialising processes of upbringing, schooling, media, and professional preparation, along with current deficit-oriented, statistically based policy settings (e.g., 'Closing the Gap', NAPLAN), it is not unlikely that many teachers, whilst believing they are working to improve Indigenous student learning and achievement, are unconsciously enacting deficit practices. This is not to argue that statistical measures such as NAPLAN are of no use, nor is it to ignore the historical, political, and economic realities of disadvantage for many Indigenous Australians. However, when social issues are conflated with identity, and conceptions of Aboriginality become so mired in notions of deficit, disadvantage, and deficiency, teacher expectations

lower (Sarra, 2005), educational approaches become reductionist, essentialising, and punitive (Fogarty et al., 2017), and the cycle of failure is perpetuated by funding and policy settings that embody this deficit paradigm (Gorringe, 2011; Sarra, 2005; Wilson, 2016).

The ways deficit discourse operates and is perpetuated, as introduced above, are discussed in OR1 (p. 7), OR2 (p. 8–9), JA1 (p. 138–9), and JA3 (p. 7). JA1 offers a critique of the ways the latest review of Indigenous education in the NT works to reify such deficit conceptions of Indigenous children, their families, and communities regarding their educational endeavour. JA3 offers a brief critique and a Warlpiri response to the simple systems, deficit-oriented NTER.

As reported in several publications of this thesis, the analysis of CCCP footage failed to uncover any episodes or patterns of deficit assumption, thinking, or conversation regarding Indigenous students and families among CCCP participants. This is not surprising as participants were selected into the CCCP based upon demonstrated success in a variety of spheres of Indigenous education. To varying degrees, most CCCP participants seemed somewhat aware of both the existence and impact of this deficit discourse upon the engagement, learning, and achievement of Indigenous students. There were conversations about this, with two participant pairs choosing ‘deficit teacher talk’ in their schools as the focus for their workplace projects.

Largely in response to the prevalence and limiting nature of deficit discourse within the field of Indigenous education, one of the key learnings of this research reported and discussed in both organisational reports (OR1, p. 13; OR2, p.18, respectively) and in JA1 (p. 143) and JA3 (p. 10), is *strengths-based conversations and approaches.* This research proposes that pedagogic approaches in Indigenous education need to regularly draw on the knowledge, strengths, and aspirations of Indigenous children, families, and communities as a critical part of the platform for educational endeavour and achievement. In so doing, this research echoes

the call of other authors, including Bat and Guenther (2013), Fogarty, Lovell, and Dodson (2015), Fogarty et al. (2017), Gorringe and Spillman (2008), Sarra (2012), Spillman (2017), and SSI Limited (2014). Using a strengths-based conversational approach, one CCCP pair was able to facilitate school-based peers' awareness and ownership of their collective habit of engaging in deficit discourse, regarding Indigenous students and families, and its debilitating nature. This episode is reported in JA1 (p. 144). In addition, high-expectations relationships necessary to the wellbeing and achievement of Indigenous students constitutes another version of strengths-based approaches (Sarra et al., in press; SSI Limited, 2014).

1.4.1.2 Culturalism and the dilemma of cultural binaries

At the end of Section 1.2 'Guiding Principles', I mentioned that I was introduced to McConaghy's (2000) text *Rethinking Indigenous Education* in 2010 when commencing this DCR. Her brief description of a disorienting dilemma in 1985 whilst working in remote northern NT resurfaced some of the uncertainty I had experienced when attempting to discharge government education policy at Titjikala School. Whilst perhaps not a widely acclaimed text, McConaghy's theorising, particularly her notion of culturalism, became a powerful tool for reflecting on my experiences in Indigenous education in the NT.

In the 'Preface' of *Rethinking Indigenous Education: Culturalism, Colonisation and the Politics of Knowing*, McConaghy (2000) offered a succinct definition of culturalism:

> Culturalism, in brief, refers to the use of particular anthropological notions of 'culture' by which 'Indigenous culture' enters the field as 'already read' (following Mishra 1996). Further, culturalism incorporates the ideologies and discursive regimes of universalism, cultural racism and cultural incompatibility in order to construct and perpetuate a 'two race' binary. It requires that anthropological notions of 'culture' and the 'two race' binary are privileged as the primary analytical tools for deliberations of pedagogy in all instances. (p. xi)

Clearly, I had not read McConaghy's publication and was therefore not aware of this notion of culturalism at the time of designing and facilitating the CCCP. However, reading

this text resulted in a great deal of reflection on the impact of the 'two-race' binary in Indigenous education in the NT. This caused a further dilemma for me, as this culturalist assumption was clearly foundational to the important educational movements of bilingual and two-way learning as well as the design and implementation of the CCCP, yet I could see it was at the same time potentially limiting.

The way such culturalist assumptions can work to limit human interaction and relating was made poignantly clear to me through an interaction during an SSLP that I was co-facilitating in the Yarra Valley in 2013. This episode is reported in OR2 (p. 9), but is worthy of a brief mention here. One male participant, named Robbie, was clearly an Aborigine having appropriate physical markers including facial features, curly black hair, and very dark skin (Paradies, 2006). He also frequently broke into Aboriginal English whilst speaking. He was one of only three Indigenous participants in a group of 22, most of whom had very little or no previous interaction with Indigenous adults. In the morning check-in on Day 2 of the weeklong program, Robbie was clearly agitated. When it was his turn to check-in, this is what he said:

> *All that stuff you have in your head about me, about who I am as an Aboriginal man* [holding open hands to the sides of his head]. *Do away with it* [waving hands away from his body]. *Get rid of it, and meet me as a human being . . . Meet me, Robbie* [surname]*!* [pointing to his chest].

In an informal, one-on-one conversation after the check-in, Robbie indicated that during conversations the previous evening, he had been 'hammered' with questions about his Aboriginality, his language, heritage, country, songs, dances, and so on. When other participants realised he was not such a 'real Aborigine', being a descendant of the Stolen Generation, he said he felt their disappointment. In a real sense, and as McConaghy (2000) suggested, Robbie had been 'already read' by others. Robbie knew that these imaginings of Aboriginality, triggered by his physical appearance, prevented them from 'really getting to

know me'. This sense of others' disappointment at his lack of authenticity had caused him a great deal of anxiety and illness throughout his adult life. This is one way that culturalist assumptions about Aboriginality may play out, potentially preventing quality human interaction and relating. Paradies (2006) has written eloquently of this phenomenon, drawing heavily from personal experience.

In such ways, and as a tool for social analysis and self-reflexivity, I have found culturalist discourse extremely useful. In this regard, I provide some personal analysis later in this section. Whilst McConaghy's (2000) writing has been influential it has also been heavily critiqued, perhaps most notably by Sarra (2011).

Coming from a critical realist position, Sarra's (2011) critique is largely of McConaghy's (2000) post-structural argument and analysis. Sarra made two points in his critique that are useful from the perspective of this research, and which I do not see in a pragmatic sense as necessarily at odds with the notion of culturalist discourse as a tool for social and cultural analysis.

First, Sarra (2011) critiqued McConaghy's (2000) post-structural employment of knowledge = power coupling, taking exception to the notion that ultimately, knowledge will always be used to exert power relations. Rather, Sarra proposed that human emancipation is only possible when people have 'knowledge of the power relations that oppress them' (p. 39). He wrote, 'It is just this relationship between knowledge and freedom that I attempt to capture in the "strong and smart" philosophy' (p. 39). Here Sarra argued for knowledge = freedom as distinct from the knowledge = power coupling of post-structuralism. Regardless of the various ideological critiques, it seems clear to me from this research that an awareness of culturalist assumptions, the ways they are perpetuated and limit human interaction and thinking (as in Robbie's case), is a powerful tool for emancipation, personally and collectively.

Second, in addressing McConaghy's (2000) critique of essentialism, Sarra (2011) pointed out that binaries do exist rather than being 'artificial impositions on the flux of reality' (p. 39). In the same paragraph, he proposed that binaries can be and not be in the same moment. To exemplify his argument here, Sarra pointed out that 'one is either an Aborigine or not' (p. 39), clearly a binary. Yet one can be an Aborigine and other things at the same time, if we focus on a stratified notion of human identity. In reinforcing this, Paradies (2006) pointed out that human identity can be constituted by 'many aspects of experience, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, class, physicality, language, religion and profession, to name only a few' (p. 356). I would add that useful and powerful binaries are often mutually constituting; that is, both their difference and uniqueness are conferred through their coexistence. One cannot exist without its opposite. Nowhere have I read this more beautifully articulated than in the paper by Bawaka Country et al. (2016) that focused on the relational, emergent co-becoming of place/space from a Bawaka Yolngu perspective. During this paper, the authors offered the Bawaka Yolngu concept of *gurrutu* to 'illustrate the limits of western ontologies' (p. 456). *Gurrutu* is the complex kinship system of Bawaka Yolngu and underlies the conceptions and realities of all things in, with, and around Bawaka country through their complex yet binary interrelatedness. *Gurrutu* is the process of emergent co-becoming comprising Yirritja and Dhuwa in every moment. Everything that constitutes Bawaka country—people, plants, animals, geographic features, fire, stars, songs, ceremonies, wind, tides, and so on—is either Yirritja or Dhuwa, being held in existence by the existence of its opposite. Through the complex relational flow of emergent co-becoming, this paradoxically simple and complex, mutually constituting binary offers structure and reality in the present moment.

In a far less poignant way, these more sophisticated conceptualisations allowed me to perceive and investigate the possibility of culturalism's two-race binary of homogeneous

Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures being both limiting and enabling at the same time. The realisation of this possibility did not happen all of a sudden but emerged over time through reading, reflecting, and talking about the culturalist critique (read McConaghy, 2000) and the critique of culturalism (read Sarra, 2011). Interrogating the CCCP experience (and indeed my entire experience in Indigenous education in the NT) through this lens of culturalist possibility was indeed both powerful and liberating.

Through research analysis of the CCCP video footage, many examples of the limiting, over-simplistic nature of culturalist binaries emerged. Multiple episodes were uncovered where such assumptions were invoked and operated to prioritise and perpetuate an over-simplistic view of homogenous and incompatible Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. Neither participants nor we facilitators were aware of the discourse we were engaging in and its limiting nature. This essentialising of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures and identities constituted a dominant pattern of thinking and talking within the CCCP, where Indigenous cultural perspectives were usually positioned positively and Western perspectives negatively. This pattern of assumption, thinking, and talking is discussed in OR 2 (p. 11), with two anecdotes from the research being offered, and OR 1 (p. 8).

Through the early research period, this lens of culturalist discourse also led to some significant self-reflexive analysis and awakening. I became aware that I had been heavily socialised into such a culturalist discourse through my time in Indigenous education in the NT and was able to acknowledge and accept some of my habits of perceiving, thinking, judging, and responding that had been strongly patterned by this discourse. For example, in OR2 (p. 22), I describe an episode (Anecdote 1) that occurred on Day 2 of the CCCP. Here, following a whole-group discussion about leadership, an Indigenous male participant offered the observation that the first four speakers were non-Indigenous, his explanation of this observation being that this occurred because non-Indigenous people like to talk and

Indigenous people do less talking and more listening. Whilst this may have been a valid perception based upon the Indigenous male's and others' experiences with Western educators, one well worth contemplating, no one questioned or contested this position or offered an alternate explanation, of which there may have been several. For example, analysis of video footage showed that seven of the nine participants who did not speak in the initial group conversation were Indigenous women. The passive acceptance of the male participant's proposition prevented consideration and critique of this more obvious sociolinguistic phenomenon given these circumstances: that of silencing women in public discourse (see, e.g., Pettman, 1992). Further, as six of the eight women who did not speak were Indigenous, there was also the possibility of 'double colonisation' being at play, where imperial and patriarchal ideologies merge and leverage off each other (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2006). CCCP participants held different positions in the organisation and therefore differing socioeconomic circumstances and histories. Class may have also interacted in this situation to contribute to power and silence (Katrak, 1989). Therefore, gender, class, and a multitude of other factors may have influenced the pattern of conversation. All of these possibilities remained unexplored due to the passive acceptance of this culturalist assumption of a binary of homogeneous cultural groups: 'Westerners talk, Indigenous people listen'. In these ways, the compliant acceptance of this over-simplistic assumption served to limit the depth, scope, and possibility of the conversation.

From a self-reflexive position, why had I not, as the facilitator of this conversation, recognised the dominant conversational pattern and the assumption being reified here, about the primacy of a two-race cultural binary within Indigenous education? Further, and perhaps even more perplexing, why had I not at least noticed the gendered pattern of conversation when I had previously worked for several years in health education curriculum and policy development where gender challenges were ever at the forefront of our considerations? In

addition, why had I not drawn attention to considerations of the possible impact of power and class here, when I was well aware and educated of their effect? First, as outlined in the previous section, I was unaware of the culturalist assumptions of a two-race binary until I read McConaghy (2000) in 2009. It is clear now that I had held and enacted such subconscious culturalist assumptions throughout my Indigenous education experiences in the NT, including CCCP. Assumptions about the primacy of 'culture' to Aboriginal life and identity, and that bridging the cultural divide between Aboriginal and Western cultures is the main game in Indigenous education, were deeply embedded in the culture of NT DEET, through informal conversation, professional learning programs, teaching and learning approaches, curriculum documents, policies, and research. Indeed, it seems in retrospect that in all my educational experiences in the NT, my conscious and subconscious focus was heavily on culture and this binary of cultural difference. The male Aboriginal CCCP participant's assessment of the conversational pattern as an exemplar of this binary of cultural difference resonated with these underlying assumptions. No further information was required.

In addition, in considering how this episode also invoked assumptions regarding Indigenous identity, I came to accept that during my time in Indigenous education in the NT, I (like Robbie's counterparts discussed earlier), enacted judgements about Indigenous 'authenticity' based upon subconscious culturalist assumptions. These assumptions included that culture and language are central to 'real' Indigenous identities, and subsequently, that a critical part of educators' work is to reacquaint the 'have-nots' with their language and culture. This would somehow make them more fully 'Aboriginal', also reinforcing the discourse of progress and enlightenment (Harrison, 2007). These assumptions of authenticity, based upon the centrality of culture and language, became tools for judgement about who to listen to and ask questions of when considering issues of Indigenous education, and who to employ. I clearly recall making decisions about employment of Aboriginal teaching assistants

and even conference speakers, where this notion of Aboriginal authenticity figured centrally though not wholly consciously in decision-making processes. This is not to say that working with Aboriginal children on their language and culture is negative. On the contrary, reinforcing local Aboriginal languages and cultures enhances both Aboriginal children's perceptions of identity, their connections and obligations to country, and their perceptions of the value their teachers and thus broader society places on this. It is only problematic if we perceive children as less authentically Aboriginal if they cannot speak their language and/or do not know their country or cultural heritage. I now accept that during that time I preferentially judged Aboriginal people based upon such characteristics. Further commentary on the notion of Indigenous authenticity, its assumptions, and patterns of thinking and judging is offered in OR1 (p. 10) and OR2 (p. 9). In addition, a further self-reflexive account is offered in OR1 (p. 11).

In departing from McConaghy and accepting Sarra for a while, I became able to see that the binaries of culturalism are not always necessarily limiting or disabling. Indeed, being availed the opportunity to consider binaries in the more sophisticated, paradoxical ways outlined earlier in this section enabled me to also see the important foundational nature of some culturalist conceptions within the field of Indigenous education. Culturalist assumptions, for example, provide a foundational position for the critically important political movements of bilingual and two-way education. Culturalism operates here through the prioritisation of a binary of two distinct epistemological and ontological worlds, one Indigenous and the other Western. Ideologically, bilingualism is devoid of the 'knowledge = power-over' kind of power central to a Foucauldian analysis, though pragmatically it will always be 'at play' in some ways. Rather, and ideally, in bilingual or two-way educational setting, agentic, transformative power (knowledge = emancipation) is desired to honour these

two distinct cultural knowledge systems and bring them together within the bounds of a school community.

Culturalist assumptions are also foundational to and reinforced by some important educational research within the field of Indigenous education in the NT. For example, D'Arbon et al. (2009) undertook the most extensive research to that time in exploring Indigenous leadership in remote education settings. *'Linking Worlds*: *Strengthening the Leadership Capacity of Indigenous Educational Leaders in Remote Education Settings'* represented a four-year collaboration between the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and the Australian Catholic University. It was an ARC link project with NT DET as a project partner. The research aimed to explore the 'unique "worlds" within which Indigenous educational leaders operate' and to identify the 'skills, knowledge and attributes required to be an effective leader' (D'Arbon et al., 2009, p. 1). The primary output of this research was the intercultural educational leadership framework. The authors offer a research-based rationale for this:

> Put simply, the worlds in which Indigenous educational leaders operate are intercultural/bothways ones . . . [that] requires 'working together' as intercultural educators. This is represented graphically below where educators are 'talking about the knowledge systems of two cultures working together'. (Marrika, Ngurruwutthun, & White, 1992, p. 31)

The graphic referred to shows two interconnecting circles, one being representative of Western culture and knowledge, the other Indigenous culture and knowledge. Where the circles intersect represents intercultural culture and knowledge. The quotation and associated graphic summarise the outcome of four years of working with Indigenous leaders in remote education in the NT. As with bilingual and two-way education approaches, the culturalist assumptions and thinking here are clearly accessible. In addition to this, the fundamental assumption on which rested the conception, planning, and initiation of CCCP was that the

most critical challenge we face in NT Indigenous education is bridging the gap between these two cultural worlds. This assumption is obvious in the project title—the Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project—and in the way the project worked to bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous education workers together to consider this challenge.

In the ways briefly touched on here, I now perceive that culturalist assumptions and thinking have led to some important opportunities for intercultural exploration and learning within Indigenous education in the NT. If left unexplored and unchallenged, however, the passive acceptance of culturalist perspectives can lead to disabling patterns of thinking and judging such as stereotyping, judgements about Aboriginal authenticity, trivialising, or eulogising Aboriginal cultures and identities, and deficit discourse. These are further discussed in OR1 (pp. 8–13, 23–24).

In such cases, transformational possibility and learning is severely restricted, and culturalist assumptions reified. During the CCCP, the primary process used that enabled culturalist discourse to be transcended was conversational circles. Using circles for conversation is based upon the assumption that as human beings we all wish to connect to self and others in good ways; that is, we all wish to participate in 'good relating' (Prannis, 2005). Conversational circles are relational spaces that include and honour everyone's story, opinions, ideas, and aspirations. They are equal power relating spaces that enable perceptions of safety and trust to emerge, and are therefore essential to the establishment of high-expectations relationships, the subject of OR2. Conversational circles, the ways they were employed during the CCCP, and some of the transformative opportunities they availed have been extensively outlined and discussed in the thesis publications (JA1, pp. 143–5; JA2, pp. 20–1; JA3, pp. 13–4, 18; OR1, p. 12; OR2, pp. 15–6, 22–3).

It was for the reasons outlined here that a recognition of the need to explore and honour human diversity beyond the limitations of culturalist thinking led to the first key learning in

OR1 to be named *'Good relating' as the deeper purpose of culture*, and in OR2, *Creating cultures of 'good relating'.* Video analysis uncovered many episodes where CCCP participants in such ways were able to transcend the binaries of culturalist thinking, offering opportunities for learning and transformation. For example, one CCCP participant pair took up the challenge of engaging Aboriginal assistant teachers in year-level curriculum planning sessions in their school. This process could have taken a culturalist focus where, for example, they might have discussed the primary differences between Aboriginal and Western ways of learning. Instead, the pair used conversational circles to facilitate the establishment of deeper personal relationships and broad perceptions of safety and trust. This enabled more inclusive and robust conversations, with Aboriginal assistant teachers more clearly engaged and participating (see JA1, p. 145, for further detail). In another example, JA3 focuses on *the brumby dance* episode and describes how Indigenous and non-Indigenous CCCP participants worked to co-create a ceremony to assist in dealing positively with negative emotional fall-out from the NTER. It can be argued that the NTER is a culturalist imperative of a strongly deficit kind, and as mentioned earlier, the CCCP had clear culturalist underpinnings. Despite this, the participatory processes facilitated by the Warlpiri pair, using age-old practices of conversational circles, clearly worked to transcend these potentially limiting cultural binaries.

In this section, I have explored various conceptions of culture and the ways that an awareness of culturalist discourse in Indigenous education in Australia can enable an understanding of its value as well as its limitations and potential to oppress. In particular, and as this research has done, the utilisation of culturalist critique with regard to individual and collective habits of perceiving, thinking, judging, and behaving can enable positive transformative opportunities. Section 1.4.2 explores how underlying assumptions such as those of culturalism are transferred from society to individuals through socialising processes, and how individual and collective liberation from such limiting assumptions may occur.

1.4.2 The self-society dilemma and transformative learning

Erich Fromm's (1962) notion of social character has already been introduced in the 'Introduction' to this overarching statement. It enables an understanding of the way Schein's (1992) three layers of culture interact to direct human perception, thinking, and acting.

In 1962, three decades prior to Schein's publication, Fromm drew together, under the banner of 'radical humanism', the sociology of Marx and the psychoanalysis of Freud to construct a framework for explaining the dynamic interplay between culture (society) and individual needs and drives (self). Fromm (1962) identified this social character as

> the nucleus of the character which is shared by most members of the same culture, in contradistinction to the individual character in which people belonging to the same culture differ from each other. (p. 71)

Social character is constructed and transmitted within each society based upon the unique set of structures and conditions operating within that society, including, for example, political and geographic factors, cultural traditions, population size, modes of production, and technology (Fromm, 1962). The purpose of social character is to maintain order within any society by enabling behaviours that conform to accepted social patterns to be enacted without conscious decision-making; that is, by creating social habits enacted by individuals on mass. In any moment, the socially constructed habits of social character begin with directing how we perceive experience and thus the information we take in. To explain and understand this facet of human social habit, Fromm introduced the 'socially conditioned filter', which is a functioning element of social character. This subconscious filter operates to ensure that only those experiences and information that conform to the categorical system of society are allowed into human awareness. That is, some phenomena and sensory data are noticed, interpreted, and responded to. Other phenomena and data are not. In this regard, Bennett-Goldman (2001) proposed that only about 1% of the information available to us in any

moment enters awareness, such is the discerning power of the socially conditioned filter. The socially conditioned filter also operates by having language for some phenomena and experiences and not for others. What we have language for we notice. As well as language there is a socially accepted 'logic' that directs people's patterns of thinking. In many Western societies, this is a binary or dualistic logic. Finally, societal taboos, the 'not done' or 'not thought', direct attention within social character (Fromm, 1962). The 'not done' or 'not thought' are not attended to.

There are some strong resonances between Schein's layers of culture and Fromm's notion of social character. In a significant way, Fromm's notion of social character with its socially conditioned filter provides an explanation of how Schein's three layers interact, are transmitted to new members, and perpetuated. It also demonstrates how, without critical reflection on these unconscious processes and the ways they direct habits of perceiving, thinking, and doing, culture remains robustly intact. In this regard, Fromm's constructs also offer a way of understanding (and possibly transcending) our own constructed social (cultural) character. As a radical humanist, the purpose of all this for Fromm was precisely this: to offer a process for 'waking up' to these 'false' aspects of our unconscious selves. Fromm called this process 'derepression' (1962, p. 110). According to Fromm, this process of opening oneself to the deeper, wider reality within leads to a knowing much broader, deeper, and more profound than Western rationalistic, dualistic knowing.

Within the field of Indigenous education, this process of derepression resonates with Sarra's intention to facilitate Aboriginal people's emancipation from the oppressive structures and vestiges of colonisation. It is also complementary to Stacey's (2011) notion of self-reflexivity. For example, the personal self-reflexive accounts offered in the previous section, where I describe becoming aware of my socialisation into culturalist assumptions, thinking, and judging, clearly offers an example of derepression. These culturalist

assumptions constituted part of my social character, which I was becoming increasingly aware of. In the SSI's position paper of high-expectations relationships, significantly influenced by this research through OR2, one of the three key elements in the 'high-expectations relationships framework' identified and discussed is 'understanding personal assumptions' (SSI, 2014). The SSI (2014) rationale is offered below.

> The Australian teaching population remains almost entirely of Anglo–Australian, middle-class backgrounds (Mills 2008). In addition the socializing processes of a middle-class upbringing, reinforced by the implicit rules and norms of schooling, are so powerful they appear to be largely resistant to preservice teacher education efforts to focus on understanding diversity (Mills 2008). The out-of-awareness values and beliefs laid down through these socialization processes lead to habitual patterns of perceiving, thinking, judging and behaving. It is in this way that society has conditioned us to have low expectations of low SES and Indigenous students, also highlighting why it can be very difficult to change such perceptions and judgments even for those who genuinely believe in high-expectations for all. (p. 7)

Here is offered a justification and call for all teachers in Australian schools to continually engage in self-reflexive processes of derepression, to understand and challenge aspects of their social character—subconscious cultural assumptions and the habits they elicit. This is clearly one of the imperatives of the SSI. In my seven years as a designer and facilitator of the SSLP, such processes were central and critical to our work.

Many examples were offered through conversation and interview during the CCCP where participants talked about such personal learning and transformation. Subsequently, the third key learning outlined in the organisational reports was titled, *Making it personal.* Many quotations and examples are offered in the thesis publications (OR1, pp. 15–6; OR2 pp. 20–2, p. 145; JA2, p. 20–2).

Such personal shifts are well documented within research from the adult learning theory of transformative learning, which offers another way of viewing derepression at work. As one of the most researched approaches to adult learning, the theory focuses on both the

nature of these transformative experiences and the necessary elements for them to occur (Taylor, 2007). As demonstrated in all the CCCP participant excerpts in the publications (identified in the previous paragraph), such experiences result in a significantly revised interpretation of past experiences, one that would clearly inform future ways of thinking and doing (Mezirow, 1996). The substantial body of research undertaken on transformative learning theory points to four critical elements for its occurrence: the importance of context and its relational nature, a disorienting dilemma that creates emotional activation for change, a different way of viewing prior experience, and critical reflection leading to new meaning and motivation (see, for example, Lanas & Kiilakoski, 2013; Mezirow, 1991, 1996, 2000, 2009; Taylor, 1998, 2007). Transformative learning theory is further discussed in JA2 (pp. 19-–22), with examples offered from the CCCP. In addition, several CCCP participant 2012 reflections on their experiences, as documented in the *Key Learnings Report: For Original Participants of the CCCP* (Appendix 1), allude to such personal transformations (see OR1, p. 21).

Whilst self-reflexivity and transformative learning theory focus on the nature of and processes for personal awakenings and shifts, the CCCP research strongly supported the notion that personal and collective shifts feed off each other and work together. In his intellectually engaging and compassionately hopeful publication *Awakening Struggle: Towards a Buddhist Critical Social Theory,* Robert Hattam (2004) created a third space of possibility for social transformation, a clearly argued synthesis of Buddhism and critical theory. In weaving together the socially transformative intentions and positions of critical theory with the consciousness transforming practices of Buddhism, Hattam (2004), following Fromm (1962), demonstrated how 'Radical social transformation is not the precursor of psychological liberation because our ego and society condition each other' (p. vii). This is reminiscent of Stacey's (2011) notion that the human mind and society are continuously and

reciprocally co-evolving. Individual and social transformations are contingent on each other. Of all the early critical theorists, Fromm, with his grounding in both sociology and psychoanalysis, best understood this. Recognising this phenomenon 25 years earlier, Fromm (1978, cited in Hattam, 2004) wrote, 'Radical inner human change is the only alternative to economic catastrophe' (p. 217). Reinforcing this conviction that radical inner human change is essential to social transformation, Hattam (2004) quoted Anzaldua (1987):

> The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the 'real world' unless it first happens in the images in our heads. (Hattam, 2004, p. 3)

This notion that individual and collective transformations are co-dependent, feeding off each other, was strongly supported through analysis of CCCP episodes and participant presentations, interviews, and feedback. The episode explored in JA2 (pp. 19–22) serves to demonstrate this. This example discusses how shifting the conversational practices within a group of teachers and assistant teachers in a remote school in the NT enabled significant personal shifts in perceptions and relating for at least one group member, and resulted in shared perceptions of a more harmonious, inclusive, and productive teaching team. Another example of how individual and collective shift co-evolved regarding deficit discourse is offered in JA1 (p. 144). In addition, JA3 describes and analyses an unplanned episode that occurred on Day 4 of the CCCP, the brumby dance. This episode enabled many small but positive personal transformations and led to a profound shift in the collective sense of solidarity, optimism, and agency within the CCCP group regarding the subject of the episode, the NTER.

1.4.3 Organisational complexity and Indigenous education

The notion briefly explored in the previous section and supported through CCCP episodes, that individual/collective, mind/society, individual/group transformations are

contingent on each other, is central to Stacey's (2011) complex responsive processes of relating perspective on organisational and social complexity.

As outlined in Section 1.3 'The Research Story' in 2003 as the assistant principal of Group School East, I participated in an emerging leaders program where I was introduced to the organisational complexity research of Ralph Stacey (2003). Stacey's perspectives had a substantial impact both on the conception, design, and conduct of the CCCP and the research perspectives and methodologies.

Stacey's (2011) initial focus was on critiquing systems thinking and strategic management practices, as the dominant discourse for organisational research and practice for the past few decades. In undertaking this task, Stacey deconstructed the 'conventional wisdom' of this discourse through an examination of its implicit, 'taken-for-granted assumptions' (Stacey, 2011, p. xvii). In particular, he critiqued the 'dominant prescriptions' in strategic management literature, which focus on the certainty of the 'big picture' over the 'long term' for the 'whole organisation' (p. 3), prescriptions that have clearly failed to deliver, most evident in the economic and political unrest typified by the global financial crisis and the high rate of collapse of businesses and corporations.

Stacey's (2011) extensive critique of systems thinking and strategic management practices is well beyond the scope of this thesis. Suffice to point out here that Stacey (2011) demonstrated how major organisational change does not occur through enactment of simple systems thinking with its focus on objectively determined, whole-of-organisation, long-term predictions and strategies. Rather, it occurs through the cumulative impact of the multitude of locally iterative processes of conversation and interaction within organisations. Local interactions and conversations produce further iterations of interaction and conversation, all of which involve reinforcing or changing identities, power relations, and ideologies. Here lies the inherent social complexity and messiness of any organisation.

As indicated in the ‘Introduction’, Stacey (2011) also critiqued the dominant Western view of the individual mind residing within a person as something separate but connected to society which is external to the individual. Rather, Stacey (2011), drawing on the work of Mead (1934) and Elias (1978), proposed that the individual mind is constituted by the silent private conversations one has with oneself that are reflective of the audible public conversations one has with others. This is an important offering as it speaks to human identity and as such strongly resonated with Indigenous perspectives offered through the CCCP. Further discussion of this, along with the CCCP episode, is offered in OR2 (pp. 16–17).

I employed Stacey’s (2011) perspectives in JA3 (pp. 8–10), along with those of Bat and Guenther (2013), to critique the current simple systems, standardisation approaches to Indigenous education in the NT as inadequate and to propose a ‘localized complexity’ approach focusing on relational work in local contexts. Stacey’s perspectives from an earlier edition (Stacey, 2003) were also taken up in OR2 (pp. 16–7) and in OR1 (p. 8) to demonstrate the strongly relational and contextual nature of organisational interaction and sense making, and the primarily interpersonal nature of human identity.

1.4.4 *Engoori:* Focusing initial conversations in local Indigenous education settings on the question *‘How are we together?’*

In the second paragraph of Section 1.4.1 ‘Culture, Cultural Analysis, and Culturalism’, I indicated a disorienting dilemma Scott Gorringe and I were grappling with. It involved the way we most efficaciously think about and approach cultural work within the field of Indigenous education. McConaghy (2000) certainly outlined problems with the dominant anthropological view of culture within the field, one that maintains focus on *who* people are. In addition, the pervasive and limiting nature of deficit discourse in Indigenous education was flagged in Section 1.4.1.1 ‘Deficit Discourse’. Our work with *Engoori* during the CCCP

enabled both a resolution of the initial dilemma and a way of offsetting deficit discourse through initially engaging people in strengths-based conversations.

Engoori is a three-phase, conversational process offered by the Mithaka, Tjimpa people to address complex intercultural challenges (Gorringe, 2012; Gorringe & Spillman, 2008). It is a reinterpretation of an old Mithaka conflict resolution ceremony (JA1, p. 143). My brother 'Scott Gorringe' and I began this process of reinterpretation with permission from his old people in 2006. Engoori offers a strong example of cultural continuity, further discussed in JA3 (p. 11). Engoori utilises conversational circles, with their focus on multiple perspectives, to engage all local stakeholders within place and/or regarding a particular challenge.

The first cycle of *Engoori* focuses participants on the question, *'How do we need to be together to bring the best of what we've got to this place and challenge?'* Phase 1 involves 'honouring our past' through strengths-based conversations, by sharing stories in response to the question, *'What keeps me strong?'* Such conversations in Indigenous education contexts immediately disrupt deficit assumptions and thinking by focusing only on the strengths participants bring with them. Once offered, participants are engaged in collective sense-making processes where the individual responses are mapped, connected, and transformed into a collective response to the question, *'What keeps us strong?'* JA1 (p. 143) outlines and discusses the Phase 1 outcomes during the CCCP where the dominant theme was strength through family and family-like relationships. Phase 2 of this first cycle focuses on 'visioning our future' by considering the question, *'How do we need to be together in the future to bring all these strengths we have identified to bear on the challenges we face?'* Again, participants work individually and then collectively to co-create a values-based vision for themselves. Phase 3 focuses on 'actioning our present'. The logic and questions here are, 'If these are the things that keep us strong (Phase 1), and this is how we want to be into the future to keep these strengths dominant (Phase 2), *what behaviours do we need to enact now and in every*

moment to make this happen?' Here, participants work collectively in small groups using a coconut tree metaphor, offered by Uncle Steve Mam (Mer Island, Torres Strait Islands, deceased) to identify explicit behaviours they agree to enact in response to the question above. This constitutes a cultural action plan for the group, articulating *how we need to be together to be the best we can be, individually and collectively.* The use of *Engoori* during the CCCP as a strengths-based approach is also discussed in OR1 (pp. 13–15) and OR2 (pp. 18–20).

In addition, and regarding the dilemma flagged earlier, our work with *Engoori*, including during the CCCP and this research, has convinced us of the benefits of initially focusing intercultural education work on the question of *how* we are (rather than *who* we are), and more specifically, the question *'How do we need to be together to be the best we can, individually and collectively?'* This judgement has also been reinforced by Gorringe, Ross, & Fforde (2011) and most recently by Fogarty et al. (2017). As a strengths-based approach, it immediately disrupts the dominant deficit focus on Aboriginality within the field, rather in our experience creating a shared sense of connectedness, trust, and optimism. Further, processes such as *Engoori* and conversational circles also work to transcend over-simplistic binaries of cultural perspectives or groups, rather drawing on the vast diversity and social complexity inherent among any group of people.

1.4.5 Aboriginal (Ngemba) lore and ecocentrism

As outlined in Section 1.4.1.2 'Culturalism and the Dilemma of Cultural Binaries' my first major disorienting dilemma and subsequent transformation through this research focused on a recognition and exploration of my culturalist self, embedded in my social character through experiences living and working in Indigenous education in the NT. The second major transformative moment occurred through my growing relationship with Aboriginal men. In Section 1.3.3 'Post CCCP: The Research Phase', I briefly outlined how my work with the SSI

led me to develop positive connections and strong relationships with Aboriginal men in NSW, in particular a Ngemba loreman John Oates. Through these episodes of 'good relating', trust and willingness to share and disclose heightened. Just as I had been introduced to a new way of perceiving, thinking about, and being in Indigenous education through self-reflexive culturalist critique, I was now being introduced to a totally different way of perceiving, thinking about, and being in the world. These experiences on country and a book offered to me by another Ngemba loreman (Quinn, 1992) enabled a self-reflexive, anthropocentric critique.

JA2 (p. 16) briefly discusses anthropocentrism. Whilst well accepted as a vestige of the colonial endeavour, anthropocentrism remains less explored than deficit discourse and essentialising of Indigenous identities in the field of Indigenous education, yet well interrogated within the fields of eco-philosophy and environmental education (see, for example, Gruenwald, 2003; Greenwood, 2009; Harmin, Barrett, & Hoessler, 2017; Jickling, Blenkinsop, Morse, & Jensen, 2018; Plumwood, 2003; Milroy & Milroy, 2008; Stewart, 2004). The paper investigates its impact within the field of outdoor education. Washington (2017) proposed anthropocentrism to be the overwhelming worldview of modernism, though not of all people and cultural groups. Here humans are seen as the most important and evolved species, and the world is positioned as a mere resource for their benefit. Washington (2017) contrasted anthropocentrism with ecocentrism, where 'all nature is seen of intrinsic value' (p. 7). It is easy here to become embroiled in the ideological battle between capitalism and environmentalism, falling into the trap of polemics and binaries, a propensity I have experienced in the past. However, as in the case of culturalism discussed in Section 1.5.1.2, I can now see that historically, there are both limiting and enabling aspects to this anthropocentric worldview, though my overall assessment clearly leans now towards a more eco-focused sentiment. Indeed, it is the fixed gaze of anthropocentrism on humans and their

activity that has led to the global human rights agenda and its associated disciplines (e.g., feminism and post-colonialism). In addition, much of the research and theoretical perspectives I drew on, particularly in the earlier stages of the research, were a result of focused investigation of human phenomena: Fromm's radical humanism, Schein's cultural analysis framework, Stacey's organisational complexity research and perspectives, and Taylor's transformative learning theory.

I now accept that for most of my life, I have been subconsciously transfixed on humans and their interactions. As with the self-reflexive example of culturalism offered earlier, the underlying anthropocentric assumptions of my social character, created through the socialising processes of upbringing, schooling, and professional training, have worked to subconsciously focus my mind on all things human, screening in only the information conforming to these assumptions. For example, back in 2008 during the CCCP, two Warlpiri participants introduced the notion of *ngurra-kurlu* to the group. This is clearly an ecocentric process of being, where human identity and activity focus entirely on connectedness and obligation to specific other-than-human (and human) entities within the ecological community. Yet until my recent experiences with Ngemba lore some six years later, I remained unaware of this and have only accessed this retrospectively. Therefore, it is these experiences in the second stage of the research period that enabled further derepression. Ngemba lore and *ngurra-kurlu* are further discussed in JA2 (pp. 17–19) and JA3 (pp. 11–12).

This second self-reflexive turn through the research process further shifted my sense of self and purpose in life. The desire to facilitate emancipation, expressed by Sarra (2011) regarding Indigenous people in Australia, broadened for me to include Country. Here, emancipating Country (which includes all human and other-than-human inhabitants) requires Australians to see and feel differently about the places they live, to notice them more, to become more curious, and to spend more time exploring and learning, leading to stronger

connections and eventually to stronger feelings of obligation to care for these places. In agreeing with and supporting Bawaka Country et al. (2016), I accept that an important part of this shift is to 'work to dismantle a hierarchy of knowledge that would place human-centred, academic understandings as more legitimate than the forever-knowledge of Yolngu Elders and their more-than-human kin' (p. 457).

1.5 Publications (Reports and Papers) and Communications (Conferences)

Against the contextual landscape of this research story, this section outlines the intent and focus of each research publication and presentation.

2013	Organisational Report 1 (OR1) *Exploring transformative opportunities in the intercultural spaces of Indigenous education* (July 2013)
	NATSIEC Buunji Conference. Sydney, Australia *How are we together? Focusing 'cultural work' in Indigenous education on practices and capabilities of 'good relating' through strengths-based conversations and approaches* (November 2013)
	Organisational Report 2 (OR2) *Towards a framework of dispositions, capabilities and cultural practices for developing and enacting high-expectations relationships* (December 2013)
2014–15	One year's leave from DCR (July 2014 to June 2015)
2016	NOCE Conference, University of Sunshine Coast, Australia *Lore, law the land and us: Considering power and positionality in relation to country* (April 2016)
2017	Journal Article 2 (JA2) *Coming home to place: Aboriginal Lore and place-responsive pedagogy for transformative learning in Australian outdoor education,* Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education. 20(1) (April 2017)
	Earth Ethics Conference, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia *Positioning ourselves in relation to Mother Earth: Aboriginal lore as a reflective lens* (November 2017)
	Journal Article 1 (JA1) *A share in the future . . . Only for those who become like 'us'!: Challenging the 'standardisation' reform approach to Indigenous education in the Northern Territory,* The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education December 2017
2018	Journal Article 3 (JA3) *The Brumby dance episode: On the value of cultural continuity within the localised complexity of remote Indigenous education,* Australian Aboriginal Studies Journal July, 2018
	Overarching Statement

Organisational Report 1: ***Exploring transformative opportunities in the intercultural spaces of Indigenous education*** was compiled to feedback findings from this research to the host organisation, NT DECS. As such, it was written as an interim report, intended as a conversation stimulus with the chief executive officer and executive of NT DECS in 2013. It includes an executive summary, an overview of the research findings summarised into six themes or key learnings, an outline of original CCCP participants' and NT DECS key personnel feedback on those key learnings, and recommendations that identified opportunities for the organisation to take up and leverage the findings either through existing projects and strategies or upcoming ones. Importantly, it linked to and built upon a structural review of the agency undertaken in 2009 (Ladwig & Sarra, 2009). Up until the change in government in the NT in 2012, I had participated in very positive conversations with members of NT DECS regarding ways of implementing the Cultures of Collaboration (CCP) Program (the CCP was the professional learning program and resource resulting from the CCCP), in combination with the key learnings from this research, across the education workforce in the NT. However, as mentioned in Section 1.3.3 'Post CCCP: The Research Phase', the 2012 shift in government heralded a new era in Indigenous education in the NT, one directed by a neoliberal, standardisation ideology and approach. As this was counter to the intention and recommendations of both the CCP and the organisational report (OR1), by default it became the final report.

As I had been working for the SSI for five years, with this research process and findings, and the SSI work impacting each other over that time, it seemed appropriate to explore potential benefits from the research in a more formal way for our work at SSI. At the time, there were conversations within the SSI about putting out a position paper about the Stronger Smarter Leadership approach. Following a supportive conversation with Chris Sarra, the founder of the SSI and chair of the SSI's board of directors, I decided to write a

research report for the SSI exploring the notion of high-expectations relationships, supporting, drawing on, making more explicit, and extending upon Sarra's origin research regarding high expectations (Sarra, 2005). Thus, **Organisational Report 2:** ***Towards a framework of dispositions, capabilities and cultural practices for developing and enacting high-expectations relationships*** was presented to the board of directors in December 2013. It included a substantial discussion of what high-expectations relationships are, how they work to offset essentialising and stereotyping of Indigenous identities, rather creating in Sarra's own words 'fair and compassionate, firm and courageous' (Sarra et al, 2018, p.13) relationships with Indigenous students, which are most likely to bring out their best. Finally, the report offers a set of dispositions and capabilities necessary to establish and realise high-expectations relationships, along with the kind of cultural practices within a school that would facilitate such relationships. This report was accepted by the SSI board of directors and significantly influenced the writing of the first SSI position paper, one that focused on high-expectations relationships.

In November 2013, I facilitated a workshop at the Buunji National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Conference to gain peer feedback regarding the findings of the CCCP research. Focusing on the first two key learnings from the research (as subsequently outlined in OR2), I engaged participants in critical reflection and discussion regarding the ways they work to counter deficit discourse and essentialising of Indigenous identities.

Following a 12-month break from the DCR (July 2014 to June 2015) resulting from shifts in my personal and professional direction as outlined in Section 1.3.3 'Post CCCP: The Research Phase', I began writing a critique of Wilson's (2014) neoliberal review of Indigenous education in the NT. For me this was unfinished business. Thus, **Journal Article 1 (JA1):** ***A share in the future . . . only for those who become like 'us'!: Challenging the***

'standardization' reform approach to Indigenous education in the Northern Territory was submitted to the Australian Journal of Indigenous Education early in 2016, accepted for publication late in 2016, and published in December 2017. It draws on the organisational complexity research of Stacey (2011) and the NT remote community-based educational complexity research of Bat and Guenther (2013) to critique the position taken in Wilson's (2014) review of Indigenous education in the NT. CCCP research focusing on the use of conversational circle and strength-based approaches was utilised to support the value of a different approach.

As outlined in Section 1.3.3 'Post CCCP: The Research Phase', in 2016, I took up a position with a large Queensland Department of Education outdoor education centre, working to embed Aboriginal perspectives within the outdoor education curriculum. I was invited to facilitate a workshop at the National Outdoor Education Conference in April 2016. Here I utilised a perspective on Aboriginal lore (Callaghan, 2014) and a number of episodes from the CCCP to facilitate participants' reflections on their assumptions regarding the way they positioned themselves in relation to the natural environment—anthropocentric critique. I was subsequently encouraged by the editor of the new *Journal for Outdoor and Environmental Education* to translate the workshop processes and direction into a journal article. With his support and feedback, **Journal Article 2 (JA2): *Coming home to place: Aboriginal lore and place-responsive pedagogy for transformative learning in Australian outdoor education,*** was submitted in June 2016 and peer reviewed, significantly restructured, and accepted in November, and published in April 2017. This article focuses on the impact of anthropocentrism on Country and our relationship with the places we inhabit, as one of the least-interrogated vestiges of colonisation. It explores how such anthropocentric assumptions manifest in outdoor education practice. Ngemba and Warlpiri perspectives regarding

relationships with Country are offered along with conversational circles as a process for outdoor educators to engage with local Indigenous people.

The brumby dance episode that occurred inadvertently during the CCCP was so remarkable, that through early conversation with my supervisors, I had always intended to write a journal article about it. ***Journal Article 3 (JA3): The brumby dance episode: On the value of cultural continuity within the localized complexity of remote Indigenous education*** demonstrates how the creative re-interpretation of Warlpiri (Aboriginal) knowledge and cultural practices worked to successfully respond to the complexity, confusion, and anxiety experienced by many CCCP participants regarding the NTER. As an exemplar of the power of cultural continuity, the processes employed by the CCCP pair in facilitating this session were inclusive and strengths based, leading to a sense of solidarity and optimism among CCCP participants. The article was submitted to the *Australian Aboriginal Studies Journal* in May 2017 and accepted for publication in December. It was published in July 2018.

Being invited to present at the Earth Ethics Conference held at Griffith University in November 2017 signified both the completion of this research as an emergent process and the rolling on of my story. Engaging participants and connecting them to Country using Aboriginal stories retold together through their singing and dancing (which I had permission to facilitate on Jaggerra country) offered participants a powerful whole-of-body experience of connecting to *Gunni Thakun* (Mother Earth, Ngemba). It enabled them to gently confront the questions, 'How do I position myself in relation to the places I live and inhabit', 'How obligated do I feel to care for those places', and 'How am I enacting that obligation?' The subsequent circle conversation in which I introduced the Warlpiri concept of *ngurra-kurlu* as a way of explaining the purpose of story, song, and dance was honest and refreshing. I left feeling that together we had co-created a generative space for place-based inquiry, creativity,

and continuity. I wondered how this shared experience might influence the rolling on of participants' stories.

1.6 Summary and Questions to 'Keep the Story Rolling'

This concluding section offers an overview of the major messages from this research, along with questions that work to keep this story evolving and rolling on.

This thesis offers an iterative, emergent story of continuous co-evolvement. In the first instance, it is my story, one that I am proud of. There are many highlights, some low points, a multitude of episodes of uncertainty and anxiety, momentary shifts, and lasting transformations scattered throughout. For me, emergence and co-evolvement have largely operated through processes of derepression, of 'waking up' to the underlying assumptions and habitual patterns of my social character, the products of my socialisation in various contexts and at various times throughout my life (Fromm, 1962). This has always demanded honest self-reflexive practice, often requiring a certain amount of courage, particularly in the earlier stages, the need for which has diminished as my sense of self as connection and obligation to people and Country has deepened and expanded. As outlined in Section 1.4.5, this emergence and co-evolvement has led me to a deepening commitment to 'work to dismantle a hierarchy of knowledge that would place human-centred, academic understandings as more legitimate' than the life-sustaining, ecocentric knowledge of Aboriginal elders, loremen and lorewomen and 'their more-than-human kin' (Bawaka Country et al., 2016 p. 257). In this regard, the research of Stacey (2011) on organisational complexity inadvertently worked to reinforce this age-old focus on emergent co-becoming central to many Indigenous ontologies: of stories and identities rolling on through processes of continuous co-evolvement.

In addition, like mine, the stories of many CCCP participants were ones of derepression and transformation of self. Testimonies of these are well documented in the publications.

This essential focus was represented as the key learning, *Making it personal*, in OR1 and OR2. In a similar vein, one of the three realms of high-expectations relationships for the SSI is 'understanding personal assumptions' (SSI, 2014, p. 7). This focus on personal transformation is critical when attempting cultural or collective change within an organisation.

Questions to keep this story rolling include:

- How do I maintain and live this commitment and stay awake and alive to transformative opportunities that may present?
- In what ways and to what extent do I advocate for the creation of such transformative opportunities for others?
- How do I discern when potential opportunities arise?

This is also a story of deepening intercultural collaboration through relational and conversational processes that initially promote more equal power relating. This was the focus of the first key learning in OR1, *'Good relating' as the deeper purpose of culture*, and OR2, *Creating cultures of 'good relating'*. Whilst interacting and communicating in an intercultural space is always a socially complex undertaking, this research has clearly identified conversational processes that enable participants to move beyond simple cultural binaries, deficit discourse, and the inevitable defensive routines and conflict they perpetuate. All research publications have highlighted how the use of conversational circles quickly enabled a shared sense of trust, safety, and inclusivity among CCCP participants and, in some cases, their workplace peers. Further, JA3 demonstrates how Warlpiri (Aboriginal) practices using conversational circles enacted a cultural continuity reaching back thousands of years, which enabled the transformation of a palpable collective sense of anxiety and powerlessness among CCCP participants regarding the NTER into a strong, shared sense of solidarity and agency. This research has also demonstrated that once a shared sense of trust, safety, and

inclusivity had emerged through the practice of conversational circles, conversations were able to become more challenging and robust. This enabled the possibility of personal derepression and transformation through critically reflective conversations and practice. All three journal articles provide examples of this from the CCCP data. In addition, they also all offer and describe episodes that demonstrate how individual and group transformations reciprocally co-evolved.

Another set of conversational processes strongly endorsed through this research were strengths-based approaches, also the title of the second key learning in OR1 and OR2. Such approaches are able to shift the conversation by immediately disrupting and/or preventing the pervasive deficit discourse in Indigenous education. Strengths-based approaches draw on the knowledge, strengths, and aspirations of all group participants. In Indigenous education settings, this provides a critical platform for the engagement, wellbeing, learning, and achievement of Indigenous children. JA1 provides an example of how a strengths-based approach utilised during the CCCP facilitated a group of teachers to recognise and accept their conversational habit of deficit discourse and collectively commit to shift this.

Engoori, a Mithaka Tjimpa conversational process from far western Queensland was employed during the CCCP as a strengths-based approach. In addition to its value in this regard, it also worked to shift the initial conversation away from race-based questions of identity—*who* am I/are we?—to relational questions of *how* am I/are we?, therefore avoiding the likelihood of both the articulation of over-simplistic identity binaries and the limiting power relating and argument that often follows. From this research, I propose that engaging regularly in group practices such as *Engoori* offers a powerful way of utilising Indigenous perspectives to facilitate intercultural collaboration through co-creative processes that are inclusive of all identities, stories, and country.

This research has also demonstrated how enacting strengths-based and conversational circle processes within the CCCP shifted conversations in ways that worked to disrupt and challenge the whole-of-system, hierarchical, and deficit assumptions and thinking that dominate organisational approaches to Indigenous education in Australia. Further, they did so in ways that included and engaged participants rather than disengaging them. These are Sarra's (2011) 'doing with' approaches and Osborne and Guenther's (2013) dialogic work within spaces of relational trust. In this way, this research strongly supports the importance of working with strengths-based, conversational processes in local contexts to co-create robust, relational spaces where episodes of derepression and transformation become possible, and solidarity and shared sense of purpose and commitment can emerge. In this regard, in Indigenous education in Australia, and for this purpose, we need not look beyond Indigenous cultural practices and processes such as conversational (yarning) circles and *Engoori.*

Questions to keep this story rolling include:

- How can the uptake of Indigenous practices of conversational circles and strengths-based approaches such as *Engoori* be scaled up within education jurisdictions and schools, especially as they are relatively time-intensive processes?
- How can these processes best be facilitated and incorporated into staff cultural practices and classroom teaching and learning practices?

CHAPTER 2:

Organisational Report 1 (OR1)

Organisational Report 1 (OR1): Exploring transformative opportunities in the intercultural spaces of Indigenous education. Interim (final) report for NT DECS, July 2013.

Exploring transformative opportunities in the intercultural spaces of Indigenous education

Interim Report
For
NT DECS

David Spillman
July 2013

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Executive Summary

This report details the findings and recommendations for NT DECS of an analysis of the Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project (CCCP). The CCCP was undertaken in NT DET in 2008. The findings of this analysis can be 'read out' from CCCP to the broader array of Indigenous education contexts in NT schools. The clear and significant ramifications for NT DECS in 2013 are detailed in this report.

The wellbeing, learning and achievement of Indigenous children in schools is largely dependent upon the patterns of perceiving, thinking, judging, responding and behaving among school leadership, teachers and education workers. In profound ways these patterns work to enable or stifle the good relating, learning, motivation, collaboration and diversity required to create success in these complex relational contexts. 'Culturalism' represents one such set of limiting assumptions and practices in Indigenous education. Here a 'two-race' binary of 'anthropological' cultural perspectives is assumed, prioritized and enacted. For example, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, Warlpiri and Kartiya or Yolngu and Balanda may become the primary foci in all considerations about teaching and learning, educational policy and development, culture and diversity within a school or system (McConaghy 2000). 'Deficit talking and theorising' is another disabling set of assumptions and practices in Indigenous education. Teachers often direct such deficit mindsets and conversations outwards, at Indigenous children and families (Shields et al 2005; Sarra 2005), or at 'the system'. When disabling patterns of thinking, talking and doing such as these remain unchallenged among school leadership, teachers and education workers, students wellbeing, learning and achievement is severely compromised. Indeed, through this analysis the personal and collective capabilities and practices, critical to establishing effective intercultural learning spaces for Indigenous children, have been identified.

The CCCP offered a unique opportunity to unpack the relational complexities of Indigenous education and to identify the key ingredients for positive transformation and success in schools working with Indigenous children and families. The CCCP assembled a unique group of experienced Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators from across the NT. They came together in existing relational pairs, for a total of nine days spread into three forums over and eight-month period. Approximately thirty-six hours of video footage was taken of CCCP conversations, presentations and interviews. This provided the data for the analysis that is the basis of this report.

Research Findings

'Culturalist' assumptions and practices were evident in many CCCP conversations and interactions. Here they worked to stifle critique, denying a deeper understanding of the gender, linguistic, cultural, social and economic diversity and assumptions at play, and the power relations they seeded. Such assumptions and practices remain widespread in NT DECS. Yet there were also many instances in CCCP where process and conversation worked to transcend such assumptions and practices. The idea that 'good relating' is essential to 'enabling cultures' for those working in Indigenous education was strongly reinforced, as was the critical importance of strength-based conversations and approaches. Engaging in personal reflective critique to understand oneself more

deeply as a unique, cultural and habitual being enabled significant personal transformations for several participants. Indeed, through a focus on capabilities and practices of 'good relating' using strengths-based conversations and approaches, some participant pairs were able to facilitate significant transformations of the 'culture' of workplace project groups, in short timeframes.

The structural review of NT DET, undertaken in 2009 by Ladwig and Sarra (2009) clearly reinforces that the findings of this analysis are applicable to NT DECS more broadly. Together this work strongly affirms:

1. the critical importance of intentional planning and resourcing of 'cultural work' to create strengths-based cultures of good relating, in schools and corporate work teams. This 'cultural work' can be undertaken through a focus on 'cultural capabilities and practices', on the enhancement of critically reflective, relational and collaborative capabilities and practices within individuals and groups.
2. this 'cultural work' must be undertaken 'locally' – school by school, unit by unit, branch by branch.

Recommendations for NT DECS
Currently, there appear to be a number of concrete opportunities to leverage this kind of localized cultural work in schools in NT DECS.

NT DECS School Review Process
Many of the relational, conversational and critically reflective capabilities and practices identified in this research are implicit in the *NT DECS School Review Framework*. If these were drawn out and made explicit, they could become part of the school review process and discourse, also enabling professional learning responses to areas needing enhancement.

Recommendation 1
Undertake an audit of the *NT DECS School Review Framework* to identify key relational, conversational and critically reflective capabilities and practices.

Recommendation 2
Work with NT DECS personnel undertaking school reviews to explicitly incorporate these 'cultural capabilities and practices' into the audit process.

(As I, the principal researcher remain connected and committed to education in NT, I would be honoured to facilitate the work outlined in *Recommendation 1 and 2* in partnership with NT DECS personnel, at no cost to NT DECS)

Recommendation 3
Undertake an audit of existing professional learning approaches to ascertain those which could be used to enhance these 'cultural capabilities and practices' of individuals and groups within school communities. The *Cultures of Collaboration Program* is one example of a professional learning approach that might provide a useful framework or resource for this work.

Community Driven Schools Project
To address many of the dysfunctional cultural patterns identified by Ladwig and Sarra (2009), the CDSSU should be resourced to facilitate and coach this professional learning to enhance the 'cultural capabilities and practices' of work teams across DECS. The CDSSU would work collectively and locally with school staff and the broader school community and students.

Recommendation 4
Provide support and resourcing for the staff of the CDSSU to lead professional learning regarding the identified sustainable approaches to work place cultural transformation through enhancing 'cultural capabilities and practices.'

NT DECS Corporate Sector
The critical 'cultural work' outlined in this research and that of Ladwig and Sarra (2009) is also relevant to the non-school sector of NT DECS. To address some of the dysfunctional cultural patterns identified by Ladwig and Sarra (2009) by creating positive, enabling cultures within NT DECS, it is critical to resource and undertake professional learning to enhance the 'cultural capabilities and practices' of these work teams and their members.

Recommendation 5
Identify and cost a number of longitudinal professional learning / coaching approaches or programs to enhance 'cultural capabilities and practices' within and between corporate work teams. It's essential these have a strong program evaluation protocol.

Recommendation 6
Trial and evaluate one or more professional learning approaches or programs with one or more work teams.

Introduction

This interim research report is for NT DECS executive leadership. It offers findings and recommendations from research analysis of the Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project (CCCP), undertaken in NT DEET in 2008. These findings are strongly supported by a structural review of NT DECS undertaken by Ladwig and Sarra in 2009. In concert, this research and the structural review (Ladwig and Sarra 2009) strongly suggest that these CCCP research findings can be 'read out' to the broader array of Indigenous education contexts of the Northern Territory. There are significant and clear implications for NT DECS for 2013 and beyond.

Background and overview of research project

There has been much discussion and writing about the dire situation for Indigenous children in NT and Australian schools (MCEECDYA 2010, Hughes and Hughes 2009; ABS 2009; Behrendt and McCausland 2008; Trudgen2008; Collins and Lea 1999). Most often, but not always, such conversations are framed within the realm of 'Indigenous education'[1]; the way forward usually being some variation of 'closing the gap'. Whilst this focus is clearly justified from human rights, affirmative action and strategic service delivery perspectives, it may also invoke and maintain negative stereotyping (Paradies 2006; Sarra 2005), and deficit talking and theorising (Bishop 2009; McNaughton and Mei Kuin Lai 2008,), among a largely white, middle class education workforce. These and other discourses may unknowingly hinder or disable attempts to create 'success' in these contexts (Gorringe et al 2011, McNaughton and Mei Kuin Lai 2008, Sarra 2005, Sutton 2000), though defining 'success' in such contexts is itself problematic (Folds 2001, Spillman and Costanzo 2004). There appears far less research focus on the nature of the intercultural interactions, communications and learning that constitute the daily lives of Indigenous children, families, education workers and this largely non-Indigenous workforce, though such a focus has recently been proposed (d'Arbon et al 2009).

This research takes up this challenge of exploring and interrogating the nature and possibilities of the intercultural spaces in Indigenous education. The focus of this research is on the patterns of adult conversation, thinking and interacting in Indigenous education spaces in the NT, and the extent to which these patterns are enabling and/or disabling, and transformable. This research is harbored by a belief that there is often a good deal of relational, collaborative and creative potential lost in these Indigenous education spaces; losses that impacts directly on the wellbeing, learning and achievement of not only staff and other adult members of the school community, but also of students.

The research initially focuses in on the experiences of the CCCP.

[1] 'Both-ways' and 'Two-ways' education were coined partly to move the focus away from one side or the other (d'Arbon et al 2009)

The Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project (CCCP**)** undertaken in Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training (NT DEET) in 2008, aimed to:

> significantly enhance levels of culturally competent collaboration within DEET workplaces to improve student outcomes and service delivery (NT DEET 2007)

CCCP involved eleven Indigenous/ non-Indigenous participant pairs, all of whom worked in educational settings within NT DEET. Participants were invited together for a total of nine days, split into three forums of four days, three days and two days, over an eight-month period. Project aims included the:

- Co-creation of a group culture of trust, care and collaboration
- Enhancement of participants' cultural competence and their capacity to facilitate such enhancement within their workplaces
- Identification of frameworks, activities, processes, models and other resources to assist in facilitating the enhancement of cultural competence among workplace members, and transformations in workplace cultures towards cultures of care, trust and collaboration

Between workshop forums, participant pairs facilitated conversations with groups of staff in their schools to enhance quality of conversation, levels of trust, collaborative and cultural capability and to name and begin to address some of the complex challenges they faced. These school-based projects became an important site for learning. The *Cultures of Collaboration Program (CCP)* was created as a result of the shared CCCP experiences. This is a professional learning resource for conversational or facilitative leaders to enhance relational, reflective and collaborative capabilities among school community members, thereby enhancing the collaborative quality of school cultures.

Approximately thirty hours of video footage of CCCP conversations, presentations of school based projects and interviews were recorded. This has been used as the primary dataset for this research analysis.

Research Analysis

The research analysis initially focused on thematically searching the video footage for patterns of talking and interacting and their sets of underlying assumption, that have been indentified as limiting or disabling in Indigenous education contexts – these being 'culturalism' (McConaghy 2000) and deficit talking and theorizing (Gorringe et al 2011, Pearson 2009, McNaughton & Mei Kuin Lai 2008, Sarra 2008, 2005).

Culturalism refers to practices and conversations in the realm of Indigenous education where an anthropological or 'racial' view of 'culture' is subconsciously accepted (McConaghy 2000). Here the meaning of 'Indigenous culture' enters the conversation as known, 'already read' – unspoken and assumed (McConaghy 2000). This assumption along with a number of other related practices and assumptions perpetuates the primacy of a 'two-race binary' – 'us' and 'them'; Indigenous and non-Indigenous (McConaghy 2000). In this over-simplification of human diversity, this anthropological view of 'culture' and the 'two-race

binary' become the 'primary analytical tools' for all considerations of teaching and learning, education policy and Indigenous identity (McConaghy 2000). Whilst McConaghy (2000) proposes 'culturalism' as a powerful contemporary vehicle for continuing colonisation, in this research it is seen as part of the existing field of Indigenous education, a potential point of departure, but if left out-of-awareness and uncontested, extremely limiting. Indeed the 'culturalist' assumption that the most critical challenge we face in NT Indigenous education is bridging the gap between two cultures (Indigenous and non-Indigenous), was the foundation on which CCCP was conceived, planned and initiated.

Deficit talking and theorising represents another dominant pattern of conversation in Indigenous education (Gorringe et al 2011, Pearson 2009, McNaughton & Mei Kuin Lai 2008, Sarra 2008, 2005). Here a widespread belief held largely among teachers, education workers and the broader population is that Indigenous children are less able to learn than their non-Indigenous counterparts because of their 'external' situation (Sarra 2008, McNaughton & Mei Kuin Lai 2008). The impacts of these conversations on reducing both expectations of Indigenous students and self-efficacy of teachers to help these children achieve excellence, are well documented (Sarra 2005, McNaughton & Mei Kuin Lai 2008). That such beliefs can be internalised as self-belief by Indigenous people and children, is also well identified (Gorringe et al 2011, Sarra 2005, Smith 1996).

The research analysis also focused on identifying CCCP processes, interactions and/or learnings that enabled participants to transcend these limiting and/or disabling patterns, co-creating high levels of connectivity, care, trust and collaboration.

When considering the challenge of how to approach 'culture', organisational researcher Edgar Schein (1992 p3) takes an instrumentalist view, suggesting that the most useful conceptions will best enable us to 'understand the hidden and complex aspects of organisational life', in order to better manage and enhance them. Subsequently he identified 'three levels of culture' to attain this. *Artifacts* constitute the surface level of culture and are most noticed by new group members or outsiders. They include what we pick up with our senses, behaviours, practices and patterns of interaction, the physical layout of space, dress code, displayed objects etc. *Artifacts* are 'easy to observe difficult to decipher'. *Espoused values* are what group members say they believe and do. In organisations they are usually enshrined in an array of artifacts such as vision statements, codes of conduct, policies and strategic plans. Both artifacts and espoused values are within the group's awareness and can therefore be easily reflected upon. *Basic assumptions* or underlying cultural assumptions are implicit, out-of-awareness (subconscious) assumptions, passed on through the socialisation process. They include sets of beliefs and values about ourselves, the world, stories, legends, and myths about heroes and villains etc. This is the deepest and most significant layer of culture. Schein's research showed that it is these underlying cultural assumptions and not espoused values that drive our habits of perceiving, thinking, judging and behaving. Here Schein offers a view of 'culture' that focuses on patterns of behaving and interacting both within individuals and groups, and the underlying assumptions that drive them. This is a very different view of 'culture' to the one central to 'culturalism'. In CCCP this

view of 'culture' and Schein's cultural analysis framework were employed to enable participants to identify patterns of conversation and interaction both personally and collectively, and to uncover or 'surface' the underlying assumptions that drove these patterns.

In an exposition of his Complex Responsive Processes Theory (CRPT) Ralph Stacey draws on the social psychology of Elias (1978, 1989). He states:

> The individual is the singular, while the group is the plural of the same phenomena, relationship (Stacey 2003 p323)

CRPT is based upon process thinking. Stacey juxtaposes it with systems thinking. He points out that most western psychological and sociological perspectives draw on some variation of systems thinking. Stacey proposes this dominant western focus on individuals as objects within spatial systems that exist external to them but which they are a part of, as flawed and disabling. Here we come to perceive the human mind as something separate and isolated from social interaction. While his critique is extensive and far beyond the scope of this report, he proposes the heart of the problem is that systems thinking and approaches focus us on abstract wholes or systems, and arbitrary boundaries, rather than micro, local interactions between people in the present. In doing so we overlook the site of greatest transformative power and opportunity, the day-to-day, moment-to-moment interactions and conversations between people.

Both Schein's cultural analysis framework and Stacey's CRPT had significant influence on the design of CCCP. They were also both used as analytical lenses in this research for investigating the experiences, learnings and transformation of individuals and groups.

The main results of these analyses were incorporated into the *CCCP Key Learnings Report*. In 2013, this document was designed to stimulate discussion, sense-making, and feedback among the original CCCP members and other key NT DECS personnel.

Research findings – The Key Learnings

These key learnings are not offered as fact or truth. Rather, they reflect patterns of conversation and interaction, and the underlying assumptions these patterns rest upon, that occurred during CCCP when reviewed through the particular analytical lenses outlined above.

Key Learning 1 – 'Good relating' as the deeper purpose of culture

'Culture' lies at the heart of most conversations about, and approaches to Indigenous education. The ways we think about, talk about and enact 'culture' in Indigenous education have a huge impact on the quality of our relationships and the levels of trust we create. If we can focus such conversations on the question of 'how we are', we can build connectivity and trust, and co-create effective ways of working together. A 'culture of good relating' can then become the foundation for co-creating success with complex intercultural challenges.

Often 'cultural' conversations in Indigenous education focus on artifacts of Aboriginal cultures, the most visible and tangible products and activities – stories, songs, dance, artwork, ceremonies, language, kinship and country connections. These artifacts only tell us a little bit about a culture. Here, 'who' Aboriginal people are can be interpreted through 'what' they do – they share 'dreamtime' stories, sing songs, perform dances, create art, speak languages, connect with family and country. This view may affirm a sense of Aboriginal identities that is based upon relatively superficial aspects of culture.

When we focus our conversations in this way, on cultural artifacts, we may, without even knowing it, reinforce some assumptions that prevent us from co-creating the strong ways of communicating, relating and working together necessary to deal with the complex challenges we face. Some of these limiting assumptions emerged through the CCCP conversations and interactions.

Stereotyping - By focusing on Aboriginal cultural artifacts we can reinforce the idea that this is who all Aboriginal people are. They are dancers, songsters, storytellers, speakers of language, artists, family-oriented, connected to country etc. We confirm the notion, 'this is what all Aboriginal people do. It's what makes them all Aboriginal'. In this way we may come to stereotype Aboriginal people, see them as a homogenous identity group classified by these characteristics. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people may enact this form of stereotyping. By doing this we are defining Aboriginal group membership. At the same time we are also silently defining non-membership. The result is over-simplistic cultural binaries that can become the focus of our thinking and talking in Indigenous education. Such over-simplified binaries deny the complex tapestry of human identities in intercultural spaces, and may lead to perceptions of boundaries, separateness and cultural incompatibility. Such perceptions may work against the deeper communicating, understanding and relating required for trust and transformation in intercultural spaces. There were a significant number of instances during CCCP where this kind of binary stereotyping occurred. Here are two examples.

During day 2 of CCCP, following a whole group discussion, an Indigenous male participant made the observation that the first four speakers were all non-Indigenous. He then proceeded to explain that this occurred because non-Indigenous people like to talk and Indigenous people do less talking and more listening. Facilitators and participants alike actively accepted this belief, with further conversation reinforcing it and generalizing it to include all Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. No one questioned this position or offered an alternate explanation, of which there may have been several. Interestingly the seven of the nine participants who didn't speak in the initial group conversation were Indigenous women. This went unnoticed. How much did gender as well as age, experience, position within the school and organization, existing relationships, personality and other factors also influence the pattern of conversation? This we'll never know as the analysis of initial group discussion closed with unanimous acceptance of this cultural binary about talking and listening. Here the problematic and over-simplistic assumption that all Indigenous people are good listeners and all non-Indigenous people talk too much was affirmed.

On the first day of the second forum (day 5) participants were asked to reflect on their key learning from the previous forum. This was undertaken as individuals, and then in small groups. One group comprised two Indigenous women, experienced in Indigenous education from different remote communities and two non-Indigenous women, also both experienced teachers in Indigenous education. In their small group sharing the Indigenous women identified 'cultural' differences in the use of questioning as a key learning, a perception accepted by the two non-Indigenous women. Whilst there was some conversation about the complication of language translation with questioning, this difference was again broadly generalized to all Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The group later reported this back to the larger group as one of their shared key learnings.

> *In our culture we don't use much questions….. Sometimes it makes it hard for our people to understand them … putting up a question is like looking at my people when then have a little bit of English …. translate it …make it meaningful (Indigenous female).*

Both participants and facilitators accepted this perception with further examples provided to support this view. Later in the day one of the Indigenous women shared experiences and learnings from her workplace project with the whole group. Here she reported an animated and lengthy conversation amongst Indigenous community members during a school council meeting. When questioned about the topic of discussion she replied.

> *They are trying to find a good focus question for the community meeting.*

The problematic nature of the previously reinforced assumption about broadly generalisable cultural differences in questioning might have been identified and discussed here, but it wasn't. I cannot say for sure why neither facilitators nor participants picked this up. All I can offer is that 'underlying cultural assumptions' such as this one about cultural differences in questioning, operate out of our habitual awareness. They can strongly influence the small amount of information we collect with our senses, moment to moment, and the large amount we ignore. I am not suggesting here that there aren't cultural differences in the purpose, style and context of questioning. I am saying that this was not explored through these CCCP conversations. Rather a generalized assumption that non-Indigenous people use questioning a lot and Indigenous people do not was reinforced.

Aboriginal authenticity – These 'imagined' and stereotypical perceptions of Aboriginality can also lead us to make judgments about degrees of Aboriginality on a type of sliding scale. At one end, 'real' aborigines are 'full blood', still connected to family, live on ancestral country, speak language, know and can perform and paint their dreamtime stories and songs. As each of these characteristics diminish so does one's degree of Aboriginality down the sliding scale. Such perceptions favour those Aboriginal people who have been least impacted by colonization. In so doing they may deny the humanity and identities of many Indigenous people of mixed heritage and / or who have been dispossessed of family and ancestry, language and country. These perceptions of

degrees of Aboriginality may also deny us the benefits of the diversity of experiences, perceptions and learnings of all Aboriginal people.

Through self-analysis undertaken as part of this research, I became aware of some personal out-of-awareness assumptions operating during my time living and working in NT, including my work as the consultant facilitator of CCCP. These included the belief that 'culture' was central to identity for Indigenous people and that Indigenous people who still had first language, ancestral stories and who still occupied their ancestral lands had stronger or more 'real' Indigenous identities than those who did not. These assumptions became tools for judgment about who to listen to and ask question of, including whom to invite onto CCCP. Indeed six of the ten Indigenous participants invited onto CCCP were Yolngu or Warlpiri, all being first language speakers, either living on or near their ancestral lands with regular visits to country. It is not surprising then that the majority of 'cultural' teachings offered through CCCP came from these six participants, and from two of their non-Indigenous male CCCP partners, both of whom were also language speakers though to varying degrees. All the Indigenous metaphors offered came from this group including Milpiri, Brackish Water, and the basket weaving metaphor (see Key Learning 5). This group also led the Brumby dance, a co-created performance to shift responses to the NT intervention, and the stolen generation re-enactment spoken entirely in Yolngu Martha. It was also some of these participants who suggested and began dot painting to reinterpret sayings, provocations and perspectives offered through the project. Whilst other Indigenous participants did regularly offer their thoughts, feelings, perspectives and experiences throughout CCCP, they did not offer 'cultural' teachings or perspectives. Whilst these 'cultural' teaching - metaphors, performances and perspectives were extremely valuable to the experiences and learnings in CCCP, they were in another way exclusive. Here they may have worked to exclude or diminish the validity of the experiences and feelings of 'Aboriginality' of other Indigenous participants.

Trivializing or eulogizing aboriginal cultures and identities – These stereotyped constructions of Aboriginality and their associated cultural binaries can also lead to the view that Aboriginality and Aboriginal cultural perspectives are irrelevant in today's modern world; that they have little to offer. They are not sophisticated enough or technologically advanced enough to contribute anything of value to contemporary life. Here 'real aborigines' are easily positioned as 'primitive' and in need of 'bringing into the modern world'. This has been proposed as one of the central underlying assumptions of the NT intervention. There was no evidence of this assumption being invoked through any conversations in CCCP.

Similarly, but in an opposing manner, such stereotyped constructions can lead to the view that 'real Aborigines', those who live on their country with intact ancestry, language and dreaming have what the rest of us need, including other Indigenous people. This 'unique' group is given a position of privilege, being seen to hold superior knowledge and morality to the rest of us.

I have already provided a brief description of how Aboriginal 'cultural' teachings from a particular group of participants were provided a place of privilege in CCCP. There was also a clear pattern of interaction in CCCP where these

perspectives were further enhanced by contrasting them with deficit views of 'whitefella' and organizational cultures.

Focusing cultural work on 'good relating'
In *Treading Lightly* Tex Scuthorpe reminds us that the purpose of cultural artifacts (e.g. stories) has always been to teach and affirm, to remind us, how we need to relate to self, others and country (Sveiby and Scuthorpe 2006). In this way the question of '*who* Aboriginal people are' was focused on the deeper cultural purpose of '*how* Aboriginal people needed to be together, with others and with country.' Indeed Tex tells us that his old people believed whoever inhabited their lands were part of their community whether Aboriginal or not. Stories, paintings, ceremonies, walking on country, speaking language were all at the same time both an enactment of and teaching about good relating. Both these artifacts, and their enactment or reproduction contained knowledge and wisdom about how to be a good person, how to relate positively to self, others and country. In this way the deeper purpose of culture has always been to enact 'good relating'.

In CCCP we focused much of the early conversations and reflective work on building connectivity through good relating. This was about taking time to get to know ourselves, and each other at deeper levels.

> *CCCP focuses on relationships to self and relationship to others … ourselves and collectives at the same time. (Indigenous female)*

Participants were able to co-create strong reflective and conversational practices that led to the development of trust and conversational robustness.

> *The power and success of CCCP has been through the group dynamic that has developed. There's been a lot of high-stakes disclosure, and people getting deeply into themselves to bring our attributes that can seed change (Indigenous male)*

In this way CCCP participants co-created a culture of good relating that focused us on 'how' we needed to be together. This became a strong cultural foundation for considering some of the complex challenges participants faced in their workplaces.

> *CCCP has clarified that a lot of cross-cultural collaboration is about forming a strong relationship with that person you're working with or that group of people you're working with (non-Indigenous female)*

A variety of conversational tools were used to enable participants to co-create this 'culture of good relating.'

The circle was introduced and established early in CCCP as the primary site for conversation. Conversational circles are based upon the assumption that as human beings we all wish to connect to self and others in good ways, that is participate in good relating. In CCCP the circle was set up to enable group members to establish a space of safety, where they could talk openly and without judgment about their feelings and thoughts.

The circle is a physical manifestation of safety. Early in our time we kept the circle tight. Now we can sit anywhere because of the trust. (non-Indigenous female)

Over the first few days high-stakes disclosures and demonstrations of courage contributed to strong feelings of trust between group members and a sense of belonging. Through the rituals of checking-in and checking-out, whole and small group conversations, participants created a strong new set of habits of communicating, relating and sense-making. On two occasions, once in each of the second and third forums, I had planned for short check-ins at the start of the day due to my anxiety about outcomes and timelines. On both occasions the group over-rode me taking much longer to check-in, such had become the importance of beginning and closing the day in circle to affirm good relating.

Engoori is a three-phase conversational process for co-creating powerful responses to complex inter-cultural challenges. It was created, based upon a Mithaka, Tjimpa (black hawk) story from southwest Queensland. *Engoori* was introduced on day 3 of CCCP and used to focus participant on collectively responding to the question, 'how do we need to be together to be at our best?' Through *Engoori* CCCP participants collectively identified and committed to explicit behaviours to enact a robust culture of good relating and communicating.

As CCCP progressed, there was a quantifiable increase in the amount of humour and laughter in conversation and interactions. Laughter and humour contribute to positive group interactions and cultures in significant ways. In CCCP they served to reinforce a group culture that included levity, engagement and connectivity – good relating.

Key Learning 2 – Strength-based conversations and approaches

Much thinking and conversation in Indigenous education comes from a deficit perspective. A lot of funding in Indigenous education is based upon deficit data - data that shows how far behind Indigenous children are in their educational performance. In this way 'Closing the Gap' is a deficit agenda. This is not wrong. Indeed it may be necessary. Deficit perspectives may however perpetuate negative self-perceptions and a sense of powerlessness among Indigenous children and families. They may also reinforce this perception among school teachers, education and other government workers, reaffirming that we need to keep doing things 'to' or 'for' Indigenous people rather than 'with' them.

Strengths-based conversations are critical to affirming a positive sense of identity, power, agency and optimism.

The co-creation and enactment of the Brumby Dance by CCCP participants (day 4) offers one such example of the power of strength-based conversations and approaches. It worked to transform strong feelings of anger, resentment and bewilderment regarding the NT intervention into affirmations of cultural strength, agency and quite optimism for many Indigenous participants. Here, in response to strong emotional disclosures initiated by an Indigenous male during the morning check-in, a Warlpiri participant pair offered a song created by Yapa in Lajamanu, in response to the NT intervention. The song tells of a wild brumby charging into camp creating chaos and frightening everyone. With courage and

calmness the people catch, bridle and eventually ride and direct the brumby. They can steer it wherever they wish.

The men involved in CCCP were invited to co-create a dance to accompany the song. This was achieved with much laughter and humour and an emerging sense of cohesion and accomplishment. In a different place the women practiced singing the song and prepared the accompanying percussion and attire. We came together and performed the dance.

Following the performance and a lunch break, we reconvened our circle and opened a space to allow people to talk more about their feelings and perceptions of the NT intervention if they wished. No one did, though there was some laughter and finger pointing in jest with respect to our dance performance. When asked how he was doing, the Indigenous male who initiated the whole episode with his heartfelt check-in that morning simply said with a smile and nod, "*I'm okay now. It's alright. Thankyou."* I noted in my facilitator's journal that many around the circle non-verbally mirrored this sentiment.

Engoori has been introduced above. Phase 1 was undertaken on day 3 of CCCP. Here participants were asked to individually respond to the question 'What keeps me strong?' They were asked to draw a picture that told their story of strength. In small groups they then shared their stories and co-created a group story of strength that affirmed every individuals' strength. These were then shared with the whole group. A session that I had allocated one and a half hours, ran for over three having to be adjourned and continued the next morning, such was the engagement and enthusiasm.

One of the themes that emerged through these strengths-based conversations was the notion of 'family'. On reflecting upon their responses to the Phase 1 *Engoori* question 'what keeps me strong?' two participants offered:

> *It wasn't possible for me to think about me, without family. (Indigenous male)*
>
> *Yeah me too. I couldn't think of myself separate from my family, even before I was married (non-Indigenous male)*

This was a repeated theme as noted by another participant.

> *Yeah we all talked about family. Family's at the core. It's the heart. It's what keeps all of us strong (Indigenous male)*

Several Indigenous participants began referring to the CCCP participants as family.

> *I feel safe too… going back to my school and staff is a little bit difficult, … and I always think of this (group) as part of my family (Indigenous female)*

It was noted that many teachers get 'taken into family' when beginning to work on remote communities. Three Indigenous female participants also talked about how they see the children in their class as their children too.

I am their teacher … um … responsible for their learning and wellbeing. I also love and care for them as their mother…. I keep a mother eye open as well as a teacher eye … all the time.

Enacting 'family' in teacher – student, and colleague relationships has been shown to enhance Indigenous student wellbeing, learning and performance. It offers one way of enacting a strengths-based approach that reinforces 'good relating'.

Key Learning 3 – Making it personal

As human beings we are largely habitual in nature. Our senses only pick up a small amount of the information available to us in each moment. These sensory perceptions are generally filtered by beliefs, values and stories (assumptions) that lie out of our awareness. These assumptions are built up through our lifetime. They arise through the interaction of preferences, drives and dispositions we carry into the world, with our experiences throughout our lives. Many people 'inherit' such sets of beliefs, values and stories through their family upbringing. Similarly, socialization into a profession through university study and professional practice is likely to embed additional sets of assumptions, as is membership of a sporting club or any other social group. Clearly then these beliefs, values and stories are contextual. In different situations and contexts, different assumptions are likely to be subconsciously activated. As a result we subconsciously search for and take in information that reinforces the particular assumptions 'at play' in a particular context. We then tend to think and make judgments about and respond to these perceptions in patterned ways that are also likely to be context dependent. It is in this sense that Gandhi made the statement, "We don't see the world as it is. We see it as we are."

In CCCP both these sets of assumptions (beliefs, value and stories) and the patterns of perceiving, thinking, feeling, judging and responding they invoked, were considered to make up both the culture (collective) and the cultural 'selves' (individuals) of a group.

An obvious and critical example of how this operates in Indigenous education is through deficit teacher talk. Deficit conversations about Indigenous children and families both come from and reinforce negative beliefs, values and stories about Indigenous children's ability to learn, their families and their external circumstances. The huge deficit data focus in Indigenous education serves to maintain these beliefs. Usually bound up in these conversations are judgments about levels of ability, wellbeing and care. In day to day interactions with Indigenous children and families, teachers who regularly participate in such conversations search, moment-to-moment, for evidence to reinforce these negative assumptions – without ever being fully aware of it. In addition, because of these reinforced assumptions and the associated 'low-expectations' of Indigenous children, such teachers often fail to invest much energy and effort into teaching and learning and 'good relating' with children or families. This deficit culture self-perpetuates.

Regular participation in deficit teacher talk keeps the 'finger of blame pointing outward' at Indigenous children, families and communities. Such patterned conversations and thinking saves teachers from having to look inward at their

'cultural selves', to challenge their own assumptions and practices. Yet this is what must happen to break the culture of deficit teacher talk. The group culture can only shift when one or more members become aware that this patterned way of seeing, thinking and interacting, this aspect of their 'cultural self' is disabling. When deficit perspectives and its associated 'low-expectations' teaching practices are challenged and overturned, positive transformation of expectations, relationships and learning outcomes become entirely and swiftly possible.

Through CCCP, in this way, participants were able to explore their cultural selves. Reflective tools were provided for them to identify particular personal patterns of perceiving, thinking, feeling, judging and behaving. This self-analysis was a dominant theme introduced early in CCCP.

> *The question I have been constantly challenged by in this program is what do I know about myself? (Indigenous female)*

Whilst there was no evidence of deficit assumptions of Indigenous children and families in CCCP conversations, most participants identified disabling aspects of their 'cultural selves' – personal habits that retarded their relationships and efforts.

> *This has challenged me personally to change some of my behaviours that I thought were normal. It's a work in progress … the ability to be challenged, accept it and move on. Being challenged has been a new but positive experience, has brought a lot out of me that I didn't think existed. (Indigenous male)*

Other disabling habits identified by participants included poor self-perception, fear of conflict, need for control and being the expert. All participants were able to shift these disabling habits in some way. Some participants felt that this personal transformative work enabled them to 'see' things differently;

> *The tools and processes provided in CCCP have given me a new perspective. I see the world in a different way now. (non-Indigenous female)*

….. suspend habitual responses and mend relationships;

> *I have been able to suspend my emotional response and judgement in a number of difficult situations. As a result I have been able to deal with these situations more calmly (non-Indigenous female).*

….. and create new positive habits.

> *The most significant change for me through CCCP is that I now challenge my own assumptions, challenging my reactions to certain situations. This allows me to choose different responses and decisions….. Through the CCCP projects things have come into my consciousness. It's allowed me to be a more relaxed leader. I can only ever change myself not others. I can now be the change I want to see. (Indigenous female)*

For many CCCP participants this introspective analysis of 'cultural selves' led to a shift in habits of relating to self and others. These small personal

transformations enabled them to seed change through enhancing practices of 'good relating' and through facilitating conversations with work colleagues.

Effective listening was one of the key practices of focus taken up by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants.

> *I've been able to build stronger relationships through being a better listener … building more trust (non-Indigenous female)*
>
> *I've learnt a lot from listening to other peoples' journeys …. particularly through their stories. (Indigenous female)*
>
> *I can now understand other peoples' perspectives a lot better and am more aware of them. I am a more attentive listener now. It helps in everyday and work life (non-Indigenous male)*

Key Learning 4 – Changing the conversation

Changing personal or group beliefs and practices is best seeded when individuals within groups become aware of their disabling habits of seeing, thinking, judging and responding – when they become aware of their habitual patterns of thinking and talking that hold them and others back. If this is done gently in an environment of good relating, with trust and safety they are most likely to choose to do something about it. Changing the conversation offers a powerful way to enable this. This is not about changing 'what' groups of people are talking about, but about changing 'how' they are talking, changing the patterns of conversation.

There are many ways we can change or challenge patterns of thinking and talking within groups. One way is to change the physical layout for conversations. In CCCP all participant pairs chose to introduce the circle in their workplace projects. Most also introduced the conversational processes of checking-in and checking-out. All pairs noted a response to this. In some cases there was some initial resistance to changing this 'how' of conversation. An easing into this new conversational space, once this different way of being together had become familiar and safe most often followed. For one pair introducing the circle and checking-in and out completely transformed the ways that teachers and Indigenous assistant teachers interacted. They reported a significant shift in Indigenous assistant teachers' perceptions of power and relating between themselves and teachers. This led to much higher levels of Indigenous assistant teacher attendance, engagement and initiative in co-operative planning.

Many pairs also chose to use *Engoori* in their projects, all noting the high levels of engagement and positivity in these strength-based conversations. One CCCP pair initially asked their workplace colleagues to have a conversation about Indigenous student's learning at their school. Without intervening the CCCP pair noted that the pattern of conversation quickly moved to a deficit agenda. Without commenting on this they then introduced *Engoori* engaging the workplace participants in strength-based conversations about themselves. They noted the high level of engagement, laughter and emotionality in these conversations. Once this activity was completed they asked their workplace

colleagues to think about the difference in this conversation and the previous one they had about Indigenous student learning at their school. They reported that these differences were easily identified and acknowledged. The group then had a conversation about the impacts of deficit and strength-based conversations in Indigenous education. This simple conversational process gently enabled workplace participants to identify and own their disabling, habitual deficit talk, and experience an alternative, a positive strengths-based way of talking and thinking. The possibility of substantial transformation in 'seeing', thinking, judging and relating for this group of teachers was opened up.

Using powerful questions can also shift how people are talking and thinking. From the above example we can see that two questions about the same topic are may elicit very different patterns of talking and thinking. Think about the two questions below.

- *What's preventing Indigenous children in our school from learning as well as other children?*
- *What strengths do Indigenous children and families bring to this school?*

Deficit talking and thinking about Indigenous children and their learning will be immediately invoked by the first. Teachers regularly engaged in deficit talk will respond quickly to the first and may struggle with the second question. It will make them stop and think. It also offers the opportunity to recognize current deficit patterns of thinking and talking. Several CCCP pairs used powerful, open-ended questions in their workplace projects to elicit strengths-based conversations. For example, one pair used the following sequence of powerful questions with a group of teachers to seed enthusiasm, positivity, good relating and eventually, at the end of the two-hour session, group commitment to taking action.

- *What might a cross-culturally competent person look like?*
- *What behaviours and attitudes might they display?*
- *What might a cross-culturally proficient school look like?*
- *Where do you think we could go with this?*

Key Learning 5 – Metaphors, uncertainty and collective not-knowing

At various stages through CCCP, Indigenous participants introduced metaphors to highlight or provide ways of moving forward in the face of uncertainty and complexity. The Garma or brackish water and Milpiri metaphors were introduced on day 3 of the project, as Yolngu and Warlpiri ways of dealing with the tension, complexity and turbulence of two very different cultures coming together. They were offered as an expression of and encouragement for what we were attempting to enact together in our CCCP work. Whilst, if misunderstood, these two metaphors may reinforce over-simplistic cultural binaries they nevertheless highlight the opportunity available in these inter-cultural spaces of turbulence and complexity. If we can come to these spaces with courage, optimism, curiosity and good relating, whilst being relaxed about our 'not-knowing', we can co-create powerful ways of moving forward together.

The Brumby Dance event has already been briefly described. It's power in shifting participant perceptions and feelings from powerlessness and bewilderment to optimism, solidarity and agency have been noted. The value of enacting the metaphor of family in teacher-student relationship has also been highlighted.

Each time a metaphor was introduced it was in response to either a particular challenge we were encountering in the CCCP group or one that participant pairs were encountering back in their workplaces. This is exemplified by the Brumby dance. They were not offered as abstract, esoteric wisdom but rather as pathways and guides for our shared, lived experiences and challenges. All metaphors we attempted to enact together, enhancing our solidarity, resilience and optimism. They also served to encourage our acceptance of not-knowing how best to respond to particular challenges, largely through also reinforcing the belief that together we could work it out.

Enacting these metaphors together also enabled us to better cope with the paradox and ambiguity that often accompanies intercultural relating and complex intercultural challenges. Another metaphor introduced by a Yolngu participant was the 'basket weaving' metaphor. This metaphor highlighted the importance of both unity and difference, and indeed their interdependence. The basket is made of many strands of different characteristics – strengths, colours, materials and textures. Yet it is these differences and the unique way they are woven together that confers overall strength or unity. This metaphor assisted us to co-create a sense of solidarity and cohesion, whilst also exploring and utilising diversity among group members.

Key Learning 6 – The challenge of time

Strong cultures of good relating are necessary for any group of people facing complex intercultural challenges. The trust, care and safety enacted in such cultures enable group members to engage in challenging their patterns of seeing, thinking, talking an doing. This is often required for the transformations necessary for success to occur. Creating cultures of good relating and challenging assumptions and practices in ways that engage are time-intensive activities. This remains a critical challenge for schools at a time when 'quick-fix' solutions and performance agendas dominate.

As this work was core to the CCCP approach, adequate time was mostly allocated to these activities. Some tensions still arose about time to talk and relate, and outcomes and timelines. In their workplace projects, several participant pairs also encountered some level of resistance to enacting the circle and focusing group conversational tasks on quality of relating and communicating. This resistance was largely from school leadership, the general theme being that they wanted 'concrete results' from the project. One principal strongly advised the CCCP pair to 'get on with it'; saying as a principal she occupied a 'racy space'. This incident created tension and conflict. However as this was dealt with directly by the whole group, through conversational processes that affirmed 'good relating', it resulted in deeper understanding and commitment to the project work.

Providing school leadership with a strong and clear justification for the importance of allocating time to co-create strong cultures of good relating within their schools, is critical.

Responses to the *CCCP Key Learnings Report*

Original CCCP members: From February to April 2013 via phone and email communication, original CCCP members were contacted. They were invited to reflect upon, critique and provide feedback on the key learnings. All except one past participants (21) were contacted and provided a copy of the CCCP Key Learnings Report. They were offered the following questions as a starting point for response.

> *How do these Key Learnings sit with you? Do they connect with your experiences of CCCP? Do they make sense from your life and work experiences in the NT? In what ways?*
>
> *Have you already gained these learnings, from CCCP or from other experiences? If so what impact have they had on your life and work?*
>
> *If these learnings are new to you, what impact might they have on your life and work?*

Many of the original participants are now in different jobs both within and outside education, living either within or outside the Northern Territory. Substantial written responses were received from nine participants with a further five undertaking informal phone interviews in response to the report. These interviews were not recorded. Notes were taken during the interviews with clarification sought as needed, and noted. Another four participants indicated their intent to respond, though follow-up phone calls and emails elicited no response.

Written responses and notes from interviews were thematically searched for patterned responses and perspectives of difference. Whilst there was variability in responses, this largely existed within broad patterns with very few outlying perspectives. Overall, there was strong support for all key learnings, reinforced through a host of recounted incidents, learnings, and experiences since 2008. There were no challenges or objections to any aspects of the report.

All fourteen respondents reflected that they had gained in some significant way from their experiences and learnings during CCCP.

> *CCCP taught me about self-belief, possible models for initiating talk and the importance of working in the intercultural space. (Indigenous female)*
>
> *My profound experience of CCCP was the creation of a safe space to reflect jointly with Aboriginal people on shared issues, and to achieve a deeper understanding of the impact of individual pasts upon ways of relating. (non-Indigenous female)*

A consistent theme was of powerful learning about personal habits initiated or enhanced through CCCP, as identified in Key learning 3 – Making it personal.

> *This was something that was so valuable to me though CCCP. I think it's an ongoing process. It can be easy to slip back into old patterns. I still struggle. CCCP opened up my eyes to these habitual patterns, and there are many things I have managed to change. However, I still have a long way to go. (non-Indigenous female)*

> *It (CCCP) also taught me about challenging my own underlying assumptions. However it took a long time to sink in. I still have to let go of old habits. Old habits die hard. Partly this was about my leadership style. I realized I was working in a way that was unnatural (for me). I thought I had to adhere to a certain way of behaving. (Indigenous female)*

Equally strongly reported was the difficulty of maintaining this personal practice of objectifying and assessing one's assumptions, thoughts and behaviours.

> *This (making it personal) was the turning point for most of the participants. It's not something that is overly complex, yet it's about changing behaviours. It is also practical and common sense, yet we struggle to do it or maintain it. (Indigenous male)*

Several respondents identified the necessity of having supportive groups or school cultures to encourage and nurture such personal practices.

> *I have tried to maintain these learnings, perspectives and practices, but due to it's (workplace) complexity they're hard to sustain. To competently achieve these qualities you need to work consistently and collectively in small groups, through reflection and conversation, with people who understand what your talking about. It becomes achievable then, but in a large work area, with people who are unaware, it becomes nearly impossible. (Indigenous male)*

> *This (personal) learning happens through robust conversations. …. conversations with others and conversations with self. We have to create the conversational space where people feel encouraged and safe to go there. (non-Indigenous female)*

Three respondents reported continuing to actively work to facilitate group or school cultures of good listening and safety to enable and encourage robust conversation and personal reflection.

> *What I've taken on board from my CCCP experience to my subsequent work in senior management (of a school) is the critical necessity of making it personal. I've become suspicious of the aloofness and detachment of professionalism where one is warily navigating created images and manufactured modes of behaviour. Staff are more likely to perceive relationships as hierarchical and power-based, basing their performance on the need for approval or dominance. This is a less productive way of running a school. I now work a way of being, seeing and doing that is person-centred rather than organization-centred. Ironically it's producing better results for both (non-Indigenous male)*

> *Shifts of personal and staff thinking and behaviour take time, as you've said. New habits can only be built if the opportunity to talk about change is built into the school culture. The skills that we learned in CCCP about effective listening and*

building communication, and awareness of self and others have to be explicitly taught. This is an area of focus for me now. (non-Indigenous female)

Three respondents indicated that the CCCP workplace projects they commenced in 2008 are still running.

The first key learning, '*Good relating' as the deeper purpose of culture*, received significantly more comment and feedback than any other.

Culturalist perspectives and assumptions were evident in the language of several of these responses. Here respondents, echoed the 'two-race binary' of anthropologically defined cultures, repeatedly using phrases such as 'two-way', 'cross-cultural' and 'crossing the line'. However, these phrases were often embedded in narratives demonstrating a deeper, more sophisticated understanding of human diversity and the importance of good relating.

Cross-cultural collaboration is not the idolization of any one culture, but rather the respectful inter-change between cultures that enables everyone to learn, and every one to be enriched from the strengths that each has, and also cover for the weaknesses that each has. When it comes down to it, cross-cultural collaboration is about relationships where human beings, who have a unique set of life experiences, are seeking to enter into meaningful relationships with other human beings who also have a unique set of life experiences. Within a distinct grouping of people, there is an enormous range of difference in specific experience and perspective. Sure, there are broad sweeps of commonality, but the differences amongst such groups are equal to or greater than the differences across people groups. (non-Indigenous male)

Indeed all respondents reaffirmed the centrality of 'good relating' to intercultural understanding and communication even if not fully accepting the premise of Key Learning 1.

I wouldn't say that 'good relating' is the deeper purpose of culture', but I would argue that there is no meaningful cross-cultural interaction without good relating. (non-Indigenous male)

The format of inviting Indigenous / non-Indigenous participant pairs into CCCP was affirmed as a positive strategy for good relating.

CCCP was a point of affirmation of the things I have learnt over decades of good relating, cross-culturally. Being invited to participate with someone I already have a good relationship with affirmed the importance of close cross-cultural relationships. I am so glad I was chosen and privileged to attend with one of my best and closest friends (name of Aboriginal CCCP partner) (non-Indigenous male)

One participant made the link between time for good relating, creating trust and the likelihood of having robust, productive conversations.

Through the CCCP processes of good relating and getting to know each other and building trust, those high-stakes conversations come about more easily. As you mention later, this involves time and making sure that school leadership supports a culture of communication within the school whereby teams have time to learn about and from each other. The really productive conversations then evolve as a matter of course (non-Indigenous female)

The essential nature of building trust and safety through conversations of good relating, to enable robust, challenging and productive conversations was clearly demonstrated by three respondents. They all recounted the incident, described on page 5 where after a group conversation on Day 2 of CCCP an Indigenous male participant noticed that the first four people to talk were non-Indigenous. He then proceeded to explain that this was because Indigenous people like to listen and non-Indigenous people like to talk. This went unchallenged and unexplored at the time. All three respondents recalled feeling uncomfortable with this generalization at the time. However for slightly different reasons, that all nevertheless reflect on their perceptions of the level of trust and connectivity in the group at the time, all three felt unable or unsafe to challenge or question this interpretation. It was the beginning of the second day the group was together. Further, all three respondents are female. As previously mentioned, the ways gender relating and power played out and interacted with cultural and socioeconomic factors is worthy of further analysis, but remains beyond the scope of this research.

There were many responses to the commentary and examples of stereotyping in the Key Learnings Report. Respondents provided many additional examples. Together they provide substantial evidence that these patterns of thinking and judging can be 'read out' to many other Indigenous education contexts both within and beyond the NT. Respondents affirmed that in their experiences of schooling Aboriginality is often exclusively defined by language, country connections, song, dance and stories. Two participants discussed becoming aware of their own previous habits of thinking about Aboriginal identity.

> *These perceptions highlight one of the most important learnings for me in regard to my own tendency prior to CCCP to pedestalise full-blooded, on-country, first language speaking participants as providing a greater opportunity for me .. us to learn from, inadvertently authenticating or bestowing on them deeper levels of power and wisdom than their more urbanized Indigenous counterparts. (non-Indigenous male)*

One respondent reported that these images of Aboriginality were strongly reinforced in her final year of pre-teacher education, by an Aboriginal academic. Many concrete examples were offered of Indigenous people making these kind of judgments about other Indigenous people, for not knowing their language or country, or being 'half caste' or 'yellow fellas'.

One respondent went into detail about how she worked to overcome such assumptions and practices of thinking both for herself and others.

> *In this way it's easy to loose sight of the modern (Aboriginal) people who live in the culture, and tend to lock them in a time warp by saying that to be Aboriginal you must adhere to certain cultural rules. …… The CCCP help me to work through some of my preconceived notions and start to focus more on the individuals I worked and lived with, as opposed to considering the attitudes and behaviours of my Indigenous colleagues as being purely culturally driven. What you are calling 'good relating' became the key to my school-based project. I worked with staff to help them get to know each other as people first, and then by exploring the things that made us the same or different we could talk about culture. (non-Indigenous female)*

The power and usefulness of strength-based conversations and enacting the 'family' metaphor in relating to children were both strongly supported by many respondents with positive examples of their use.

Despite the strong endorsement of CCCP experiences and approach, and the many positive and concrete examples of the use of CCCP processes to enhance relational and collaborative capability since 2008, a number of challenges to their broader uptake were identified. Prioritising time in schools for this kind of work was repeatedly identified, as was the challenge of 'outsider' perceptions, largely encapsulated in the response below.

> *I think one of the criticisms of the tools of CCCP is that it was seen by some as tree hugging, warm and fuzzy, zero outcome based, and other than that everyone had a good time, …… rather than the powerful, innovative and challenging ways in which to work differently and achieve successful outcomes with lifelong learning. (Indigenous male)*

Despite these challenges there was a strong commitment from the respondents to continue using processes, skills and approaches introduced through CCCP. Indeed most indicated a belief that this is essential work for any school engaged in intercultural education.

> *The skills we learned in CCCP about effective listening and building communication, the awareness of self and others etc, have to be explicitly taught to a staff. I think school operational plans should have self-reflective elements where it is anticipated that all schools give staff training to incorporate CCCP strategies. The results from the CCCP project at (school name) changed the school forever, and although the effectiveness of communication and growth fluctuates, the core concepts are now built into the corporate memory of the school. This is because the Indigenous staff who are long term team members have embraced the processes of CCCP and keep it alive the best they can. (non-Indigenous female)*

Key NT DECS and CDU personnel*:* A number of people from NT DECS and CDU who have been involved in the *Cultures of Collaboration Program,* were invited to provide feedback on the *CCCP Key Learnings Report.* On 9 May 2013, five key personnel from NT DECS and two from CDU participated in a face-to-face critique and discussion of the CCCP key learnings.

During this two-hour session, many similar comments to those above were made and stories recounted. There was a lengthy discussion about the challenges of stereotyping and Indigenous authenticity in NT DECS. Indigenous participants related a number of stories and incidents where they felt expectation to conform to stereotypes, or where the authenticity of their own or another's Aboriginal identities had been implicitly questioned. A number of incidents were related where education personnel had gone out of their way to seek advice from 'traditional Aborigines' about Indigenous education, ignoring other Aboriginal people who also had perspectives, opinions and ideas. One participant related overhearing the comment from a non-Indigenous person about himself "He's not a real one. I'll ask someone else." There was a sense in the group that these stereotypical patterns of thinking and interacting were still common in NT DECS, and not just restricted to non-Indigenous people. Indigenous participants also

reminded us of the importance of cultural protocols when entering, working or living on traditional lands, of important questions about who has the right to speak for and on that country, who has the right to invite others to speak, and how do we find that out. The point was made that the above critique about stereotypes and authenticity should never be used to erode these important cultural protocols.

Participants spent a good deal of time recalling and discussing their experiences of good relating, largely through facilitating or participating in the circle. They reinforced the importance of opening spaces where people could co-create a group culture of trust, safety, common language, shared values and ways of being together. Only then could deeper more meaningful, more challenging dialogue occur. They talked about the importance of getting people out from behind their desks, IPods, phones, so there's nothing to hide behind, so they're face-to-face and present.

The group talked about deficit teacher talk regarding Indigenous children and families. There was a unanimous feeling that this was a pervasive pattern in many but not all schools in NT. One participant initiated a conversation about the importance of teachers being engaged in the personal learning of understanding themselves as cultural beings. He related his own experiences as a principal facilitating this work and proposed that teachers can come to understand how the way they're seeing the world when involved in deficit conversations is just way of seeing it, and that there are far more empowering and dignified ways of looking at the same circumstances. This led to a conversation about Key Learning 3 – Making it personal. As with the original CCCP respondents, there was strong support for the critical nature of this personal reflective work. Again a number of participants felt strongly that this work is most enabled in a workplace culture that supports and ideally facilitates this learning, where time and good conversational processes are available.

Discussion and Implications

It is apparent from the responses of the original CCCP participants and the key NT DECS and CDU personnel that they perceive many of the challenges identified in the *CCCP Key Learnings Report* able to be 'read out' to the broader array of Indigenous education contexts in NT DECS. It seems clear from their testimony that the quality of relationships, conversations, and subsequently school and workplace cultures within NT DECS, has a critical impact on productivity, on the wellbeing, learning and achievement of both staff and students. This perspective is strongly reinforced by Ladwig and Sarra in their 2009 review of NT DET.

> Many of the difficulties facing DET are cultural in nature. Organisational structures cannot guarantee improvements in organisational cultures without clear leadership and strong processes established within those structures. The relationship between organisational structure and organisational cultures has been well documented and explored in the broader literature on school restructuring. The basic parameters of that work indicate that the relationship between organisational structures and cultures is neither simple nor direct. That is, while it is clear the organisational structures can prevent high quality performance in schooling, it is equally clear that structural change to schools and school systems cannot in itself produce high quality performance. The relationship between organisational structures and cultures in schooling is thereby asymmetric and non-

> determinative. For any school system to promote high quality performance, clear structural change and overt cultural change are needed simultaneously. (p19)

The pervasiveness of the 'cultural' challenge in NT DECS is strongly identified by a number of sources external to CCCP and it's follow-on work.

In 2005/6, and after nine days of sharing, learning and challenging members of the first Indigenous Leaders Network (ILN1) for NT DEET summed up challenges to the future of Indigenous education in NT with the following three questions.

1. How do we create trust in the intercultural contexts in which we work?
2. How and by whom are decisions made about where we prioritise our time?
3. How can we enhance the bi-cultural competence of educational leaders and workers within our schools? (Spillman 2006)

Mandated to undertake a structural review of NT DET, Ladwig and Sarra (2009) nevertheless felt compelled to report significantly on issues of organizational culture.

> There is a prevalence of dispositions and attitudes that work to constitute an organisational culture in need of significant change, if educational outcomes are to improve in schools. That is, we can not say what percentage of individuals within DET display the identified beliefs and dispositions noted below; but the fact that they were evident to the review, even in its short data collection period, is notable and suggests a significant enough spread to require attention. (p25)

They went on to write a significant section in the report describing patterns of thinking and interacting that, in combination, have eroded credibility, trust and collaboration. Unfortunately as their mandate was only for structural reform analysis, no recommendations were made regarding cultural transformation.

> While specific organisational recommendations can be made to address the structural concerns identified above, any attempt to make new structures operate effectively will also require a direct and independent addressing of a number of dispositions that constitute the organisational culture of NT DET. (p25)

Ladwig and Sarra (2009) identified a number of pervasive systemic and cultural dysfunctions including a lack of clear systemic direction, a culture of 'silo-building', ad hoc decision-making, partial reforms of structure, innovation and initiative, and a lack of systemic coherence. Whilst there have clearly been attempts since the review to address some of these challenges, evidence from this research suggests many still remain.

Further, it is also clear from CCCP experiences, this research and a host of writings on the issue, that the NT Intervention has served to further erode Indigenous people's trust and faith in government agencies, including NT DECS, adding to the complexity and magnitude of the challenge. (see for example AIDA 2010; Jordan 2010; Marland 2010; Behrendt and McCausland 2008; Sarra 2008a; Scrymgour 2007; Dodson 2007).

Over time a greater and more explicit investment by NT DECS in resourcing the kind of 'cultural work' outlined in this report would lead the necessary cultural transformation. The perspective reinforced through this research is that focusing on creating 'cultures of good relating' in schools and work teams, that is, planning to develop relational, collaborative and critical reflective capabilities and practices, repeatedly and over time, will work to create more enabling cultures in schools, work teams and in NT DECS. This perspective is also supported by significant recent research in intercultural education in the NT where a focus on enhancing intercultural educational capabilities is proposed (D'Arbon et al 2009).

> Linking Worlds participants defined effective leadership as being strong in identity, resilient and confident, and most importantly, as being able to make the intercultural connections necessary for educating children and advocating for others. Effective leadership requires interactions and interdependence through teamwork to share the workload and is not and individual effort. The mainstream educational system – the bureaucracy – was spoken of by participants most often in terms of its over emphasis on management and administration in defining effective leadership. This emphasis was misplaced according to the dominant perceptions of those who work within the intercultural worlds of remote Indigenous schools. (p2)

A useful, albeit oversimplified, way to conceptualise and differentiate this work is through the metaphor of 'triangles and circles'. Oversimplifications can be useful to initiate awareness and curiosity. A common and simple way to conceptualise an organization such as a school is as a 'triangle'. Here with the principal sitting at the apex there is a hierarchy of authority and leadership, knowledge and power, and accountability. The 'triangle' is the space of 'the known' and expertise. Such a conceptualization explains the perspective offered in the quote above, of a bureaucratic over-emphasis of management and administration. Whilst the assumptions and practices of the 'triangle' are certainly central and critical to the efficient functioning of any organization, by themselves they are inadequate. This is precisely the point made by Ladwig and Sarra (2009) when they point out that structural reform (reforming the 'triangle') and cultural reform (reforming or perhaps introducing the 'circle') must occur simultaneously. In the 'circle' the assumptions about authority and leadership, power and knowledge and accountability shift away from the hierarchical, to those of shared equality. In the circle, everyone's perspective, experiences, feelings, knowledge and ideas are ideally equally valid, regardless of the position occupied in the hierarchy. The 'circle' is the space of multiple perspectives, deep listening and collective sense-making. Indeed, educational researcher Julia Aitken (1996) has proposed that to create vibrant, excellent schools principals and executives must shift their leadership from direction and control to co-ordination and support. This marks a shift from hierarchical leadership to facilitative or conversational leadership, from enacting the assumptions of the 'triangle' to enacting the assumptions of the 'circle', though there are clearly times when the assumptions and practices of the 'triangle' are right and necessary in every school and organisation. Using this metaphor, it is precisely this shift to the assumptions and practices of the 'circle' that constitute the 'cultural work' strongly advocated for schools and work teams through this research. The cultural, relational work of the 'circle' and the systemic, managerial work of the 'triangle' are complimentary, and both critical to the life

and work of vibrant, excellent schools and organizations.

Creating school cultures that are able to enact the assumptions of 'the circle' is best undertaken by focusing professional learning and development opportunities on 'cultural capabilities and practices', that is critically reflective, relational and collaborative individual capabilities and group practices.

Recommendations for NT DECS

Previous edicts by NT DECS executive, that all teachers and education workers in NT should be 'inducted' in the *Cultures of Collaboration Program* are commendable. Yet they also signal a lack of understanding how these critical reflective, relational and collaborative capabilities and practices are best developed and embedded, how this critical cultural work is best undertaken. As outlined through this research the most powerful and sustainable approaches to this work happen locally and repetitively, with school staff, the broader school community and students. It requires persistence and resilience from those driving the process, the facilitative leaders. For example, if we're trying to transform the conversational culture of a school staff from habits of deficit talk and theorizing to strengths-based talk and theorizing, then it's those staff members who must be involved in this work, together, over time, through relating, conversing and reflecting. The assumptions and processes of the 'circle' are critical here.

Currently, there appear to be a number of concrete opportunities to leverage this kind of localized cultural work in schools in NT DECS.

NT DECS School Review Process

Many of the relational, collaborative and critically reflective capabilities and practices required to create vibrant and enabling school cultures are implicit in the *NT DECS School Review Framework*. If these were drawn out and made explicit, they could become part of the school review process and discourse. This would also assist school leadership in concrete way to plan for their enhancement by drawing on existing or newly created professional learning processes to build individual and collective capability and practice.

Recommendation 1

Undertake an audit of the *NT DECS School Review Framework* to identify key relational, conversational and critically reflective capabilities and practices.

Recommendation 2

Work with NT DECS personnel undertaking school reviews to explicitly incorporate these 'cultural capabilities and practices' into the audit process.

(As I, the principal researcher remain connected and committed to education in NT, I would be honoured to facilitate the work outlined in *Recommendation 1 and 2* in partnership with NT DECS personnel, at no cost to NT DECS)

Recommendation 3

Undertake an audit of existing professional learning approaches to ascertain those which could be used to enhance these 'cultural capabilities and practices'

of individuals and groups within school communities. The *Cultures of Collaboration Program* is one example of a professional learning approach that could be useful.

Community Driven Schools Project

To address many of the dysfunctional cultural patterns identified by Ladwig and Sarra (2009), the CDSSU should be resourced to facilitate and coach this professional learning to enhance the 'cultural capabilities and practices' of work teams across DECS. The CDSSU would work collectively and locally with school staff and the broader school community and students.

Recommendation 4

Provide support and resourcing for the staff of the CDSSU to lead professional learning regarding the identified sustainable approaches to work place cultural transformation through enhancing 'cultural capabilities and practices.'

NT DECS Corporate Sector

The critical 'cultural wok' outlined in this research and that of Ladwig and Sarra (2009) is also relevant to the non-school sector of NT DECS. To address some of the dysfunctional cultural patterns identified by Ladwig and Sarra (2009) by creating positive, enabling cultures within NT DCS, it is critical to resource and undertake professional learning to enhance the 'cultural capabilities and practices' of these work teams.

Recommendation 5

Identify and cost a number of longitudinal professional learning / coaching approaches or programs to enhance 'cultural capabilities and practices' within and between non-school and/or corporate work teams. It's essential these have a strong program evaluation protocol.

Recommendation 6

Trial and evaluate one or more professional learning approaches or programs with one or more work teams.

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CHAPTER 3:

Organisational Report 2 (OR2)

Organisational Report 2 (OR2): Towards a framework of dispositions, capabilities and cultural practices for developing and enacting high-expectations relationships. A discussion paper for the Stronger Smarter Institute, December 2013.

Towards a framework of dispositions, capabilities and cultural practices for developing and enacting high-expectations relationships

A Discussion Paper

For the

Stronger Smarter Institute

Prepared by David Spillman as progress towards
the Doctor of Cultural Research degree, UWS.

December 2013

CONTENTS

About this paper

For the past six years I have had privilege of working as a co-designer and co-facilitator of the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program (SSLP). Through critically reflective conversations over this period, one broad concept has emerged as central to the Stronger Smarter approach– 'high-expectations relationships'. Whilst the elements of high-expectations relationships have been actively present since the foundational work of Dr Chris Sarra and the staff and students of Cherbourg school, it is only in recent years that they have been explicitly linked into this key concept of phrase. There is a growing belief among SSLP facilitators that the concept of 'high-expectations relationships' provides the unique and essential centre-stone of the Stronger Smarter approach, one that could well carry this critical work into the future. This is certainly my view.

The purposes of this paper are to:

1. stimulate critical reflection and dialogue within the Stronger Smarter fraternity, about the meaning and practicalities of enacting 'high-expectations relationships', and;

2. propose a rationale for a framework of dispositions and capabilities, and cultural practices to facilitate the development of the personal dispositions and capabilities necessary to initiate and enact high-expectations relationships.

Introduction

The term 'high-expectations relationships' has emerged through the work of the Stronger Smarter Institute to reflect something that has always been central to the Stronger Smarter philosophy and approach. It represents a modified term to more succinctly and explicitly capture a 'known' and essential entity. Yet there has been little writing focused specifically on this central concept, to stimulate reflection, conversation and good practice. Through this paper I will explore and elaborate the notion of 'high-expectations relationships'. To do this I will draw on various Stronger Smarter writings, an evaluation of the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program (SSLP) undertaken in 2009 and on the key learnings from research I have recently undertaken on the Cross-Cultural Collaboration project (CCCP), a Northern Territory Department of Education and Training initiative in 2008. I was a co-designer and co-facilitator of the CCCP.

In 2009 Clear Horizon Consulting (CHC) an organizational change evaluation company was commissioned to evaluate SSLP. The SSLP works with school principals and members of school leadership teams along with Indigenous staff and community representatives to enhance their leadership capabilities in order to improve the wellbeing, learning and educational outcomes of Indigenous children. CHC initially worked with institute staff to construct a 'program logic', an evaluative structure to gather evidence of program impacts on the way to final outcomes. CHC staff conducted semi-structured interviews both with key informants and SSLP participants as well as undertaking three case studies.

Although not an evaluative focus, this report provides some valuable perspectives on elements of high-expectations relationships.

The CCCP aimed to identify, trial, evaluate and document for professional learning purposes, processes and strategies for effective professional collaboration in Indigenous education settings. Eleven Indigenous / non-Indigenous participant pairs were invited for nine days of critical reflection, dialogue and planning. The three forums (four days, three days, two days) were interspersed with periods for workplace projects. Here CCCP participant-pairs facilitated and evaluated collaborative conversational processes and strategies with their school staff. Approximately thirty hours of video footage of CCCP conversations, presentations and interviews was captured. This constituted the primary data source for research. A *CCCP Key Learnings Report*, was circulated back to original CCCP participants for reflection and feedback early in 2013. Participant responses to these *key learnings* will also be referred to in this analysis.

I have undertaken this retrospective research of the CCCP experience as part of the Doctor of Cultural Research degree through the University of Western Sydney. Along with the SSLP writings and evaluation, the CCCP research offers a unique opportunity to unpack, elaborate and critique 'high-expectations relationships', what they are, how they're established and what they offer.

In particular this discussion paper will address the following questions, though not necessarily in the order outlined below.

- What are high-expectations relationships?
- Why are they so critical to the work of Stronger Smarter leadership and the education of Indigenous children? What is it that they offer?
- How are they formed? How can we best facilitate their establishment and monitor their enactment?
- What obstacles prevent or work against them? How can these be overcome?

'High-expectations relationships' and the Stronger Smarter approach

The critical importance of teachers having high expectations of student effort and performance and of 'building good teacher-student relationships' were integral to the successes of Cherbourg School and have therefore always been central to the Stronger Smarter approach (Sara 2005 p192). The necessity of building a good relationship with students in order to engage them in a high-expectations agenda has also been recognized in other Stronger Smarter schools.

> *Because the principal has got that personal relationship with students and a lot of community members (then) if your child comes to school these are the expectations … now the kids know they have to behave, try their best, and they have to come everyday.* (CHC 2009 p25)

The coupling of these two critical attributes of teacher / student interactions - building a good relationship and having high-expectations of student behaviour,

effort and performance - has been recognized and highlighted, most recently through usage of the term 'high-expectations relationships'. One of the five key metastrategies of the Stronger Smarter approach has been reformed to reflect this.

> 'High expectations' leadership to ensure 'high expectations' classrooms, with 'high expectations' teacher/student relationships;

High-expectations relationships require that teachers understand the unique talents, interests, knowledge and circumstances of the student. One informant in a Stronger Smarter school talked about the lack of this understanding prior to the principal undertaking SSLP.

> *Teachers did not have a good grasp of what the kids were actually capable of, and were disconnected from what the kids were good at or what knowledge they had …. They taught what they thought then needed to teach without understanding what the kids could do* (CHC 2009 p23)

Good relationships are not only required between teachers and students, but also with parents and community members to build trust and mutual understanding to work together for the child's benefit.

> *2005 was about getting a feel for what was needed to change, … it was about building relationships with families, communities and kids, and building their trust so that whether I had the teachers on board or not, I could really move along cause the community was going to support us.* (CHC 2009 p23)

It's also critically important that teachers understand and acknowledge the cultural, historical, family and individual student-background knowledge that Aboriginal education workers bring to the classroom. This knowledge compliments the curriculum and pedagogical knowledge of the teacher, enabling the creation of an equal partnership in the classroom as identified by an Aboriginal education worker.

> *One may have a teaching qualification and they have responsibility for the planning, teaching programs, but the other one has Aboriginal knowledge and knowledge of the kids, and that needs to be valued and they might have a different way of looking at things, and a different way of connecting with kids, to make their learning relevant, and that needs to be valued in the class as equals.* (CHC 2009 p27)

The quality of relating between school leadership, teachers, education workers, parents, carers and community members has a huge impact on the tone of the school's learning environments. When a significant number of adults within a school community enact good relationships, the culture of the school begins to shift positively. Indeed, the expert panel over-viewing the CHC evaluation of SSLP recognized the importance of a high-expectations culture or environment in which children learn.

> SSR has laid the challenge to orchestrate a major change in Indigenous education through a culture of high-expectations for Indigenous children (CHC 2009 p18)

One of the report conclusions also highlighted the importance of high-expectations relationships between all members of a school community.

> One of the main threads of the SS approach is to create an environment of high-expectation for the performance of teachers, other staff, students and parents (CHC 2009 p53)

In such high-expectations cultures or environments people become more open to having their mindsets, attitudes, expectations and practices challenged. Indeed, challenging the mindsets of teachers and Indigenous children and families was central to the transformation and success at Cherbourg School (Sarra 2005). Having 'hard conversations' to challenge teachers attitudes, expectations and practices was a strong theme highlighted by school leadership in the evaluation of SSLP (CHC 2009).

In his addresses to participants in SSLP over the past two years Dr Chris Sarra has described high-expectations relationships as 'firm and fair, compassionate and courageous', reinforcing the above perspectives. In these ways high-expectations relationships are now established as a core and essential ingredient of the Stronger Smarter philosophy and approach for all involved in the education of Indigenous children.. In 2011 members of the SSI created the following overarching statement about the Stronger Smarter philosophy, also reflecting the centrality of high-expectations relationships.

> The Stronger Smarter philosophy honours a positive sense of cultural identity, acknowledges and embraces positive community leadership, enabling innovative and dynamic approaches and processes that are anchored by high expectations relationships. High expectations relationships honour the humanity of others, and in so doing, acknowledge one's strengths, capacity and human right to emancipatory opportunities.

So, what can we glean so far about the nature of high-expectations relationships from these various Stronger Smarter perspectives?

1. 'High-expectations relationships' are positioned as critical to the wellbeing, learning and achievement of many Indigenous (and other) children in schools. Yet it is also clear from a variety of Stronger Smarter perspectives and stories of success, that high-expectations relationships between staff, and between staff and parents, carers, agency personnel and others are also necessary for the 'cultural' transformation critical to wellbeing and educational success within a school.

2. High-expectations relationships are in some ways and to a significant extent, relationships of equal power. They are 'fair' and 'compassionate' and 'honour the humanity' and 'strengths' of others. This suggests that in high-expectations relationships we regularly 'tune in' to the feelings, experiences, perceptions, strengths, needs and desires of others. Here we largely let others speak for themselves and are genuinely and compassionately interested in what they communicate. Through this desire to empathise we get to know a lot about the other person. In this

way high-expectations relationships might also be seen as socially just relationships (Mills 2008).

3. The Stronger Smarter statement of philosophy suggest that high-expectation relationships enable emancipatory opportunities. Just how this occurs will be further explored through this paper. Yet some insight is already provided above, and when we think of these relationships as being 'firm' and 'courageous'. For example, through challenging or 'hard' conversations within a relationship of trust and safety a person may be able to free or liberate themselves from negative and disabling assumptions about self and others, creating space and possibility for growth and positive transformation.

It is the proposition of this paper, based upon a range of Stronger Smarter perspectives and experiences very briefly flagged above, that high-expectations relationships are the centerpiece of the Stronger Smarter approach, and require a range of personal relational capabilities that are essentially conversational in nature. When a significant number of individuals within a group enact these capabilities in relation to self and each other, they collaboratively create a culture of trust and safety where there is an openness and willingness to challenge and replace personal attitudes, expectations, habits and practices that may be limiting or disabling. In addition, it will be proposed that there are particular conversational processes that can foster development of the personal capabilities required for the initiation and enactment of high-expectations relationships. When these conversational processes are embedded as routines or cultural practices within a group, sustainability and robustness of high-expectations relating is enhanced.

In Indigenous education there are some pervasive challenges to the development of these capabilities and the enactment of high-expectations relationships. The remainder of this paper will explore some of these challenges and ways of transcending them through the experiences and findings of CCCP research. In particular, it will explore how CCCP participants were able to overcome the limitations of essentialised identities, initiating and creating high-expectations relationships (though they were not called this at the time). In so doing this paper offers a rationale for the establishment of a discrete set of personal conversational capabilities required to enact high-expectations relationships, and the conversational processes / cultural practices that will initiate and sustain them.

Essentialised Indigenous identities – a critical challenge to high-expectations relationships

Whilst the ethnic diversity within the student population in Australian schools is increasing, the teaching workforce remains predominantly Anglo-European and middle class (Mills 2008). This teaching workforce is now charged with embedding Indigenous perspectives throughout the curriculum (Harrison 2007), and working cooperatively and collaboratively with Indigenous children and families to enhance Indigenous student wellbeing, learning and achievement (MCEECDYA 2010). Clearly we believe, establishing high-expectations

relationships is critical to these endeavours. Yet the majority of pre-service teacher education students enter university without significant long-term friendships or relationships with Indigenous people, relationships through which the assumptions of their upbringing might be challenged. In this context, teachers' 'knowing' of Indigenous people is primarily constituted through their Anglo-European, middle-class upbringing, schooling, personal dispositions, books, media and university lectures (Harrison 2012, Mills 2008). Such 'knowing' largely embodies deficit and / or idealised imaginings (Harrison 2012, Paradies 2006, McConaghy 2000). These imagined identities preconsciously mediate and distort interactions with students and Indigenous people. In so doing they may hinder or prevent the creation of high-expectations relationships.

Deficit perceptions of Indigenous people have dominated since first contact, depicting them as primitive and sub-human, needing but being incapable of improvement (Dodson 1994). These colonial constructions of Indigenous identities, created largely for the purposes of management and control, remain deeply embedded in the social psyche of contemporary Australians, having been constructed, modified and reinforced over generations through processes 'of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation' (Langton 1993 p33, Sarra 2005).

This deficit positioning of Indigenous people is strongly reinforced in education (Vass 2013), through the language of 'disadvantage' and the discourse of progress and enlightenment (Harrison 2007, Mills 2008). Important 'catch-up' agendas such as 'Closing the Gap' nevertheless reinforce deficit positioning of Indigenous people, and subsequently the importance of their educational progress from 'lack' to knowledge, independence and power (Harrison 2007). Resources are allocated to education systems and schools for Indigenous children on the basis of this 'need to catch-up', which again serves to reinforce deficit perspectives. In these ways teachers are strongly socialised into deficit perceptions of Indigenous children and families.

In addition, education leadership in systems and schools that focuses too heavily on top down approaches and student performance data are likely to affirm these deficit perceptions, reinforcing the position of teachers as all-knowing experts (Sarra 2008, Aitken 1996). This creates a power differential that reduces the likelihood of high-expectations relationships.

In view of this it is no surprise that deficit talking and theorising by teachers about Indigenous children has consistently been identified as one of the major challenges to Indigenous student wellbeing, learning and achievement in schools (McNaughton and Mei Kuin Lai 2008, Shields et al 2005, Sarra 2005). This deficit discourse amongst teachers posits that Indigenous children are less able to learn than their non-Indigenous counterparts because of their 'external' situation (Sarra 2008; McNaughton and Mei Kuin Lai 2008). This belief often reinforced through informal teacher talk and media positioning leads to 'low expectation' interactions between teachers and Indigenous children and to teachers loss of self-efficacy in terms of their capacity to facilitate learning for Indigenous children (McNaughton and Mei Kuin Lai 2008). Such discourses are also self-

perpetuating. As preconscious patterns of assumption and thinking they facilitate, among teachers, habitual, out-of-awareness searching for evidence to reinforce them.

This situation is made even more complex by the fact that some Indigenous people have been so heavily socialised by this deficit 'colonial gaze', that they have come to accept negative stereotypes as part of their identity (Gorringe et al 2011; Sarra 2005). Sarra (2005) has clearly demonstrated how such a negative sense of identity among Aboriginal children and their families fuels low-expectations of self and others, preventing educational engagement and achievement. Challenging such self-perceptions was one of the critical undertakings of the 'Strong and Smart' agenda at Cherbourg School (Sarra 2005).

Alternatively and perhaps in an attempt to overcome deficit positioning of Indigenous people, or to offset 'white guilt' for the oppression and atrocities of colonisation (Paradies 2006), teachers may also invoke idealised images of Aboriginality. These are images of 'essentialist, traditionalist authentic Aboriginality', founded on continuous identification with pre-colonised Aboriginal life (Moore 2005 p 177). These idealised, essentialised Aborigines speak language, are 'full-blood' and have appropriate physical features, live on or are connected to ancestral lands, know and perform ancestral stories and ceremonies, inhabit extended families and possess unique spirituality (Paradies 2006). Despite this, the fact remains that for vast majority of Indigenous people in Australia (but not all) these are 'fantasies of identity'. For example eighty-eight percent of Indigenous people in Australia indicated in the 2003 census, that they do not speak an Aboriginal language at home (Paradies 2006).

This is not to say that 'cultural identity' is somehow mistaken or wrong or that we shouldn't be working with Indigenous people through education to affirm or reclaim their languages and cultural perspectives, stories and practices. On the contrary, as identified by the Stronger Smarter philosophy above, embracing the cultural identities of Indigenous children in schools is critical to their sense of belonging and feelings of being visible, included and valued (Sarra 2005). The danger is when we habitually 'imagine' all Indigenous people to posses these universal characteristics, and then make judgments about their Indigenous authenticity on this basis. In this way such imagined stereotype may mediate and distort our interactions with Indigenous people, preventing us from really meeting them for the unique human beings they are.

This situation was made plainly obvious during a 2013 SSLP in Victoria where the vast majority of participants were non-Indigenous. In the check-in on day 2 of the program a middle-aged Aboriginal man named Robbie made an animated and heart-felt plea to his co-participants.

> *All that stuff you have in your head about me, about who I am as an Aboriginal man (*holding open hands to the sides of his head*). Do away with it.* (waving hands away from his body*) Get rid of it, and meet me as a human being …. Meet me Robbie (surname)! (*pointing to his chest*).*

Through a later conversation Robbie disclosed his feeling that many people held preconceived notions about who he must be as an Aboriginal man, especially if

he's to be a 'real Aborigine'. He also felt that these preconceived perceptions often prevented others from 'really getting to know me', rather leading to questions and judgements about his 'Aboriginality' and sometimes, unrealistic expectations of him. He believed that through his life this pattern of interaction, built on preconception and judgment had plagued him, causing episodes of confusion that adversely affected his sense of self. It was only in recent years that he was coming to understand how this was playing out.

When such imaginings are 'at play' they generally exist and operate out of our awareness. Here when meeting an Indigenous person, like Robbie, his dark skin and 'Aboriginal' physical features, both important social markers of 'Aboriginality' (Paradies 2006, Kickett-Tucker 2009), activate these imaginings at a out-of-awareness level. We then subconsciously search for evidence to reinforce these images through our interactions. If the evidence is not forthcoming then a judgement of authenticity often follows. Indeed Robbie told me that because he 'looks Aboriginal' and is from the NT, people often expect him to speak language, make artefacts and know ancestral stories. When they realise he doesn't have any of these characteristics, being a descendant of the stolen generation, he often felt judged and rejected. In these ways we never really meet Robbie openly, as a unique human being. Our meeting is mediated and distorted through these preconscious images often leading to some kind of judgment of authenticity. Marcia Langton describes this social phenomenon in this way.

> Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists (Langton 1993, 33)

Such imagined, essentialised identities are pervasive among teachers (Harrison 2012, Harrison 2007), especially in Indigenous education (McConaghy 2000). They can lead us to the over-simplistic perception that Indigenous people are exclusively or primarily cultural beings, focusing here on a racialised view of 'culture' (McConaghy 2000). Such 'culturalist' assumptions and images may result in 'Indigenous culture' being placed at the centre of all deliberations about pedagogy and policy for Indigenous children in schools, as is the case with bi-lingual and two-way educational approaches. This may in turn maintain our focus on a grossly oversimplistic 'two-race binary' of 'immutable and oppositional cultures: 'Indigenous' and Western' (McConaghy 2000 p8).

These essentialised, deficit and / or idealized conceptions and their often-associated judgments, deny Indigenous peoples' humanity, their strengths, their capacity, their layered identities. When these imaginings operate, which is most often at a level out our awareness, they work to create unequal power relations (Harrison 2007). Deficit assumptions encourage educators' and teachers' feelings of power 'over' Indigenous people, affirming teachers' expertise to 'fix-up' or 'catch-up' Indigenous children. When their efforts do not realize any substantial results, fault is externalized, further reinforcing the deficit assumptions. When idealized images of Aboriginality are preconsciously enacted, Indigenous people may be conferred power over non-Indigenous people. This can lead to a lack of rigor in conversations. The 'firm' and 'courageous' qualities of high expectations relationships go missing. Indeed, this

propensity among non-Indigenous people to attribute 'moral and epistemological superiority' to Indigenous people perceived as 'real' or authentic because they comply with idealized images of 'Aboriginality' is well recognized and worth reflecting upon (Paradies 2006). Either way, through deficit or idealized imaginings, the resultant unequal power relating prevents the possibility of high-expectations relationships. For as Paradies (2006 p356) reminds us:

> There are innumerable types of human identity that vary across many aspects of experience, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, class, physicality, language, religion and profession, to name only a few.

When we add to the mix personal dispositions, preferences and drives (Harrison 2012; Mills 2008), experiences, beliefs, values and opinions we begin to see the dynamic complexity of human identities available to us. High-expectation relationships require us to be curious and open to the dynamic complexity of individual human identities and circumstances. Clearly this becomes very difficult, nigh impossible, when essentialised notions of Indigenous identities and judgments of Indigenous authenticity are preconsciously operating.

High-expectations relationships, essentialised identities and key learnings from CCCP

Analysis of the CCCP video data failed to locate any examples of deficit assumptions or stereotyping of Indigenous children or families. There were many instances however where essentialised imaginings of Indigenous identities were invoked and enacted. During CCCP these primarily focused on the 'culturalist' assumption of a two-race binary of contrary Indigenous and Western cultural perspectives. Indeed, the most fundamental assumption on which rested the conception, planning and initiation of CCCP, was that the most critical challenge in Indigenous education in the NT is bridging the gap between two cultural perspectives – Indigenous and Western. This culturalist assumption is obviously inherent in the project title – the Cross-Cultural Collaboration project.

The assumption that Indigenous people are exclusively or primarily cultural beings was widely invoked with associated essentialised notions of Indigenous cultural identity being heavily affirmed and reinforced. In most cases these essentialied Indigenous cultural perspectives and practices were positively affirmed whilst those of Western culture were seen as negative. A significant number of these instances also led to judgments about the authenticity of Indigenous people, by participants and facilitators alike. The two anecdotes below demonstrate how such preconscious assumptions of essentialised, homogenous identity groups worked to stifle both the rigor and possibility of conversation, and exploration of the complex dynamics of human identities. In so doing they severely reduced the likelihood and possibility of creating high-expectations relationships.

Anecdote 1: Early on Day 2 of the program, participants were seated in a circle and offered the opportunity to talk openly about their beliefs and experiences regarding leadership in Indigenous education in the NT. The facilitators offered

no conversational process, enabling participants to enact and then critically reflect upon their conversational habits.

Nine out of twenty-two participants didn't speak during the twenty-minute, unstructured conversation. Seven of these were Indigenous. Eight were female. The male who did not speak was Indigenous.[1]

In the subsequent reflective conversation to analyse and evaluate what had occurred, it became clear that several, though not all of the non-speakers had something to offer to the conversation, something they wanted to or could have said. A male Indigenous participant then made the point that the first four speakers were non-Indigenous. He then offered this analysis.

> *You as a Ngapaki ('whitefellas') can ….. because you like talking (laughter from others) … (speaker more animated now) You do like talking .. where …. Yolngu ….(pause) … Yolngu will sit .. but we'll be in that group and focus on what you talking about.*

He continued in this vein for a minute or so with a lot of group laughter and nodding. This led to a short interchange between three participants, which culminated when an experienced non-Indigenous female educator offered a summary of this perception.

> *What I hear, what I think you're saying is that in Yolngu way of talking, there is a lot of listening and a lot of silence. … and our way of being together is talking, talking, talking, talking.*

This view was broadly accepted with a lot of head nodding and agreement, bringing this part of the reflective conversation to a close.

Whilst this may have been a valid perception based upon the Indigenous male's and other's experiences, one well worth contemplating, what is interesting here is that the compliant acceptance of this belief served to limit the depth, scope and possibility of the conversation. For example, the passive acceptance of this proposition prevented consideration and critique of a more obvious socio-linguistic phenomenon given these circumstances, that of silencing women in public discourse (see for example Pettman 1992). The likelihood of this phenomena having been at play here, was supported when these and other research findings were presented back to original CCCP participants early in 2013 in the form of *CCCP Key Learnings Report*. Two female participants, one Indigenous, one non-Indigenous, independently recalled this incident and their feelings of ambivalence about it. Yet both indicated having felt uncomfortable and unable to contest an Aboriginal man's perspective. Further, as six of the eight women who didn't speak were Indigenous, there is also the possibility of 'double colonisation' being at play, where imperial and patriarchal ideologies merge and leverage off each other (Ashcroft et al 2006, 233). CCCP participants held different positions in the organization and therefore differing socio-economic circumstances. Class may have also interacted in this situation to contribute to power and silence (Katrak 1989). So gender, class and a multitude

[1] Seven of the twenty-two participants were male, eleven were Indigenous

of other factors may have also influenced the pattern of conversation. All of these possibilities remained unexplored.

Here, the initial explanation provided by the Indigenous male participant resonated immediately with the underlying 'culturalist' assumption, preconsciously held by many participants, that what we're really dealing with in Indigenous education is the challenge of bridging this binary divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural perspectives and practices. His analysis provided another piece of evidence to reinforce this perspective and the notion that all Indigenous people are good listeners, whilst Westerners engage in 'talking, talking, talking, talking'. Further, his Indigenous look, and the fact he was a language speaker and lawman may have added weight to his argument, conferring on him a high degree of Indigenous authenticity.

Anecdote 2. On day 3 when reporting on conversations about self-perceptions and strengths a pair of experienced, Indigenous / non-Indigenous males identify a Warlpiri word meaning 'the home inside us.' They went on to outline the 'five essential elements of Warlpiri thinking – language, law, land, kin and ceremony', concluding with the following statement.

> *If any of those five elements break down those men are nothing. They're not shields and the whole community begins to fall apart. It becomes lawless. It becomes sad. It's a terrible place.*

So here it was proposed that Warlpiri men do and should think in terms of these five essential elements. Again, participants and facilitators alike passively accepted this proposition. This is clearly an important Warlpiri strengths-based perspective, and there is obviously room for significant diversity of identities within all five of the elements. Nevertheless, in a significant way this proposal represents an essentialising of Warlpiri men's identities on the basis of a racialised view of 'culture.' Do Warlpiri men, for example who have been brought up in urban settings or lived substantial periods of their lives there, or off Warlpiri land, think in terms of these five cognitive organizers? And if they don't are they less Warlpiri? Is it how Warlpiri members and descendants of the stolen generation think and behave? Are they less Warlpiri? Would they be more Warlpiri if they knew and lived these perspectives? What room is there here to acknowledge experience, growth, learning and identity outside traditional Warlpiri culture? Such an uncontested proposition also reinforces the assumption that it's possible to know a 'real' Warlpiri man, before even meeting and talking with one. When a Warlpiri man is met and interacted with, these essentialised characteristics may become the measurement stick of male Warlpiri authenticity. This is not to say that such cultural perspectives are unimportant. It is a more complex situation than a simple right or wrong. Indeed, such perspectives embody a critical foundation for the success of approaches such as *Milpiri* (Patrick 2008). Yet if in this way through our lack of awareness, we generalize or essentialise on the basis of such characteristics of cultural identity, we deny ourselves the possibility of more fully recognizing and knowing a Warlpiri man, as a unique human being with a complex and layered identity. We deny him and ourselves the possibility of a high-expectations relationship.

Enabling high-expectations relationships – transcending essentialised identities and judgments of authenticity

In the ways briefly depicted above the analysis of video footage from CCCP uncovered a strong conversational pattern of invoking and reinforcing over-simplistic notions of a two-race binary of cultural identities, and of subsequent judgments of authenticity. Yet at the same time there were many instances where participants were able to overcome or transcend these limiting assumptions and practices, recognising the critical importance of tuning in to the unique life experiences and circumstances, cultural backgrounds, dispositions, capabilities and characteristics of those they encountered and worked with. Here they were able to recognise the great human diversity that sits within cultural groups.

> *When it comes down to it, cross-cultural collaboration is about relationships where human beings, who have a unique set of life experiences, are seeking to enter into meaningful relationships with other human beings who also have a unique set of life experiences. Within a distinct grouping of people, there is an enormous range of difference in specific experience and perspective. Sure, there are broad sweeps of commonality, but the differences amongst such groups are equal to or greater than the differences across people groups. (non-Indigenous male)*

Indeed CCCP experiences affirmed the critical relational nature of intercultural work.

> *CCCP has clarified that a lot of cross-cultural collaboration is about forming a strong relationship with that person you're working with or that group of people you're working with (non-Indigenous female)*

As suggested by the Stronger Smarter statement of philosophy above, building strong intercultural relationships requires the regular enactment of 'compassion' to honour 'the humanity' and 'strengths' of others. Here we tune-in to the unique strengths, experiences, circumstances, cultural perspectives, dispositions, preferences, opinions and attitudes of others, really getting to 'see' and learn about them, whilst minimizing the distortion of essentialised preconceptions. In so doing we liberate the possibility of high expectations relationships.

So what happened during CCCP that enabled participant to free themselves of the constraints of essentialised imaginings of Indigenous and Western identities?

Creating cultures of 'good (socially just) relating'

Firstly participants were invited in participant pairs with existing relationships to varying extents. Some were close friends as well as colleagues. This created a different situation to one where separate groups of Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants were invited, where essentialised cultural binaries might have more likely been invoked.

> *Being invited to participate with someone I already have a good relationship with affirmed the importance of close cross-cultural relationships. I am so glad I was chosen and privileged to attend with one of my best and closest friends (non-Indigenous male)*

In addition, a number of theoretical perspectives from the realms of organizational complexity and change, and community development, selected to underpin aspects of the facilitated approach to CCCP, inadvertently worked together to shift the focus away from essentialised 'culturalist' assumptions and practices. They combined to move participants initial focus away from questions of '*who* am I / are we?' to questions of '*how* am I / are we?' - away from the habits of invoking racialised notions of cultural identity and the binaries of cultural differences, towards a focus on the quality of their relating to self and each other.

A critical process to this end was to explicitly focus early conversation and critical thinking in CCCP on a different view of culture. Whilst an anthropological or racialised view of 'culture' is assumed and prioritized in 'culturalism' (McConaghy 2000), Sutton (2000 p135) offers an alternative, though not mutually exclusive perspective.

> Culture is not merely a consciously assumed personal attitude that may be donned or doffed at will ….. it is neither fully conscious and subject to voluntary control nor wholly unconscious and beyond being brought to mind …. (it) consists of the interplay between 'unreflexive daily practice' and our partial awareness of what we are doing and thinking.

This 'unreflexive daily practice' suggests that much of what makes up 'culture' is habit. Habitual daily practices rests upon 'shared basic assumptions' also called 'underlying cultural assumptions', sets of beliefs, values and stories we have been socialized into through our life within a group, assumptions that we do not have to consciously consider in order to perceive, think, feel, judge and act (Schein 1992). They generally remain as preconscious assumptions, though, to varying degrees, we can bring them into awareness and talk about then with the right stimulus.

Based upon this perspective, the view of 'culture' focused upon in CCCP was:

> Culture: the conscious and sub-conscious patterns of perceiving, thinking, judging, responding and behaving that characterise any group of people.

This is an explicitly relational view of 'culture' and was introduced early in CCCP as a reflective tool to focus participants on the question of '*how* are we together?, *how* do we perceive, think, feel, talk, respond and behave when we're together?' and, *how* do we need to be together to be the best we can, individually and collectively? This focus was largely enacted through the conversational processes and practices of the 'circle'.

Conversational circles are based upon the assumption that as human beings we all wish to connect to self and others in good ways (Prannis 2005).

Conversational circles work participants towards deep, non-judgmental listening and courageous sharing. In CCCP the practices of the circle enabled group members over time to establish a space of safety and trust.

> *The circle is a physical manifestation of safety. Early in our time we kept the circle tight. Now we can sit anywhere because of the trust. (Indigenous female)*

In such a conversational space participants felt able, to varying degrees, to share significant personal experiences.

> *The power and success of CCCP has been through the group dynamic that has developed. There's been a lot of high-stakes disclosure, and people getting deeply into themselves to bring our attributes that can seed change (Indigenous male)*

This focus on *how we are together* was further reinforced by another perspective from realm of organizational complexity, also introduced early in CCCP. In an exposition of his Complex Responsive Processes Theory (CRPT) Ralph Stacey draws on the social psychology of Elias (1978, 1989). He states:

> The individual is the singular, while the group is the plural of the same phenomena, relationship (Stacey 2003 p323)

CRPT is based upon process thinking which Stacey juxtaposes with systems thinking. He points out that most western psychological and sociological perspectives draw on some variation of systems thinking where individuals and groups are different dimensions or components of some system or whole, variously interacting with each other. Process here is seen as these interactions between the various parts of the system. In some perspectives individuals take precedence in terms of agency. In others greater importance and power is ascribed to the group. Because system thinking deals with wholes, parts and hierarchies it embraces a spatial metaphor of inside / outside. In one way this spatial metaphor operates to imagine a 'mind inside a person and the social as a system outside the person'. (Stacey 2003 p320).

Stacey proposes this dominant western focus on individuals as objects with an independent mind, operating within spatial systems that exist external to them but which they are a part of, as flawed and disabling. While his critique is extensive and far beyond the scope of this report, he proposes the heart of the problem is that systems thinking and approaches focus us on abstract wholes or systems, rather than micro, local interactions between people in the present. In doing so we overlook the site of greatest transformative power and opportunity, the day-to-day, moment-to-moment interactions and conversations between people. This is the relational context critical to the initiation and establishment of high-expectations relationships.

Drawing on the work of pragmatist George Herbert Mead (1934) and the process sociology of Elias (1978) he demonstrates how consciousness and self-consciousness are social processes requiring language, that is, 'they arise in the communicative interactions between human bodies', in social relations which they are simultaneously constructing (Stacey and Griffin 2005). It is these social processes that enable the emergence of individual self-perceptions and those of

group identities through the human capacity to enact the subject/object dialectic.

> 'I' can only ever contemplate itself as an object 'me', which is one perception of the attitude of society towards itself. (Stacey and Griffin 2005 p4)

In this way Stacey accepts Mead's proposition that:

> an individual mind is the silent conversation and private role-play of an individual body with itself, equivalent to social processes (Stacey 2003 p320)

This is to say that a human mind is not something residing inside the individual, something secret, untouchable and separate from the social. Rather, mind is always social phenomena, always working and communicating in relation to other. Self-perception for example is comprised of the 'silent conversations and private role-plays' that reflect an individual's perception of how others and society sees him or her, through their responses and gestures. In this way, as Mishler (1999) points out, identity or self-perception is always an interpersonal rather than intrapersonal phenomenon. This notion that our sense of who we are is our perception of others' perceptions of us was explored, grasped and accepted variously by participants. One participant put it this way.

> *CCCP focuses on relationships to self and relationship to others … ourselves and collectives at the same time. It's the same thing. (Indigenous female)*

Another non-Indigenous participant in presenting her group's visual representation of key learnings from the first workshop explained the inclusion of a moon in the picture.

> *We've included the moon in the centre of the picture to represent self. The moon is a metaphor for self as it reflects the light of others.*

This suggested an understanding of the predominantly social nature of self-perception and initiated a powerful conversation about identity and authenticity. This conversation was informally led by two participant-pairs, all being fluent speakers of their local Indigenous languages. Whilst the conversation was convoluted at times the dominant key point was that in both Yolgnu Matha and Warlpiri there was no word or phrase that could be translated to 'individual identity' or 'individual self'. Rather words for 'self' always related to other.

> *What I've come to understand is that really it's a very Balanda (whitefella) concept of always coming back to the self as an individual, and the more we're connected with absolutely everything as one, as us, is …. um …. more how it is to be alive you know.*

Another male of non-Indigenous heritage, though a deep speaker of Warlpiri and regarded as a Warlpiri man by his male, Warlpiri project partner, added a Warlpiri perspective.

> *Well in Warlpiri …. you can't think of yourself in the sense of 'self' (pointing inwards at chest). But you think of your relationship to your kinship, your relationship to country, your relationship to language, your relationship to ceremony, your relationship to law. ….. and all of those relationships are essential relationships. So I'm not just an individual 'me' isolate. I'm part of a family. I'm part of a clan. I have responsibilities for country. I have responsibilities in terms of law. I have responsibilities in terms of things, important things, sacred things, language and so forth. So I can't just say well you know I'm the authentic me. I can say my authenticity relates to how integrous I am to all of that interconnectedness. So I can't just be focused on me (pointing inward at chest). I've gotta be focused … (draws big circles outward with hands)*

A younger Indigenous female summarized the perspective to nods and smiles from the four conversational leaders.

> *So the authenticity is really in your relationships? That's where authenticity lies in our relationships and our connectedness to everything else and everybody else.*

So here a variety of Indigenous perspectives reinforced the phenomenon recognised by Stacey in CRPT, that 'self' is not an isolated, unitary entity, but rather a relational, interconnected phenomena. This perspective also reinforces the value and power of focusing learning experiences on the question of '*How* am I / are we in relation to self, other and country?' rather than on the questions '*Who* am I / are we?' Whilst cultural identity is central to a strong sense of self, particularly for many Indigenous people (Sarra 2005), focusing conversations and reflective learning on the relational questions of *how am I / are we?*, also enables us to affirm and enhance our interdependence. Both perspectives are possible and necessary, inter-related and complimentary.

This relational, cultural work was also enabled by the introduction of reflective tools like perceptual positioning (Knight 2009) and a variety of provocations such as: *When challenged, how do you respond, with defensiveness or possibility?* Through this reflective, conversational work participants were able to enhance the quality of their relating to self and each other, co-creating a space and relationships of safety and trust.

Strengths-based conversations

An early explicit focus on strengths-based conversations also contributed positively to the establishment of good relating and subsequently a space of safety and trust. This served to shift the conversation away from the dominant pattern in Indigenous education of deficit talking and theorizing, and may have been significantly responsible for the complete lack of deficit conversation during CCCP. *Engoori* was employed early in CCCP for this purpose. *Engoori* is a strengths-based conversational process for co-creating collective responses to complex inter-cultural challenges. It is based upon a Mithaka, Tjimpa (black hawk) story from southwest Queensland (Gorringe and Spillman 2008). It was introduced on Day 3. Participants began by individually responding to the question, *What keeps me strong?* Through sharing their responses in a collective sense-making process, they co-created a strong collective story of strength, focusing on and honouring both common themes and individual, unique strengths.

The (Engoori) activity was quite emotive this one, and that's why I believe it's one of the great tools we can use. It brought everyone together with tears and laughter. (Indigenous male)

Indeed, analysis of the CCCP video footage showed that as CCCP progressed, there was a quantifiable increase in the amount of humour and laughter in conversation and interactions. This contributes positively to group interactions and cultures in significant ways (Knight 2009). In CCCP, humour and laughter served to reinforce a group culture of 'good relating' that included levity, engagement and connectivity.

Engoori focused participants on positive relating through mutually recognising and embracing strengths, offsetting deficit perspectives reinforced through the 'disadvantage' discourse. Engoori processes require substantial exploratory conversation with others including Indigenous people, rather than mediating our relating through some mental construction of 'who' we're meeting. In this way strength-based conversational processes such as *Engoori* require us to be fully present with each other. They assist us in avoiding the unequal power relating that is inevitable when deficit or idealized imaginings filter and direct interactions and relationships (Harrison 2007).

The dominant theme that emerged through these strengths-based conversations was the notion of 'family'. On reflecting upon their responses to the Phase 1 *Engoori* question 'what keeps me strong?' two participants offered:

It wasn't possible for me to think about me, without family. (Indigenous male)

Yeah me too. I couldn't think of myself separate from my family, even before I was married (non-Indigenous male)

This was a repeated theme as noted by another participant.

Yeah we all talked about family. Family's at the core. It's the heart. It's what keeps all of us strong (Indigenous male)

Several Indigenous participants began referring to the CCCP participants as family.

I feel safe too… going back to my school and staff is a little bit difficult, … and I always think of this (group) as part of my family (Indigenous female)

It was noted that many teachers get 'taken into family' when beginning to work on remote communities. Three Indigenous female participants also talked about how they see the children in their class as their children too.

I am their teacher … um … responsible for their learning and wellbeing. I also love and care for them as their mother…. I keep a mother eye open as well as a teacher eye … all the time.

This powerful 'family' metaphor affirmed the notion of interdependence, the centrality of 'belonging' to human life, and the relational nature of identity. In addition, enacting 'family' in teacher – student, and collegial relationships has been shown to enhance Indigenous student wellbeing, learning and performance. It offers one way of enacting a strengths-based approach that reinforces good, socially just relating.

In combination these facilitated perspectives - a relational view of culture, conversational practices of the circle, identity as an interpersonal phenomena and strengths-based conversations, enabled participants to reflect upon, talk about and build their connectivity, their 'good relating'. In so doing, participants were able to begin co-creating or continue enhancing high expectations relationships that honoured the strengths and humanity of each other; that were in this way socially just relationships, 'fair' and 'compassionate'.

Making it personal – challenging assumptions and patterns of perceiving, thinking, judging and doing – critically reflective relating

Upon this foundation of good relating, affirmation of strengths, and shared feelings of trust and safety, it became possible to challenge personal habits of perceiving, thinking, judging, responding and behaving, both self-reflectively and interpersonally through feedback and questioning. Here participants enacted the 'courageous' and 'firm' aspects of high-expectations relationship. Whilst all participants reported feelings that their gifts and strengths were affirmed and their experiences and knowledge validated through CCCP conversations, they were also all able to focus critically on their understanding of self.

> *The question I have been constantly challenged by in this program is what do I know about myself? (Indigenous female)*

Many participants were able to identify personal habits that were limiting or constraining, sometimes with significant shifts.

> *I can't believe that over the four days I came out a completely different person, like seeing the world in a completely different way ….. The impact that that's had is it's made me see a lot about myself …. Good things and bad things … and I'm quite open to looking at the negative things as well … So I came out with that learning under my belt about myself, which can only make me more empowered in the position that we've been given to make change. I'm here to make a difference (non-Indigenous female)*

In such ways participants were encouraged to tune-in to and critically explore their habitual patterns of perceiving, thinking, judging and acting, and where they deemed necessary plan to practice alternative behaviours.

> *This was something that was so valuable to me though CCCP. I think it's an ongoing process. It can be easy to slip back into old patterns. I still struggle. CCCP opened up my eyes to these habitual patterns, and there are many things I have managed to change. However, I still have a long way to go. (non-Indigenous female)*

All participants identified specific behaviours they worked to change or enhance. Effective listening was one of the common capabilities of focus taken up by both

Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants, also reinforced by the strong uptake of perceptual positioning as a self-reflective tool.

> *I've been able to build stronger relationships through being a better listener … building more trust (non-Indigenous female)*

> *I've learnt a lot from listening to other peoples' journeys …. particularly through their stories. (Indigenous female)*

> *I can now understand other peoples' perspectives a lot better and am more aware of them. I am a more attentive listener now. It helps in everyday and work life (non-Indigenous male)*

The capability to notice and suspend impulsive emotional responses was also identified as both being enabled by and enabling good relating.

> *I have been able to suspend my emotional response and judgement in a number of difficult situations. As a result I have been able to deal with these situations more calmly (non-Indigenous female).*

Through processes of deep listening, feedback and critical reflection participants were able to enhance their capability to identify and challenge preconscious assumptions and habitual practices.

> *The most significant change for me through CCCP is that I now challenge my own assumptions, challenging my reactions to certain situations. This allows me to choose different responses and decisions….. Through the CCCP projects things have come into my consciousness. It's allowed me to be a more relaxed leader. I can only ever change myself not others. I can now be the change I want to see. (Indigenous female)*

> *I never used to like to be challenged. Now I'm seeking feedback to develop myself personally and professionally. (Indigenous male)*

Essentialised notions of Indigenous identities and authenticity were also owned and critiqued.

> *One of the most important learnings for me (was) in regard to my own tendency prior to CCCP to pedestalise full-blooded, on-country, first language speaking participants as providing a greater opportunity for me .. us to learn from, inadvertently authenticating or bestowing on them deeper levels of power and wisdom than their more urbanized Indigenous counterparts. (non-Indigenous male)*

This personal transformative work facilitated through challenging conversations enabled some participants to access a different perspective.

> *The tools and processes provided in CCCP have given me a new perspective. I see the world in a different way now. (non-Indigenous female)*

This critically self-reflective work is relational and conversational. It marks 'silent conversations' we have with ourselves that reflect 'social processes', previous conversations and interactions with the group or media or books.

Awareness of the need for and nature of such personal challenges comes through conversation with others, through tuning-in to different perspectives, stories, feedback and powerful questions, and then having the courage, and the sense of safety and support to proceed. Often our silent self-reflections are interspersed with conversations with others to test out our reflections and thinking. We may ask others for feedback, what they're thinking about it all. In these ways critically reflective capabilities that are both self-reflective and interpersonal are always nevertheless conversational. They are essential to high quality, high-expectations relationships.

Summary: Towards a framework of dispositions, capabilities and cultural practices for developing and enacting high-expectations relationships

This CCCP research reinforces the central and critical importance of high-expectations relationships in inter-cultural educational spaces, as proposed by the Stronger Smarter philosophy and approach. It has assisted to further unpack the nature of high-expectations relationships and the ways they can be initiated, facilitated and made sustainable. In particular it supports the notion that high-expectations relationships require both socially just relating that is compassionate and fair, and critically reflective relating that is courageous and firm. Socially just relating characterized by empathy and compassion, deep listening, genuine interest and non-judgment, enables the establishment of trust and safety within relationships, leading to equitable power relations. Critically reflective relating characterized by courage, resilience, rigour and firmness, requires the strength and security of a socially just relationship, and enables positive transformation of personal assumptions and practices. Socially just relating without critically reflective relating is supportive and affirming, but frustrating as it lacks the rigor and robustness necessary to enable or facilitate positive transformation. Critically reflective relating without the trust, safety and feedback of a socially just relationship may become delusional, and / or is often perceived as hard, overly clinical and uncaring, leading to defensiveness and disconnection. Both socially just and critically reflective relating are required for positive personal and group transformation, for emancipation. Both are clearly necessary to high-expectations relationships.

There are specific dispositions and capabilities required for socially just and critically reflective relating. As has been argued above, all of these capabilities are essentially conversational in nature. As some CCCP participants identified, and Stacey (2003) has demonstrated, the act of individual self-reflection is primarily conversational in nature, as such dialogue with self reflects previous social conversations and interactions. Identifying these dispositions and capabilities and creating ways to evaluate and monitor their development and enactment would be of great use to SSLP participants, their school communities and the Stronger Smarter Institute. To contribute to this framework development, listed below are a starting set of such dispositions and capabilities, along with a set of conversational processes that can assist in facilitating the development of these dispositions and capabilities.

Socially just relating requires a disposition of genuine interest in others, their feelings, experiences, knowledge, opinions and beliefs and a willingness and ability to empathise with the other's situation and perspectives. Such a disposition is based upon the beliefs that as human beings we experience the world in similar and different ways, we carry different 'baggage' – gifts, talents, strengths, experiences, preferences, cultural assumptions, weaknesses, scripts and blindspots through which we interpret the world and create our realities, and that encouraging and enabling others to speak for themselves is the most humanising and useful way to initiate good relating, creating trust and releasing the potential of creative collaboration. Along with the above-mentioned disposition, the following capabilities are required to enact socially just relating.

* Reflective whole-body listening, including:
    - using appropriate body language and positioning
    - tuning in to what's said as well as all the non-verbal cues offered
    - noticing and resisting the impulse to respond while the other person is speaking
    - checking back with the speaker that the correct message about feelings and thinking has been accessed

* Seeking and exploring non-judgmentally perspectives, experiences, opinions and life circumstances of others, especially those different to one's own, including:
    - using appropriate body language and positioning
    - asking appropriate open-ended questions
    - using appropriate follow-up questions and prompts
    - regular body language and short verbal responses that indicate full attention and listening
    - noticing and where necessary suspending mental responses and impulses to make judgments or to respond

* Responding openly and clearly when others ask questions including:
    - expressing feelings about particular events or incidents
    - sharing stories of personal experience
    - outlining thinking about issues of focus
    - disclosing personal, 'high-stakes' feelings and perceptions

* Sharing the humorous side in situations, including being able to laugh at one's own mistakes and failed attempts

* Through conversation with others, seeking, naming and building upon common threads and differences in experiences, perspectives, desires and ideas for particular purposes or challenges.

Critically reflective relating requires a disposition of curiosity, courage and resilience firstly in terms of exploring one's personal habits, and then those of others and the conversational patterns within groups. It is based upon the belief that as human beings we are primarily habitual – that is, the vast majority of our daily perceptions, thoughts, judgments, responses and behaviours are habitual. Most of these hold us in good stead, helping us to thrive and survive. Some of

these habits may limit or hold us back. Such habitual patterns operate in individuals and groups, as a result of the dynamic conscious and pre-conscious interplay between individual preferences and dispositions, life experiences and socialization into particular groups. These habits can be identified, challenged and modified. Along with the above-mentioned disposition, the following capabilities are required to enact critically reflective relating.

* Identifying and examining personal habits of perceiving, thinking, judging, responding and behaving, and the preconscious assumptions and drives which enable them.

* Seeking feedback (both affirming and critical) from others about personal habits, and how they are enacted in specific conversations and instances

* Responding openly, inquisitively and analytically to critical feedback from others

* Reflecting on feedback and new self-awareness, and where necessary making decisions and plans to modify or change particular specific habits.

* Suspending emotional responses in emotionally charged situations, walking away and analyzing these feelings and situations

* Accepting failure, uncertainty and 'not-knowing' and seeking others opinions and ideas regarding these issues or challenges

* Providing affirming and critical feedback to others when requested

Cultural practices to develop and enhance personal capabilities

This CCCP research has also identified a set of conversational processes that can enhance the likelihood of participants developing and enacting these socially just and critically reflective dispositions and capabilities. When these conversational practices are embedded as routines within the life of a group they become cultural practices, enhancing the likelihood of sustainability of high-expectations patterns of relating. These conversational processes include:

Conversational circles – working towards a space of equal power, safety and trust where everyone's feelings, perceptions and experiences are validated, and over time can also be challenged in a non-judgmental, productive manner

Dialogue – a conversational process that focuses on synthesizing or building upon the perspectives and ideas of others, and being ever-prepared to challenge one's own perspective and assumptions, and accept uncertainty and 'not-knowing' (as contrasted with debate where we defend our perspectives as 'known' and 'right' and attempt to 'punch holes' in those of others). Dialogue draws on multiple perspectives and enables collective sense-making and consensual decision making, both critical processes when dealing with complex intercultural challenges.

An explicitly relational view of culture – focusing initial conversation in inter-cultural spaces on the questions of *How am I / are we? How do I relate to self, others and country?* rather than the questions of *Who am I / are we?* which may invoke essentialised notions of identities and judgments of authenticity.

Strengths-based conversations – Individually and collectively, all human beings have strengths. Beginning conversations by mutually acknowledging and affirming these strengths builds connectivity, trust and optimism. Building on our individual and collective strengths when faced with difficult, protracted or complex challenges engenders commitment and hope and enhances likelihood of creating success. Strengths-based conversations and approaches are critically in Indigenous education where there is a strong socialization into deficit theorizing and talking among teachers, educational leadership, politicians and policy makers.

Implications and Recommendations

As identified in the very first section of this paper, the purpose is to stimulate critical conversation about the nature of high-expectations relationships, and how we might best monitor and evaluate their development and enactment. As also previously mentioned, there is a growing belief among the SSLP facilitation team that successfully addressing this challenge would be extremely useful for many Stronger Smarter stakeholders and their school communities.

It is therefore recommended:

1. Key SSI personnel, particularly those from the SSLP facilitation team, executive, and perhaps some trained SSLP facilitators read and critically respond to this paper. (perhaps AT Kearney consultants also?)

2. SSLP facilitation team hosts a face-to-face sense-making conversation where this feedback is tabled and discussed with the purpose of reworking this paper into a SSI position paper.

3. Use this position paper to inform ongoing research into the creation of a disposition and capability framework through which SSLP participants can evaluate their entry levels, direct their change efforts and monitor their progress. The AT Kearney project to create a behavioural metric for the Stronger Smarter approach will further compliment and inform this development.

4. As this paper and research also represents research outputs for my Doctor of Cultural Studies degree, I would like to undertake my final research project further investigating and developing this disposition and capability framework. This proposal is also open for discussion and feedback, and will determine whether I present a formal proposal to SSI board.

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CHAPTER 4:

Journal Article 1 (JA1)

Spillman, D. (2017). A share in the future . . . only for those who become like ‘us’!: Challenging the ‘standardization’ reform approach to Indigenous education in the Northern Territory. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, 46*(2), 137–147. doi:10.1017/jie.2017.3

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A Share in the Future . . . Only for Those Who Become Like 'Us'!: Challenging the 'Standardisation' Reform Approach to Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory

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The global standardization reform movement in education has seduced many Indigenous education policy makers in Australia, providing a powerful neoliberal discourse to further consolidate their focus on Indigenous educational deficit. *A Share in the Future,* the latest review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory is an exemplar in this regard. This paper offers a brief exposition of this review, highlighting how an exclusive focus on comparative statistics and standardised testing of English literacy and numeracy works to maintain the coupling of 'Indigenous' and 'deficit', reifying colonial power relations and justifying technical and bureaucratic educational approaches, administered and monitored from afar. Such an approach is unable to adequately respond to the relational, cultural and linguistic complexities and nuances of local Indigenous education contexts. The educational assumptions and propositions of *A Share in the Future* will be juxtaposed with those of the Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project, undertaken in the Northern Territory in 2008, to consider alternative ways of successfully engaging these local educational complexities.

■ **Keywords:** Indigenous education, deficit discourse, colonial power relations, standardization, strengths-based approaches

In May 2014, the latest review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia, titled *A Share in the Future,* was released (Wilson, 2014). It represents 'the first comprehensive review of Indigenous education in the NT since *Learning Lessons: An independent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory* reported in 1999' (Wilson, 2014, p. 7). As the policy recommendations from this review have been accepted by the NT Department of Education (Chandler, 2014), it occupies a critically important space, and will impact directly on the lives of many Indigenous children in the NT. The review is rationalised on the basis that 'children now in our (NT) schools and those yet to arrive deserve better' (Wilson, 2014, p.7). Yet the questions need to be asked, what does 'better' mean in these intercultural educational contexts? And critically, whose voices should be included in discussions and determinations about the purposes and processes of schooling? In *A Share in the Future*, a 'pragmatic decision' was made to focus on 'the English language skills and knowledge that underpin success in the western education system' (Wilson, 2014, p.7). Here educational success for Indigenous children is defined exclusively in terms of a set of standardized western educational benchmarks for English literacy and numeracy.

While this standardised educational data offers one valid perspective on schooling in the NT, and should be considered as such, the almost exclusive focus taken in *A Share in the Future* is problematic. Firstly, in doing so, the review constructs an almost entirely deficit view of Indigenous children and families. Secondly, and subsequently, it reaffirms the historical power relations that have dogged Indigenous people in the NT since first contact. Thirdly, it fails to offer an approach that can successfully respond to the local, relational, cultural and linguistic complexity of Indigenous education. As an exemplar of the standards-based reform movement in education, *A Share in the*

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Future is likely to work against the student and teacher engagement so necessary to educational success, leading rather to the broad-scale reductions in staff morale and student attendance that have resulted elsewhere from such approaches (Robinson, 2015). It ignores the substantial body of research supporting the critical relational work of teachers with Indigenous children (see Bishop, 2012; Bishop, Ladwig, & Berryman, 2014; Sarra, 2011; Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 1996; Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014), and will exacerbate the lack of trust, equality and genuine collaboration perceived by many Indigenous people in the NT through their day-to-day experience of government and practices of education (Australian Indigenous Doctors Association, 2010; Scrymgour, 2007; Trudgen, 2008). Further, by locating 'the problem' with Indigenous children and families, critical focus is drawn away from the ideologies, policies and practices of the education agency. This despite, in the NT Department of Education's case, a relatively recent review highlighting a broad array of complex, internal challenges that seriously compromise the effectiveness of the organization (Ladwig and Sarra, 2009).

By undertaking this exposition, this paper will juxtapose the assumptions, propositions and approach of *A Share in the Future* with those of the Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project (CCCP) undertaken in the NT in 2008. The CCCP represented a unique and innovative, longitudinal investigation of the experiences and learnings of a selected group of 'successful' Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators through their attempts to facilitate enhancements in culturally competent collaboration in a variety of Indigenous education settings in the NT. The CCCP took a strengths-based approach to the complex circumstances and challenges of Indigenous education in the NT, honouring the knowledge and perspectives of all participants through the employment of Indigenous conversational processes such as *Engoori* (Gorringe and Spillman, 2008; Gorringe, 2012).

I spent most of the decade from 1995 onwards working in remote Indigenous education in Central Australia, in teaching and leadership positions. This work culminated in an executive position within a large Indigenous group school, where my primary focus was on community governance of schooling (see Spillman and Costanzo, 2004a; 2004b). This work contributed significantly to being contracted in 2008 to co-design and co-facilitate the CCCP. In 2005, due to family commitments I returned to the east coast of Australia. Since that time I have worked in Indigenous education leadership, Indigenous governance and cultural capability, including eight years facilitating the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program. Over this time I have also spent significant amounts of time learning on country in New South Wales with senior Aboriginal men. I am currently teaching 'learning on country' programs at Maroon Outdoor Education Centre.

A Brief Review of Literature: Discourse and Power in Indigenous Education

Vass (2013) has proposed that, in Australia, the phrase 'Indigenous education' works to invoke widespread deficit assumptions about the educational engagement and outcomes of Indigenous children, among policy makers, educators and the broader community. Beginning from the premise that policy 'problems' arise through the socially constructed processes and contexts of policy making, Vass (2013) 'excavates' and exposes ways by which 'Indigenous education' has come to operate as a 'regime of truth' in a Focauldian sense, reifying these deficit assumptions and ascribing power. Vass (2013) and others (Fforde, Bamblett, Lovett, Gorringe, & Fogarty, 2013; Fogarty, Lovell, & Dodson, 2015) have traced the long history in Australia, regarding the establishment of a deficit discourse both in Indigenous affairs policy in general and Indigenous education in particular. These deficit perspectives were initiated and perpetuated in Australia's early colonial history through a focus on assumptions of biological difference inherent in the application of social Darwinism (Fogarty et al., 2015). Vass (2013, p. 88) identifies a shift in the 1960s towards cultural assumptions regarding Indigenous children's achievement and ability in schooling, marking from that time onwards the association between 'Indigenous' and educational deficit.

In the past few decades, this focus on Indigenous deficit within educational settings has 'permeated policy settings' in Australian education (Fogarty et al., 2015). Supported by evidence from statistical comparisons between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' educational participation and achievement, this deficit perspective works to reinforce representations of Indigenous children as deficient, dysfunctional, disempowered and disadvantaged (Fforde et al., 2013; Fogarty et al., 2015; Guenther, Bat, & Osborne, 2013). Indeed it could be argued that the language of 'Indigenous disadvantage' has become synonymous with 'Indigenous education'. Guenther et al. (2013) demonstrate a tight coupling between the two. They propose that while in one sense these statistical data that demonstrate the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students on a variety of educational indicators are useful and cannot be denied, in other ways they are problematic.

Focusing on remote Indigenous education contexts, and drawing from other Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, Guenther et al. (2013, p. 101) outline a number of problems with the language and representation of Indigenous educational 'disadvantage'. Firstly, an exclusive focus or over-reliance on such statistical data creates a narrative that reinforces the notion that being Indigenous 'is' the disadvantage, a cultural or 'racial' endowment. Extending on this, the notion of 'exceptionalism' of Indigenous people on the basis of 'race' may be

perceived and reinforced. This narrative of cultural or racial endowment works to homogenize Indigenous identities and reinforces over-simplistic, 'false binaries along racial lines' — Indigenous / non-Indigenous (Guenther et al., 2103, p. 102). Secondly, the assumptions about, and definitions of 'advantage' and 'disadvantage' on which the discourse is based, are western, thus potentially prioritizing the 'interests of the privileged, reinforcing a hegemony that in turn reinforces existing power dynamics in society' (Guenther et al., 2013, p. 102).

It is in such a way that Vass (2013, p. 86) highlights the coupling of discourse and power, where discourse works to organize and regulate power relations. He writes:

> 'Indigenous education' can be viewed as a 'regime of truth' that is girded by deficit assumptions, drawing attention to ongoing concerns with perspective, position and power within the broader Australian landscape.

Fogarty et al. (2015) have suggested that in Australia, the coalescence of the ideology and practices of the global standardization reform movement in education, along with this deficit focus in Indigenous education, is serving to accentuate both this discourse of deficit and disadvantage, and the power relating it promulgates. Here, the discourse of disadvantage dictates that 'policy success is defined primarily in terms of statistical parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people' (Fogarty et al., 2015, p. 5). In such a context there is no scope to include Indigenous expectations, perspectives or aspirations (Fogarty et al., 2015). Nor is there any space to interrogate the possibility of flaws in the education system (Guenther et al., 2013), or that notions of 'success' might differ for Indigenous people and in different localities and contexts (Osborne and Guenther, 2013a). Rather, as Osborne and Guenther (2013a, p. 91) point out through their research, decisions regarding educational outcomes and approaches for Indigenous children, and subsequently the teaching and learning approaches enacted in remote classrooms remain grounded in the epistemological and ontological assumptions of neoliberal aspiration, 'property, authority and (individual) achievement'. Further, decisions about educational outcomes and approaches for Indigenous students remain with educational experts and bureaucrats at distance from the local contexts of Indigenous education (Osborne & Guenther, 2013a).

Standardised, high-stakes, national testing has become a 'metapolicy' for education systems around the world, driven by the competitive lure of a global educational marketplace and the neoliberal promise of raised standards and economies (Lingard, Martino, & Rezai-Rashti, 2013). Lingard et al. (2013, p. 543) offer the term *global panopticism* to describe this phenomenon where the 'global eye' of educational surveillance regulates and influences national education policy 'to facilitate a form of neoliberal governance in terms of the ranking and marketing of education systems'. In this way national testing regimes constitute apparatus for top-down 'infrastructures of accountability' that impact directly on goals of schooling, curriculum and pedagogy, where school and teacher performance is now directed from afar (Lingard et al., 2013). This new mode of governance at a distance is diminishing accountabilities between schools and their communities (Sellar, 2013), and removing accountability for education from informed professional judgments by teachers (Lingard et al., 2013). This is the era of 'policy as numbers' (Lingard, 2011) and 'big data' marked by an 'epistemological shift from concerns with causality and understanding to concerns with correlation and predictability' (Lingard et al., 2013, p. 542). Robinson (2015) reports broad-scale reductions in staff morale and student attendance and engagement as a result of the standardization reform agenda in the USA and other countries. Concerns about the diminishment of both public discourse regarding education, and the rigor of educational research have also been raised (Reid, 2013).

In Australia, one 'vernacular version of (this) global policy discourse' (Lingard et al., 2013, p. 541) has manifest in the form of the 'National Assessment Program — Literacy And Numeracy' (NAPLAN). NAPLAN is a set of standardized, national literacy and numeracy tests administered once a year for all year 3, 5, 7 and 9 students in the country. It has been implemented in the NT since 2008, though various other forms of standardized testing were utilized in education jurisdictions including the NT for several years prior to this (Guenther, 2013). Guenther (2013, p. 157) points out that NAPLAN operates as a whole-of-school accountability mechanism, where it is used to determine school funding, reflect curriculum, informs pedagogy, provides teachers with evidence of student learning and has even been 'touted as an instrument that will help assess teacher quality'. Yet this nearly decade old approach is having little impact. The Productivity Commission's 2013–14 performance assessment reports:

> it is clear that between 2008 and 2014 there was little overall progress made in reducing the sizeable disparities in the proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students meeting minimum reading and numeracy standards (Productivity Commission, 2015, p. 9)

There may be several reasons for this disappointing result. NAPLAN has been exposed as 'linguistically and culturally problematic for Indigenous children, especially those in remote areas' (Wigglesworth, Simpson, & Loakes, 2011, p. 340), and for those for whom English is a second or additional language (Australian College of Educators, 2010). For Guenther et al. (2013) one of the problems with this standardisation approach is that the underlying discourse of disadvantage, with its focus on the 'gap of disparity' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, keeps the 'problem' located with Indigenous people. As

previously outlined, in such a context there is little appetite for what Indigenous people bring with them to the educational encounter. This view leads to over-simplistic binaries of Indigenous and non-Indigenous student identities, separated by this gap of disparity, which in turn leads to over-simplistic, one-size-fits-all approaches. In addition, Indigenous people's expectations and aspirations regarding schooling may vary substantially from the assumptions about 'success' inherent in the standardization discourse (Osborne and Guenther, 2013a). In real and significant ways the standardization discourse and approach to education implemented in Australian schools over the past decade, assigns Indigenous children and families to a never-ending game of 'catch-up' with little regard for their strengths, perspectives and aspirations. In doing so it replicates the unequal power relations of the colonial agenda.

In response to this critique and challenge, Osborne and Guenther (2013a) identify the need to 'interrupt established ways of thinking' about discourse, power and pedagogy. This requires educators to engage in rigorous critical reflection regarding their cultural and professional selves, in particular the assumptions about educational success, pedagogy and curriculum, which they carry with them and enact. Osborne and Guenther (2013a) and others (Bat & Guenther, 2013; Brasche & Harrington, 2012; Fogarty et al., 2015; Manhood, 2012) highlight the critical importance of considering the cultural, linguistic and social complexity that manifests in locally nuanced ways in remote Indigenous schooling and life. In such contexts, 'success' may take a more relational and place-based flavour than is assumed in the neoliberal discourse. Here Indigenous perspectives and standpoints need be prioritized. Yet as Osborne and Guenther (2013b, p. 113) point out, 'the privileging of Indigenous knowledge in formal school settings will always be a joint, developmental process.' It requires a conversation, a dialogue not a monologue, within a relational space of trust (Osborne & Guenther, 2013b).

Chris Sarra, the Indigenous principal who led the cultural shift towards 'high-expectations' at Cherbourg School brings such important sociopolitical and relational questions home to teachers when he asks questions like: 'How often do you engage in deficit thinking and talking about Indigenous children and families?' 'Do you see the strengths and potential that already reside in each Indigenous child?' How much do you know about the life and circumstances of each child and his / her family, so you can respond to the unique context of each learner?' 'How are you affirming the cultural identities of Indigenous children and families in your class and school?' (Sarra, 2012). The Stronger Smarter Institute (SSI), established by Sarra in 2009, recently released a position paper on 'High-expectations relationships' (SSI, 2014). Clearly this positions the notion of 'high-expectations' as a relational as well as a performance agenda. In a similar way to Osborne and Guenther's (2013b) call for robust local dialogue within relationships of trust, high-expectations relationship are composed of two elements, socially just relating (to establish relational trust, care and safety) and critically reflective relating (to challenge assumptions, perspectives and practices).

The Wilson Review

On 7 February 2014, the draft report of *A Share in the Future* was launched (Wilson, 2014). After a round of public consultation meetings and 118 submissions in response the final report was submitted to the NT government on 8 April 2014. This final report included an additional 14 recommendations (37 in the draft to 51 in final report). The majority of these additional recommendations addressed key areas of Indigenous education in the NT, areas that had been overlooked in the review process. Education minister, the honourable Peter Chandler flagged these key additional areas in his media release on 14 May 2014 (Chandler, 2014), including:

> A bigger focus on community engagement with schools [and]
> Greater clarity around the role of first language in schooling

Due to the changes and additions subsequent to feedback on the draft, it seems clear that the draft review was heavily criticized for failing to consider these key issues. Buried further in the report we find an acknowledgment of the breadth and extent of these concerns.

> Many respondents stated strongly held views of bilingual education ... There was also extensive commentary on the role of first language in education, the place of Indigenous culture in schools, aspects of community engagement (Wilson, 2014, p. 34)

While there is an acknowledgment of the value of first-language literacy and cultural teaching added to the final review (bottom paragraph p. 11), and some significant concessions in this regard (Recommendation 20 p. 20) the overall sentiment remains ambivalent, partial and understated regarding these key areas. For example regarding Primary education text added to the final review includes:

> The review supports the teaching of literacy in first language where feasible ... Indigenous culture should be taught where communities support this (Wilson, 2014, p. 20)

These concessions appear tokenistic at worst, and instrumental at best, as the educational goals of A Share in the Future remain clearly and exclusively on English literacy and numeracy.

Further on we read that during the consultation phase there were:

> Some concerns that the picture painted of the lives of Indigenous people was excessively negative (Wilson, 2014, p. 37)

Despite this acknowledgment, representations of Indigenous children and families remained entirely deficit in the final report. The review 'terms of reference' required the reviewer to 'map and analyse the (Indigenous education) context, including the characteristics of the Indigenous student population' (Wilson, 2014, p. 31). While there is a variety of quantitative and qualitative ways to do this that could provide layering, richness and context, only the statistical parameters of NAPLAN, student attendance and other demographic data (e.g. access to the internet, median incomes etc.) were used. Collectively these statistics work to construct a strongly deficit view of 'the characteristics of the Indigenous student population' in the NT and their families. Fogarty et al. (2015, pp. 11–12) provide a succinct summary of the deficit ways Indigenous families and communities are depicted in Wilson's review.

The use of comparative statistics in this way to map Indigenous educational deficit remains central to the review process, perpetuating the coupling of 'Indigenous disadvantage' with 'Indigenous education'. As NAPLAN is the primary statistical tool employed for the review analysis, English literacy and numeracy are placed exclusively as the indicators of educational 'success' for Indigenous children. Wilson (2014, p. 35) outlines:

> It is also important to acknowledge from the outset that this review has made a pragmatic decision to focus on the skills and knowledge that underpin success in the western education system.

In so doing the review ignored research emerging at the time from the Remote Education Systems project undertaken by the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation in Alice Springs. Here, Osborne and Guenther (2013a) argue that Indigenous people living in remote contexts hold and expect a more expansive view of educational success, one that includes both these western indicators of educational success and locally identified, place-based, cultural and relational aspirations. In *A Share in the Future* such local Indigenous perspectives are discounted (Fogarty et al., 2015). This is clearly problematic and seriously limits the usefulness of the report, especially when considering that 75% of Indigenous people in NT live in such remote settings (Fogarty et al., 2015).

Overall, the review fails completely to engage Indigenous people in the NT regarding their educational aspirations, expectations and perspectives, ignoring the substantial body of research and theory supporting the importance of Indigenous perspectives and standpoints within the field of Indigenous education (see Altman & Fogarty, 2010; Arbon, 2008; Fogarty and Schwab, 2012; Ford, 2010; Nakata, 2007; Osborne and Guenther, 2013b; Sveiby & Scuthorpe, 2006; Vass, 2013). Despite being required to 'advise on partnerships including both the empowerment of local communities and improvement of collaboration with other agencies and the Australian government' (Wilson, 2014, p. 20), little proactive attempt was made to seek a variety of Indigenous perspectives. An online community survey appears to be the only opportunity offered for Indigenous people to express a view. Yet only 16 % of the 400 respondents were Indigenous with 74% of those being teachers and an additional 12% being nonteaching education workers. In their critique, Fogarty et al. (2015, p. 13) argue that the review positions community engagement instrumentally, that is primarily in terms of its capacity 'for persuading adult community members to support predefined government goals for local schools and students'.

This, almost exclusive, focus in the review on the literacy and numeracy 'gap of disparity' enables the reduction of Indigenous education to a set of technical and bureaucratic practices. This position is most clearly demonstrated in the argument and proposed recommendations regarding education in Priority 1 schools. These are schools demonstrating the 'greatest disadvantage' across a number of statistical scales including, remoteness, Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage, enrolment, attendance and NAPLAN data, proportion from non-English speaking backgrounds and the Australian Early Developmental Index (Wilson, 2014, p. 15). While there are three groups of schools based on this classificatory method, Priority 1 schools have the greatest 'educational need' (Wilson, 2014, p. 49). They include the vast majority of very remote schools (73 out of 80) and six remote schools (p. 50). The review proposes that this categorization should dictate not only the resourcing for schools but also the kind of 'evidence-based approaches that are known to work with students experiencing specific forms of disadvantage' (p. 59). Citing only one piece of research here (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010), Wilson proposes that Priority 1 schools (low performing) will do best when 'they tighten control and provide technical training' (Wilson, 2014, p. 59). This equates to a reduction in the professional autonomy of Priority 1 schools, zero negotiation with the school community about purpose and process, and a consistent one-size-fits all instructional curriculum and pedagogy.

This argument is clearly problematic. It is based on a premise that the educational needs of children in the 79 Priority 1 schools are broadly and consistently the same. While there may be some common need for groups of students across schools that inform a generic educational approach in some contexts, the proposition here is that this statistical knowledge is entirely adequate in determining the educational approaches required by all students in these 79 Priority 1 schools. This position stands in stark contrast to the findings of a number of well-known Indigenous education researchers and organizations (Bishop, 2012; Bishop et al., 2014; Sarra, 2011; Shields et al., 1996; Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014). All focus substantially on the critical relational work of teachers with students, enabling them to understand and respond appropriately to the unique individual, social, economic, cultural and linguistic circumstances of each learner (Bishop et al.,

2014; Sarra, 2011). This is the basis, for example, of the Stronger Smarter Institute's notion of *high-expectations relationships* central to educational success for Indigenous children (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014).

It is disconcerting to note that *A Share in the Future,* a critically important educational document that is currently impacting heavily on the lives of many Indigenous children in the NT, is entirely devoid of the words 'relationships', 'relational' or 'relating' in reference to human interaction. This is an important point of critique, as it is the absence of these words that flags the complete lack of acknowledgment of the locally nuanced complexity of Indigenous education settings. There is no discussion in *A Share in the Future* of the kind of relational and circumstantial complexity inherent in day-to-day lives of educators, children and families working and living in remote Indigenous settings, as outlined and discussed by several researchers and practitioners (see Brasche and Harrington, 2012; Manhood, 2012; Osborne and Guenther, 2013a; Osborne and Guenther, 2013b). Acknowledging this local, relational complexity would uncouple what Lingard et al. (2013, p. 542) identify as the 'statistics / state relationship', a primary tool of educational governance, and central to the ideological basis of the review. Rather, in *A Share in the Future,* Wilson conflates the degree of social, cultural, linguistic and economic complexity of a school community with its degree of 'disadvantage', in order to justify an over-simplistic, whole-of-system, instructional approach, enabling surveillance and governance of schools from a distance. Further, by placing complete authority to determine educational goals and approaches with western educational 'experts' and bureaucrats far removed from the local Indigenous education interface, *A Share in the Future* reinforces and exacerbates the unequal power relations typical of colonialism.

The Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project

This section of the paper examines aspects of a professional learning project, also undertaken in the NT, which was designed to avoid and/or disrupt the assumptions and practices of deficit discourse and colonial power relations. The following exposition focuses on two key elements of this project, strengths-based approaches and conversational circles.

Three months prior to the commencement of Wilson's review in 2013, an Interim Report of research findings from the CCCP was passed to the Chief Executive of NT Department of Education and Training (Spillman, 2013). The CCCP was initiated and undertaken in 2008 largely in response to key challenges identified in 2006 by the NT Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET), Indigenous Leaders Network. I was contracted by the education agency to co-design and co-facilitate both the Indigenous Leaders Network and the CCCP. The Indigenous Leaders Network, involving 35 Indigenous education leaders from across the NT, identified three critical organizational challenges for NT DEET.

1. Enhancing levels of trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of school communities
2. Enhancing the bicultural competence among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous education employees and
3. Enhancing genuinely collaborative decision-making at all levels of the agency (Spillman, 2006).

In 2008, the CCCP aimed to:

> Significantly enhance levels of culturally competent collaboration within DEET workplaces to improve student outcomes and service delivery (NT DEET, 2007)

Thus in the conception and design of CCCP it was accepted that central to 'culturally competent collaboration' are relationships of trust, bicultural competence and collaborative decision-making between Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of school communities. In this way, and as advocated by Osborne and Guenther (2013a), the processes adopted in CCCP recognized the complex relational work of educators, the critical importance of local Indigenous perspectives, and the need for rigorous 'situated dialogue' and reflection.

The CCCP represented an in-depth interrogation of the day-to-day experiences and practices of Indigenous education in the NT, through the eyes of long-term, 'successful' Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators. The professional learning process employed, drew on the experiences and capabilities of participants to identify, create and trial efficacious approaches to culturally competent collaboration. Eleven pairs of Indigenous / non-Indigenous educators were invited to participate, having been selected by a group of peers and managers, based on their history of success as classroom practitioners including in bilingual education, in establishing strong connections and partnerships with families and community members and/or in leading successful programs or innovations within schools. Participants came to CCCP as an Indigenous / non-Indigenous relational-pair with a strong existing working relationship. They shared nine days of reflective conversation and practice, split into three forums (four days, three days, two days) over a six-month period. Between forums, participant pairs planned and facilitated conversational processes with staff at their schools, to enhance culturally competent collaboration in order to begin addressing complex challenges they faced. These workplace projects became important sites for learning and change. The CCCP culminated in the co-creation of a professional learning approach for government employees working in Indigenous education in the NT — the *Cultures of Collaboration Program.*

Thirty-six hours of video footage of CCCP conversations, presentation and interviews were thematically

analysed for dominant patterns of talking and thinking among participants. Of particular focus were conversational episodes and patterns of:

1. deficit and strengths-based talking and theorizing
2. homogenisation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities, and the over-simplistic binaries and approaches they perpetuate, and
3. assumptions and thinking that reflected perceptions of power relations.

The key learnings from that intensive research, outlined in the Interim Report, provide evidence and perspective for an approach to Indigenous education in the NT that differs significantly to the one proposed in *A Share in the Future*. All necessary ethics approvals and permissions were obtained from the relevant organizations and individuals for this CCCP research to be undertaken and published.

Strengths-Based Approaches

Fogarty et al. (2015) acknowledge the value and importance of educational approaches focused on strengths-based discourse. Such approaches are not new to Indigenous education in the NT, despite being conspicuously absent in *A Share in the Future*. In the 36 hours of video footage of interviews, conversations and presentations thematically analysed from the CCCP, there was not one incident of the deficit theorizing about Indigenous students and families, so central to *A Share in the Future*. This is not surprising as the 22 Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants were selected as a result of their success and leadership in Indigenous education.

The CCCP began on day one by asking participants to share their stories, experiences and strengths in a variety of ways. *Engoori* was one of the strengths-based processes employed for this work (Gorringe, 2012). *Engoori* is a three-phase conversational process from the Tjimpa-Mithaka people of south-west Queensland that builds on individual and collective strengths before considering critical challenges. It is a contemporary interpretation of an old Mithaka story about a conflict resolution ceremony. The first phase of *Engoori* asks participants to reflect on, respond to and talk about the questions, 'What keeps me/us strong?' Individual narratives of strength are consensually mapped into collective narratives of strength. One of the dominant themes emerging from this work with the CCCP group is identified in the following conversation.

> It wasn't possible for me to think about me, without family. (Indigenous male)
>
> Yeah me too. I couldn't think of myself separate from my family, even before I was married. (non-Indigenous male)
>
> Yeah we all talked about family. Family's at the core. It's the heart. It's what keeps all of us strong. (Indigenous male)

Several Indigenous participants began referring to the CCCP participants as family.

> I feel safe too . . . going back to my school and staff is a little bit difficult, . . . and I always think of this [group] as part of my family. (Indigenous female)

It was noted in the ensuing conversations that many teachers get 'taken into' or 'adopted by' family when beginning to work on remote communities. This was unanimously seen as important and powerful relational phenomena. Three Indigenous female participants also talked about how they relate to the children in their class as their children too.

> I am their teacher . . . um . . . responsible for their learning and wellbeing. I also love and care for them as their mother . . . . I keep a mother eye open as well as a teacher eye . . . all the time.

Though other strengths were highlighted and discussed, most participants agreed that enacting 'family' in teacher–student, and collegial relationships was critically important. Such a position coincides with Folds (2001) perspective that for Pintupi maintaining good family (*walytja)* relationships is the heart of Pintupi life and culture. Osborne (2015) exposes, through interviews, with Indigenous educators and family members, how 'family' is perceived as providing the foundation for Indigenous children's success, thus challenging the assumption of 'family' as 'disadvantage' so central to the perspective offered in *A Share in the Future*. Bishop et al. (2014) outline research over many years that clearly demonstrates how family-like, student-teacher relationships are essential to Indigenous students' educational engagement and performance.

Beginning with strength-based conversations that honour the diversity and uniqueness of experiences, stories, strengths and aspirations that children and family members bring with them, is much more likely to inspire motivation to participate and learn. They also enable the creation of supportive, inclusive learning environments necessary to nurture and translate that motivation into self-efficacy and resilience with learning. While public and political dialogue regarding Indigenous education remains largely devoid of such strengths-based conversations (Osborne and Guenther, 2013b), some such alternative approaches and discourses are beginning to emerge (Fogarty et al., 2015; Gorringe and Spillman, 2008; Guenther et al., 2013; Sarra, 2011). Engaging in such conversations both requires and reinforces power relations different to those enacted and perpetuated through the kind of deficit discourse manifest in *A Share in the Future*.

Conversational Circles

In considering why much needed school transformation often fails, education researcher Julia Aitken (1996, p. 5) proposes:

> The challenge for those directing, the central authority, is to change the focus from dictating from the top to coordinating and supporting from the center.

To unpack this Aitken offers the visual metaphor of a triangle and a circle. Here the former represents an approach of 'direct, command and control' and the latter, framing, coordinating and supporting 'from the centre'. Contemplating an education system as a triangle makes obvious the hierarchical nature of assumptions about power, leadership, knowledge and expertise inherent in *A Share in the Future*. All are concentrated at the top of the triangle, diminishing as one moves down. This justifies an exclusive focus on the 'technical, financial, legal, structural, governance and staffing' issues, things that are 'known' and controllable from the top (Wilson, 2014, p. 17). Considering a circle as the metaphorical focus shifts the role of the 'central authority' to framing policy, seeking and coordinating localized interpretations and responses from school communities, and then supporting them to realize their subsequent, negotiated visions. There is a necessary relational dynamic and reciprocity in this kind of approach, one that requires a dialogue 'not a monologue' (Osborne and Guenther, 2013b, p.94). It flags an important shift in underlying assumptions about knowledge, power and leadership, to a more shared perspective, one that honours the knowledge, capabilities and aspiration of 'local' people. It enables the enactment of 'doing with' rather than 'doing to' approaches, as advocated by Sarra (2015). Here school communities are encouraged and able to consider their unique sociopolitical, cultural, relational and pedagogic circumstances when negotiating school purposes and approaches.

Conversational circles represented a key interactive process utilized in CCCP. They are based on the belief that as human beings we all wish to connect to self and others in good ways (Prannis, 2005). They are an attempt to enact *equal power relating* where the experiences, knowledge, ideas and aspirations of all in the circle are ideally accepted as equally valid, and seriously considered. Conversational circles offer an effective site and process for the establishment of the kind of educational dialogue (Osborne and Guenther, 2013a) and relational trust (Osborne and Guenther, 2013b) identified as essential to successful approaches in remote Indigenous education contexts. In CCCP the practices of the circle enabled group members over time, to establish a space of safety and trust.

> The circle is a physical manifestation of safety. Early in our time we kept the circle tight. Now we can sit anywhere because of the trust (Indigenous female)

Engaging in the conversational practices of the circle highlighted and affirmed the dynamic relational nature of intercultural work.

> CCCP has clarified that a lot of crosscultural collaboration is about forming a strong relationship with that person you're working with or that group of people you're working with. (non-Indigenous female)

The critical importance of equal power relating to learning and transformation in Indigenous education contexts has been recently identified and examined by the Stronger Smarter Institute (SSI) in their position paper on *high expectations relationships* (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014). Equal power relating, referred to, as *socially just relating* in their paper, is the first essential element of a high-expectations relationship. Equal power relating constituted one of the primary purposes of the conversational circles employed during CCCP, in order to enhance experiences and perceptions of trust, care and safety among participants. This then enabled conversations to become more edgy, robust, and high-stakes, while minimising the likelihood of conflict and defensiveness. The potential for individual and group transformation began to increase.

> The power and success of CCCP has been through the group dynamic that has developed. There's been a lot of high-stakes disclosure, and people getting deeply into themselves to bring our attributes that can seed change. (Indigenous male)

Importantly in this way, the sense of trust and safety established through using conversational circles to enable equal power relating, then enabled *critically reflective relating,* the second component of a high-expectations relationship (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014). The necessity of enhancing the quality of equal power relating prior to entering robust challenging conversations was grasped by at least one participant.

> I would say that what I learnt from the last workshop was the absolute importance of … um …. establishing that circle of trust, before you go into any of these … brackish water (muddied, turbulent, complex) situations. (Indigenous male)

Critically reflective relating necessarily requires the platform of relational trust and safety established through equal power relating. Critically reflective relating is often initiated through giving and receiving critical feedback, or other experiences that challenge habits of thinking and doing.

For example, one participant pair used Engoori to enact critically reflective relating in their workplace project. Initially they asked their colleagues to have a conversation about the learning of Indigenous students at the school. Without commenting they noticed the conversation quickly turned to a deficit perspective where it remained. They then introduced Engoori, engaging participants in strength-based conversation about themselves. They noted the levity, engagement and emotionality of these conversations. Once completed, they asked the group to reflect on the two conversations. The pair reported that the differences were easily identified and acknowledged. They then led a conversation about the impacts of deficit and strengths-based approaches in Indigenous education. This simple conversational process engaged workplace colleagues in critical reflection regarding their own conver-

sational habits and assumptions. This is an example of the kind of 'reframing (of) the dialogue' advocated by Osborne and Guenther (2013b, p. 115), that can work to challenge both (deficit) assumptions and power relations. Here, for this group of teachers the possibility was created for substantial transformation in their relationships with Indigenous students and families.

In such ways, critically reflective relating is essential to challenge limiting assumptions and mindsets such as those of deficit discourse. Over time, it builds the individual and collective, social and emotional resilience and robustness, necessary for success in the complex contexts of Indigenous education (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014). Critically reflective relating is self-reflexive practice, the essential 'tool' for creating success in complex organizational circumstances (Stacey, 2011).

> The most significant change for me through CCCP is that I now challenge my own assumptions, challenging my reactions to certain situations. This allows me to choose different responses and decisions ..... Through the CCCP projects things have come into my consciousness. It's allowed me to be a more relaxed leader. I can only ever change myself not others. I can now be the change I want to see. (Indigenous female)

For their workplace project, one CCCP pair chose to focus on enhancing the engagement of Aboriginal assistant teachers in teaching and learning conversations. After two, two-hour sessions with school staff they reported:

> We've found a natural transition now in our weekly staff gatherings. We begin with a check-in. This gets us out-of-role and leads to another circle activity to connect us at a personal level. This leads us to our planning which takes us into the professional level, but it happens really fast because we've already got the vocab for communicating. . . . Classroom teachers are saying they see a whole new world in their assistant teachers (local Aboriginal people - ATs) now as a result of this work. Their ATs are feeling more confident. They're suggesting things like check-ins and check-outs and are really feeling part of our teaching and primary teams. (non-Indigenous female)

The check-in and circle activity at a 'personal level' constituted an activity to promote equal power relating. It worked to enhance relational trust and safety. This then enabled the possibility of critically reflective relating at a 'professional level'. Here in a short period of time, by using the circle to focus on the two components of high expectations relationships, perceptions of power and engagement shifted positively, beginning to enhance the productivity of their conversations. With such conversational practices maintained over time, the quality and robustness of critically reflective conversations could increase. It is precisely these individual and collective relational capabilities for creating trust, robust challenging conversations, and critical self-reflection that are required to co-create success in the complex contextual and relational dynamics of Indigenous education in the NT. As highlighted by Bat and Guenther (2013), such approaches recognise and honour the centrality of locally contextual relationships and dialogue, to engage local families in negotiating schooling purpose and processes in remote Indigenous education settings.

Conclusion

In this paper the latest review of Indigenous education in the NT, *A Share in the Future*, has been critiqued and exposed as a textbook example of the global, neoliberal standardization reform movement, within Indigenous education in Australia. Here the exclusive portrayal of 'Indigenous' as 'deficit' and 'disadvantaged', the unequal power relations these constructions reify, and the subsequently justified one-size-fits-all, technical, schooling approaches, administered and monitored with governance, surveillance and accountability from afar and above, have been juxtaposed with the approach undertaken in the CCCP. Clearly, the conversational processes advocated in this paper through the brief exposition of the CCCP cannot overturn the unequal power relations, deeply and historically embedded in the ideologies, structures, policies and practices of the education agency. However, as many of the CCCP participants understood, these conversational processes can work to begin shifting the local politic. Practices such as conversational circles and strengths-based conversations, enable locally negotiated knowledge of who students are, how they best learn and the purposes and processes of schooling. In such local contexts, a more humanizing, sophisticated, nuanced and engaging evidence-based approach to student wellbeing, learning and achievement can be co-created and implemented.

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About the Author

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CHAPTER 5:

Journal Article 2 (JA2)

Spillman, D. (2017). Coming home to place: Aboriginal Lore and place-responsive pedagogy for transformative learning in Australian outdoor education. *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education, 20*(1), 14–24.

Coming home to place: Aboriginal Lore and place-responsive pedagogy for transformative learning in Australian outdoor education

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Abstract

In a significant way, the growing body of place-responsive research and practice within outdoor education in Australia can be perceived as an eco-inspired response to both the devastating impact of colonization on our ecological communities and the concomitant sense of "placelessness" or lack of a sense of belonging and purpose experienced by many Australians. In this regard, there has always been an ally in Aboriginal Lore, which worked to maintain ecological and social balance and wellness in Australia for thousands of years prior to the arrival of Europeans. Yet, it has been argued that many outdoor education programmes continue to perpetuate the colonial and anthropocentric discourses clearly responsible for much of this ecological and social damage. Not surprisingly, several place-responsive proponents have flagged the value of local partnerships between outdoor educators and Aboriginal people. This paper offers a brief critique of these dominant discourses and their impact upon outdoor education practice, followed by an exploration of what partnerships with local Aboriginal people might look like and offer. To this end, transformative and conversational processes will be proposed, supported, and nuanced with evidence from an intercultural collaboration project undertaken in the Northern Territory in 2008.

Keywords: place responsive, Aboriginal Lore, colonization, transformative learning, cultural assumptions, conversational circles

Introduction

There is a growing body of research and practice within Australia regarding "place-based pedagogy" in outdoor education (see Brooks, 2002; Cameron, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Stewart, 2004, 2008; Wattchow, 2001, 2007, 2008; Wattchow & Brown 2011). Arguably, though, these approaches remain at the margins of the field (Hockley & Humberstone, 2012; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). Variously labelled as "place sensitive" (Plumwood, 2003), "place conscious" (Gruenewald, 2003), and "place responsive" (Cameron 2003a, 2003c; Wattchow & Brown, 2011), these approaches share a consciously inquisitive focus on connecting with and coming to know the unique local places that host outdoor education endeavours (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). Further, they seek to explore the ways a deeper, more conscious engagement with place, its human and other-than-human inhabitants, and its cultural history can shape and change both human experiences, perceptions, and intentions and the natural environments in which these experiences occur. Aware of the focus on reciprocity here between humans and ecological communities or, as Plumwood (2003, p. 70) refers to it, the "dialogical mode of interaction," I shall use the phrase place responsive to designate these approaches. Not surprisingly, several authors have acknowledged the value and critical importance of connecting with local Indigenous knowledge and cultural histories to this end (Plumwood, 2000; Stewart, 2004; Wattchow & Brown, 2011).

In this paper, I offer a formative exploration of the potential contribution that Aboriginal Lore and cultural knowledge might make to place-responsive pedagogy within the field of outdoor education in Australia. Following Wattchow and Brown (2011), Stewart (2004), and several generations of Aboriginal Lore men and women (Callaghan, 2014), my exposition is grounded in an ethical ecological (including social) concern, leading to two main questions: (1) In what ways do outdoor education programmes and practices operate to perpetuate, challenge, and/or transcend the colonialist and anthropocentric discourses and assumptions that have clearly led to the damage and demise of many ecological communities within Australia? and (2) What might Aboriginal Lore and cultural knowledge offer here, and how might they be included within the field of outdoor education? Through interrogating these questions and encouraging partnerships and collaborations between outdoor educators and local Indigenous people, I aim to contribute to the growing body of place-responsive research and practice in Australian outdoor education.

Initially then, I shall engage with place-responsive research and writing to undertake a brief critique of the ways these dominant colonialist and anthropocentric discourses influence practices in Australian outdoor education. In particular, I will focus on the "taken-for-granted" assumptions within the field of outdoor education regarding "nature," the human/nature relationship (including the issue of

power), and the construction of identity. This critique brings into question our ways of being, doing, and knowing in the world, particularly regarding the local places we inhabit and visit. As demonstrated by Quay (2015), working explicitly and reflectively regarding ways of being, doing, and knowing in different contexts is central to many outdoor education pedagogies. Quay's (2015) perspective will be taken up to highlight opportunities for transformative learning unique to the field of outdoor education, including those of linking with local Indigenous people and their cultural perspectives, practices, and stories. Hence, I shall introduce and examine two perspectives on Aboriginal Lore: the first, that of Uncle Paul Gordon, a Ngemba man from the Brewarrina area of NSW (Callaghan, 2014) and the second *ngurra-kurlu* (meaning "home within" or "a common sense of belonging"), a Warlpiri perspective from central Northern Territory (Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu, Holmes, & Box, 2008). The place-based beliefs, intentions, and practices of these perspectives will be juxtaposed with those of the colonialist/anthropocentric agenda, which positions humans as masters of the natural world and its other-than-human inhabitants.

To further highlight the nuance associated with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people coming together to share ways of being, doing, and knowing, I shall convey a number of experiences and participant reflections from the Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project (CCCP), undertaken in 2008 by the Northern Territory Department of Education, Employment and Training (NT DEET). At the time, I was contracted to co-design, co-facilitate, and co-evaluate the CCCP. The CCCP was a unique and innovative longitudinal investigation of the day-to-day experiences and practices of Indigenous education in the NT, seen through the eyes of long-term, "successful" Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, having been selected by a group of peers and managers based upon their history of success as classroom practitioners in areas such as bilingual education, establishing strong connections and partnerships with families and community members, and/or in leading successful programmes or innovations within schools. The professional learning process employed drew upon the experiences and capabilities of participants to identify, create, and trial various approaches to culturally competent collaboration. In a significant way, the CCCP sought to identify the most efficacious ways of being, doing, and knowing in intercultural education settings.

Eleven pairs of Indigenous/non-Indigenous educators were invited to participate in the CCCP. Participants came as an Indigenous/non-Indigenous pair with a strong existing working relationship. They shared nine days of reflective conversation and practice, split into three forums (four days, three days, two days) over a six-month period. Between forums, participant pairs planned and facilitated conversational processes with staff at their schools to enhance culturally competent collaboration to begin addressing complex challenges they faced. These workplace projects became important sites for learning and change. Many CCCP conversations and presentations of workplace projects were filmed, along with a series of reflective participant interviews. In all, over 36 hours of video footage was captured. Two vignettes and a number of extracts from participant interviews will be drawn from this footage to highlight or develop particular concepts in this exposition. All necessary permissions have been sought and provided.

The final section of the paper will include a brief introduction to the theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) as an effective process for acknowledging, challenging, and where necessary shifting individual and collective ways of being, doing, and knowing in intercultural contexts. Again, a vignette from the CCCP will be used to demonstrate individual and collective transformation and to highlight the various components of the transformative learning process. Here I propose that outdoor educators could (and do) usefully take up transformative learning processes to critique and choose ways of being, doing, and knowing regarding intercultural engagement to enhance place-responsive pedagogical approaches.

A place-responsive critique of the impact of dominant discourses on Australian outdoor education practice

What follows is a brief overview of some of the main points of critique offered by place-responsive practitioners and researchers regarding the ways colonialist and anthropocentric discourses impact on practices and subsequently, ways of being, doing, and knowing within the field of outdoor education in Australia. In their leading work on place-responsive pedagogy, Wattchow and Brown (2011) point out that since the early days of outdoor education, the triad of self, others, and nature has largely remained the primary focus within the field. Yet, as Stewart (2004) reminds us, and as this critique will demonstrate, the way this focus translates into learning outcomes and outdoor activities and experiences can vary wildly, depending on the taken-for-granted cultural assumptions carried by outdoor educators to the pedagogical interface. These out-of-awareness, "underlying cultural assumptions" both perpetuate and are perpetuated by particular discourses within the field: dominant patterns of thinking, talking, and practice that confer power relations (Hall, 2007).

An anthropocentric conceptualization of both nature and the way it relates to humans has been identified as one of the primary legacies of colonization in Australia (Plumwood, 2003; Stewart, 2004b). Here, the human sphere is positioned as separate to the sphere of nature. Humans are held as the centre of the universe with power over the (nonhuman) natural environment, which becomes a resource for human consumption and gain (Niles, 2003). Further, this worldview prioritizes individual agency and is marked by the conviction that human intelligence and technological ingenuity can rectify any of the negative environmental side effects of human consumption and development. "Nature" becomes a commodified, homogeneous "other" or, as Plumwood (2003, p. 57) suggests, "the unconsidered background to technological society" and human agency. Whilst in Australia awareness has been raised of the oppression of Indigenous peoples as a result of colonization, the attitudes and impact on ecological communities and their other-than-human inhabitants have been overlooked (Stewart, 2004). In such ways, this human-centredness characteristic of anthropocentrism "reduces the land to a passive and neutral surface for the inscription of human projects" (Plumwood, 2003, p. 99).

When such beliefs constitute the taken-for-granted cultural assumptions operating in the field of outdoor education, the "self" component focuses heavily on personal development, enhanced self-concept, competence, and achievement, usually through physical challenge (Wattchow, 2007; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). This priority is epitomized through commonly heard phrases such as, "I did things I didn't think I could do," "I conquered the elements," or "I pushed through to overcome the obstacles." The "others" focus usually pertains to the development of teamwork capabilities to achieve the same kind of physical challenges as for the "self" (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). Nature, as suggested above, often becomes the passive backdrop or "arena" for the outdoor activity and the unfolding human drama (Wattchow & Brown, 2011, p. xviii). This relative lack of acknowledgement of contribution of place within the experiential outdoor endeavour can be glimpsed through the haste and pace of programmes and expeditions, the focused and prioritized attention on the outdoor activity, and the exclusive use of Western names or grid references to refer to particular places to be visited or passed through. The primary use of topographical maps to understand and navigate country offers another example (Stewart, 2004b). Here, nature can also be positioned negatively, as a barrier, an obstacle, something to be overcome, reinforcing the focus on human agency and achievement. For example, in relation to travelling river rapids, Wattchow (2007, p. 14) reports the emergence of a common vernacular amongst participants, including phrases such as being "sucked down," "engulfed," "swallowed," "eaten," "spat out," and of "carnage."

Wattchow (2007, p. 18) also uncovers the "desire to adventure in wild nature," proposing it a legacy of the European Romantic Movement of the 18th and 19th centuries, though it clearly intersects with the colonialist agenda. To maintain this narrative, which again reinforces the individualistic and competitive "self" assumptions of the anthropocentric ideology, Australian environments must be seen as wild and untamed. Yet, Gammage (2011, pp. 14–15) points out in *The Biggest Estate on Earth* that "wilderness" is an American term and "bush" South African, and that prior to 1788 there was neither wilderness nor bush in Australia. His thesis, supported by a substantial body of evidence, is that every square metre of Australia was known and managed by Indigenous inhabitants. In this way, Stewart (2004), following the work of Indigenous Australian academic Marcia Langton, points out that the maintenance of the notion of wilderness in Australia reinforces *terra nullius,* denying both the existence of Indigenous peoples and the vast knowledge they held for every part of this country.

When such colonialist, anthropocentric or romantic assumptions are taken for granted, human identity is conferred largely through individual self-awareness, effort, agency, and achievement and, although to a lesser extent, collaborative, cooperative capabilities. Yet, in the preface of their important book *Pedagogy of Place,* Wattchow and Brown (2011) offer an alternative narrative for identity formation. Here, they invoke American poet Wendell Berry who once said, "If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are" (p. ix). The authors identify a growing sense of "placelessness" in post-colonial societies such as Australia and New Zealand due to the "hyper-mobility" of "globalizing agendas."

As briefly outlined above, the way we understand and connect with a place is not simply a manifestation of experiencing it, rather being far more determined by the taken-for-granted "cultural meanings" we carry with us to that place (Stewart 2004, p. 55). Indeed, Wattchow and Brown (2011, p. xix) have proposed a growing body of literature within the field of outdoor education that questions the kinds of "underlying philosophical and pedagogical assumptions" discussed above. They quote Lugg (1999, p. 26), who posits the rise of an alternative set of assumptions in the 1990s which focus on "educating for an environmentally sustainable future." Whilst recognizing that one of the strengths of outdoor education is its diverse array of approaches and pedagogies, the place-responsive movement represents a call for a greater, more conscious recognition of the contribution of local

environments to the field and of place connectedness to a deep sense of human belonging, identity, and obligation. Though beyond the scope of this paper, such perspectives connect strongly with the deep ecology movement (see for example, Foundation for Deep Ecology, 2012). In addition, such perspectives also sit well with Aboriginal Lore where identity and belonging take on a much more reciprocal, relational, place-based flavour.

Focusing on ways of being, doing, and knowing in outdoor education

The above critique calls into question the taken-for-granted cultural assumptions that determine our ways of being, doing, and knowing in Australia generally and within the field of outdoor education in particular. Quay (2015) deconstructs schooling in similar fashion by interrogating the various ontological and epistemic assumptions of different educational approaches. In the "traditional education" approach, still enacted in many schools in Australia, ontological questions of identity (who am I here, in this context?) and "being" (how am I supposed to "be" here, in this context?) are largely transferred implicitly to students as assumptions through the "hidden curriculum" (I am a student and must follow the rules of being a student) (Quay, 2015, p. 3). Here, the primary focus of schooling is on the knowledge students require in their progress towards a successful adult life (Quay, 2015). Yet, many students cannot see this adult life that lies beyond being a student. That is, due to life's experiences and the act of retrospection, adults may hold different assumptions about schooling to those held by children (Quay, 2015).

> For most young people the future they see in being a student simply involves more of being a student: knowing things for passing tests that seem to have little meaning beyond comparisons with other students. (Quay, 2014, p. 4)

In this way, the norms regarding ways of being a student, implicitly transferred in most schooling contexts, require "mini-adult" attitudes and behaviours (Quay, 2014). Through such schooling, students do not get to explicitly consider, reflect upon, learn about, and choose different ways of being in the world, as the underlying assumptions about schooling remain implicit and unexamined. Yet, young people seek a sense of connection and belonging. This requires particular ways of being in social contexts important to them; that is, ways of being that are different to "being a student" (Quay, 2014). For Quay (2014, 2015) the unique opportunity of outdoor education is that it offers a variety of ways of "being a person" in different contexts (being who I am where I am, also described by Quay (2016) as "cultureplace"). These ways of being do not generally require particular kinds of adult-like behaviour but are rather more child-centric, meaningful in the ways that the people involved find them meaningful. Here, through the menagerie of available outdoor education activities, different ways of being in relation to self, others, and place can be experienced (as different versions of cultureplace) and their underlying assumptions made visible and critically examined. Story offers a powerfully rich, contextual vehicle for communicating reflections and learning regarding this triad of being, doing, knowing, and their underlying assumptions (Quay, 2014).

Story, too, lies at the heart of Aboriginal Lore, the purpose of which is to teach particular ways of being, doing, and knowing in relation to self, others (both human and other-than-human) and country — ways of being, doing, and knowing that maintain the wellness and sanctity of country and everything that dwells therein (Callaghan, 2014).

Aboriginal Lore: Identity, relationships, and power

In traditional Aboriginal society, there are various accepted interpretations and understandings of what is now known as "the Lore" (Callaghan, 2014, p. 16). The first perspective briefly outlined here is that of Uncle Paul Gordon, a Ngemba Loreman belonging to country near Brewarrina in NSW. Uncle Paul is clear that he does not speak for all Aboriginal people, only conveying what he has been taught throughout his life by his old people (Callaghan, 2014).

The term Lore comes from the English word folklore referring to a set of ancient stories (Callaghan, 2014, p. 16). In Australia, the words Dreamtime or Dreaming have been used synonymously to refer to a set of stories about how ancestors created country. Both these terms give the impression of unreal, imagined, or fictitious events set in the past. Yet, for Uncle Paul Gordon and many Aboriginal people, the stories that make up Lore are very real, relevant today, and endlessly unfolding. In Uncle Paul's language, the word *Ngurrumpaa* better conveys the meaningful nature of these stories (Callaghan, 2014, p. 16) as it signifies "my relationship with my place and everything in my place." This then raises the question, "So what is my connection with everything in my place and my country?" (p. 16).

In this worldview, everything (people, plants, animals, rocks, stars, clouds, waterways, moon, etc.) has a story of how it came to be and why it exists. Every such story has its own song and dance and tells us about our obligations to these things in our place (Callaghan, 2014). So the purpose of *Ngurrumpaa* is to teach us about our connectedness and obligation to all things in our environment, ensuring the careful

and loving maintenance of country and its ecological communities. *Ngurrumpaa* therefore holds our ways of being, doing, and knowing in relation to everything on our country. In this way, our story is our identity and we can't know our story, our *Ngurrumpaa*, our reason for being unless we understand how we are connected and obligated to all things in the country we belong to. We have to know the stories of others and plants, animals, geographical features, and so on. The better we know these stories, the more we understand how we fit in, our own story, and our own purpose. In this worldview, human *identity* is primarily ascribed through our connections and obligations to others and other things, knowledge of which is held in stories and their associated songs and dances. To know who we are, and how we have to be, we have to know how we are connected and obligated. Clearly, the assumptions here within Lore about human being and relationship to nature, which informed Indigenous peoples' ways of being, doing, and knowing stand in contrast to those of the colonial/anthropocentric discourses.

This perspective was reinforced and explored in a conversation that unfolded on the first day of the second forum of the CCCP (day five). Each project group was asked to reflect upon, talk about, and present their key learnings from the first forum and their workplace project. In presenting her group's visual representation of their key learnings, a non-Indigenous participant explained the inclusion of a moon in the picture, saying, "We've included the moon in the centre of the picture to represent self. The moon is a metaphor for self as it reflects the light of others." This initiated an energetic conversation about the social nature of identity and authenticity. A non-Indigenous man, a long-term teacher in Arnhem Land and a conversational Yolngu Matha speaker, began by talking about his close relationship and extended conversations with an old local man who, at the time, was the chairperson of the local council:

> I'm fascinated by working with [name] who's our chairperson. The more I talk about things with him, . . . he highlights more the significance and necessity, or just the reality, of interconnectedness. So we've [non-Indigenous people] got our separate selves but really our separate self is everyone else. Our sense of self, our identity is a product of our social nature, . . . our relationships with others. So the word we have for interconnectedness [in Yolngu Matha language] we've got in our book, and that's it to me.

He went on by asking his project partner, a mature Yolngu woman and a long-term educator, "Is that a fair sense of that from [name of chairperson]?" She affirmed what he said through a brief exchange between the two in Yolngu Matha language. He then continued:

> What I've come to understand is that really it's a very Balanda [non-Indigenous] concept of always coming back to the self as an individual, as a separate self, and the more we're connected with absolutely everything as one, as us, is . . . more how it is to be alive you know, and how Yolngu mob see it.

Again, this was affirmed by his workplace partner who added, "In my language there is no word or phrase for the separate, individual self," instead, "the way I talk about myself is about how I am connected to family and other Yolngu, to country, language and, . . . other things, . . . many other things." Another non-Indigenous man, a competent speaker of Warlpiri and regarded as a "grown up" Warlpiri man by his male Warlpiri project partner added a Warlpiri perspective:

> Well in Warlpiri we think of *ngurra-kurlu* and that's the total interconnectedness of the whole universe. But you can't think of yourself in the sense of "self" [pointing inwards at his chest]. But you think of your relationship to your kinship, your relationship to country, your relationship to language, your relationship to ceremony, your relationship to law. And all of those relationships are essential relationships. So I'm not just an individual me "isolate." I'm part of a family. I'm part of a clan. I have responsibilities for country. I have responsibilities in terms of law. I have responsibilities in terms of things, important things, sacred things, language and so forth. So I can't just say, well, you know, I'm the authentic me. I can say my authenticity relates to how "integral" I am to all of that interconnectedness. So I can't just be focused on me [again pointing inward at his chest]. I've got to be focused [he draws big circles away from his chest signifying his connectedness to all things].[1]

A younger Indigenous woman summarized, saying, "Authenticity is really in your relationships [nods of agreement from others]. That's where authenticity lies: in our relationships and our connectedness to everything else and everybody else." This conversational exchange suggests that for both traditional Yolngu and Warlpiri societies, a person's identity, authenticity, and integrity are entirely dependent upon the extent of knowledge of his or her connectedness and obligation to law, language, kin,

country, and ceremony. As outlined by the Uncles above, the purpose of Lore, as big sets of stories, is precisely to teach people about that connectedness and obligation.

In 2008, the same year the CCCP was undertaken, the two Warlpiri participants mentioned above, along with another man, published an article about the centrality of *ngurra-kurlu* to Warlpiri life (Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu et al., 2008). In their paper, they introduce and outline the breadth and intricacy of knowledge that composes *ngurra-kurlu.* As identified in the CCCP quote above, the core elements of *ngurra-kurlu* are kinship, country, language, law, and ceremony. In this way, *ngurra-kurlu* offers a template for Warlpiri culture as well as processes for the development of identity and self-esteem, and for teaching and learning about a "proper" Warlpiri life. *Ngurra-kurlu* can be translated to mean both a "home within" and "a common sense of belonging" (p. 7). It is *purami,* "the way" for Warlpiri people to live harmoniously with people and country (p. 8). The purpose of *ngurra-kurlu,* then, is to teach Warlpiri their necessary ways of being, doing, and knowing in relation to everything on their country to maintain the well-being of everything on their country.

In the way that Callaghan (2014) talks about Aboriginal Lore, *ngurra-kurlu* can be seen as Warlpiri Lore. As it is for Uncle Paul Gordon, so to it is for Warlpiri Loremen *(Marliyarra)*[2] where the "primary goal for *ngurra-kurlu* is to support the health of people and country" (Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu et al., 2008, p. 24). And all the knowledge and wisdom needed by Warlpiri to live the proper way on the country they belong to is embodied in stories, songs, and dances. As Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu et al. express it, "In a more specific sense the Law for country is the actual dreaming songs and stories that relate to country" (2008, p. 25).[3]

Aboriginal Lore and human positioning in relation to Country

> The Lore, which requires us to care for our place and all things in our place, belongs to the land not the people. In traditional times, those who lived on the land were custodians of the Lore and so it was their responsibility to understand the Lore, teach the Lore and live the Lore. They believed that if they didn't place the Lore as their number one priority, the land would suffer and then they would suffer. (Callaghan, 2014, p. 18)

Clearly, the assumptions about human identity and relationship with ecological communities in the above two versions of Aboriginal Lore, and the ways of being, doing, and knowing they inform, are very different to those embraced within colonial and anthropocentric discourses. This difference reveals Aboriginal Lore as more representative of an eco-centric worldview. Niles (2003, p. 40) defines an eco-centric worldview as one where "life is the center of the universe and humans are a separate but equal part of nature." In Aboriginal Lore, humans are certainly positioned as an equal part of the ecological community, though, as outlined above, being connected to all things in their country, not separate from them. Further, as I have outlined in the previous sections of this paper, the purpose of Lore is to teach people their obligation to all things and all others on the country they share. Humans are positioned as "custodians" of ecological communities, of equal value to, and with connections and obligations to, all species and things in that community — rocks, trees, fish, birds, and animals — "our obligation to everything including each other" (Callaghan, 2014, p. 17). In a similar way, in Warlpiri language, *kurdiji* means "shield," a tool for and symbol of protection. *Kurdiji* is also the name of the male initiation ceremony, where boys become *Marliyarra,* "full up" of *ngurra-kurlu,* knowledge, and obligation to protect and take care of all people, animals, plants, and other things on Warlpiri country (Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu et al., 2008). Here, humans are ascribed power as connected custodians of cultureplace and everything that inhabits that cultureplace, to maintain life and all entities within ecological communities.[4]

Transformative learning: Context, challenge, critical reflection, and conversation — The cultureplace of outdoor education

The final section of this paper provides a brief introduction to, and discussion of, transformative learning. My purpose here is twofold: first, to highlight and remind educators how they can challenge themselves and others to critically examine their ways of being, doing, and knowing in relation to place and the underlying cultural assumptions that anchor them (cultureplace); and second, to offer a conversational process that enables Aboriginal peoples to contribute stories, knowledge, and perspectives to place-responsive approaches. In particular, I suggest here that outdoor educators are uniquely positioned to facilitate transformative learning regarding human relationship to place and ecological communities. Whilst this particular challenge was not engaged during the CCCP, I shall offer some quotes and a scenario to highlight the contextual, challenge-based, critically reflective and conversational requirements for transformative learning to occur, and the potential impacts of transformative learning on both individual and group assumptions and ways of being, doing, and knowing.

Transformative learning is a learning theory grounded in the social nature of human communication, which continues to be one of the most researched approaches to adult learning (Taylor, 2007). In a broad sense, this theory focuses on transforming one's worldview or perspective to critically reflect upon and analyse one's experience, to access a "new or revised interpretation of the meaning of [that] experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162). Clearly, in this way, one of my propositions is that in an appropriate relational context Aboriginal Lore and cultural knowledge can provide a different lens through which to critically reflect on, and possibly revise or shift, one's assumptions and positionings (ways of being, doing, and knowing) in relation to place. The significant body of research regarding transformative learning theory (see, for example, Lanas & Kiilakoski, 2013; Mezirow, 1991, 1996, 2000, 2009; Taylor, 1998, 2007) reinforces the importance of (1) context and its relational nature, (2) a disorienting dilemma that creates the emotional activation for change, (3) a different way of viewing prior experience, and (4) critical reflection leading to new meaning and motivation (Taylor, 2007).

The purpose of the CCCP undertaken in 2008 by NT DEET was to "significantly enhance levels of culturally competent collaboration within DEET workplaces to improve student outcomes and service delivery" (NT DEET, 2007). In a broad sense, the aim of the conversational learning experiences employed throughout the CCCP was to highlight the personal and collective knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and practices that enabled culturally competent collaboration, and those that did not. Drawing on Quay (2015), a slightly alternative way of viewing this aim is that it was about identifying enabling and disabling ways of being, doing, and knowing in the intercultural education contexts that CCCP participants inhabited. The professional learning approach co-created as a product of this project included many experiences that were designed to enable transformative learning amongst NT DEET employees towards the project aim; that is, to enable individual and collective ways of being, doing, and knowing that were interculturally efficacious. These learning experiences were selected as a direct result of participants' experiences during the CCCP.

From Day 1, conversational circles were established as the core-learning context for the CCCP. Conversational circles are based upon the belief that as human beings we all wish to connect to self and others in good ways (Prannis, 2005). Ideally, they become a way of being, doing, and knowing together that strives to enact *equal power relating*. Here, the experiences, knowledge, ideas, and aspirations of all in the circle are accepted as equally valid and seriously considered. Taylor (2007, p. 180) highlights broad research support for the establishment of trustful relationships combined with the "equalization of power" as critical to transformative learning. In particular, this enables robust dialogue and critical self-reflection in a safe, supportive environment necessary for personal shift (Stronger Smarter Institute Limited, 2014; Taylor, 2007). In the CCCP, the practices of the circle enabled group members, over time, to establish a space of safety and trust. One of the Indigenous women described the conversation circle as "a physical manifestation of safety. Early in our time, we kept the circle tight. Now we can sit anywhere because of the trust." An Indigenous man likewise observed that "the power and success of [the] CCCP has been [achieved] through the group dynamic that has developed. There's been a lot of high-stakes disclosure, and people getting deeply into themselves to bring out attributes that can seed change."

Clearly, the strong focus on conversational circles in the first four-day forum seeded some significant personal transformations. A non-Indigenous, female participant, an experienced remote teacher, reflected afterwards:

> I can't believe that over the four days I came out a completely different person, like seeing the world in a completely different way. . . . The impact that that's had is it's made me see a lot about myself. . . . Good things and bad things . . . and I'm quite open to looking at the negative things as well . . . so I came out with that learning under my belt about myself, which can only make me more empowered in the position that we've been given to make change. I'm here to make a difference.

In the time between the three CCCP forums, participant pairs designed and facilitated workplace projects aimed at offering workplace peers learning experiences to enhance their personal capabilities and collective practices for culturally competent collaboration. Following the first forum, one pair identified their priority as addressing the disengagement of Aboriginal assistant teachers (ATs) in the planning and delivery of teaching and learning processes in their school. They conducted two two-hour sessions with all teaching and learning staff, including the Aboriginal ATs. What follows is a non-Indigenous participant's reflection on what they did and what happened, offered when she returned for the second forum.

> We've found a natural transition now in our weekly staff gatherings. We begin with a check-in. This gets us out-of-role and leads to another circle activity to

> connect us at a personal level. This leads us to our planning which takes us into the professional level, but it happens really fast because we've already got the vocab for communicating. Classroom teachers are saying they see a whole new world in their [Aboriginal] assistant teachers [ATs] now as a result of this work. Their ATs are feeling more confident. They're suggesting things like check-ins and check-outs and are really feeling part of our teaching and primary [school curriculum] teams.

Here, the CCCP pair used conversational circles to get workplace colleagues "out of role" and focused on personal stories and connections. In the words of the above interviewee, this "quickly rejuvenated the quality of our relationships," indicating a re-establishment of the trustful relationships and equalization of power necessary for transformative learning (Stronger Smarter Institute Limited, 2014; Taylor, 2007). The introduction of the practices of conversational circles challenged and shifted existing ways of being, doing, and knowing, resulting in new perceptions and practices of power relating. Participants were then able to facilitate "planning" at a "professional level" that may have incorporated more open and robust dialogue, enabling and encouraging critical self-reflection. This is supported by the following reflections from the Indigenous member of this CCCP pair, who was a local woman and beginning teacher at the school. These reflections were offered at the beginning of the second forum. The first quote is in specific reference to the workplace project.

> This work has made me have to take the time get to know [other] teachers personally a bit more; be more up front with them, and talk to them. I have got a lot closer with them. It's really good and making a big difference.

This workplace project enabled this young Indigenous female teacher to recognize, accept, and act upon the importance of getting to know other teachers at a personal level and in a "more up front" manner. Though not explicit in the above quote, it nevertheless seems probable that she was able to surface and challenge some existing assumptions about professional relationships and then intentionally modify some of her behaviours, changing her ways of being and doing with and knowing about her colleagues. The second quote is from the same Indigenous woman and refers explicitly to the enhancement of her self-reflective capability, the broadening of her choice responses and, implicitly, to changes in her leadership behaviour as a result of both the CCCP and the "project."

> The most significant change for me through CCCP is that I now challenge my own assumptions, challenging my reactions to certain situations. This allows me to choose different responses and decisions. Through the CCCP project things have come into my consciousness. It's allowed me to be a more relaxed leader. I can only ever change myself not others. I can now be the change I want to see.

This short vignette and series of reflections from the CCCP demonstrate and support a number of the critical elements of transformative learning. First, establishing and maintaining relationships of trust and equal power relating are necessary to enabling the relational and emotionally supportive landscape for transformative learning to occur. Second, a "disorienting dilemma" or challenge, in this case the disengagement of Aboriginal ATs, is required to create the emotional activation to shift existing individual and collective ways of being, doing, and knowing. Finally, having a different perspective or framework is necessary to provide the lens through which to critically reflect. In the above scenario, the introduction of conversational circles and their relational assumptions constituted this lens to see, think, and talk differently.

Extending upon transformative learning theory, this short vignette also suggests that as shifts occur for individuals, the potential for changes in the collective practices of the group is also enhanced. By way of the brief reflections on the CCCP scenario above, I argue that both individual and collective shifts occurred. At an individual level, some teachers came to perceive the ATs differently. This may have changed the way they engaged with and responded to them. At the same time, ATs, probably to varying extents, were more actively involved in the conversations and planning, as their awareness of how teachers valued their experiences, ideas, and opinions strengthened. These various personal changes seeded a collective shift within the group to one more connected, motivated, and productive. Further, it is suggested, though unknown, that these shifts may have produced changes in teaching and learning within classrooms, as teachers and ATs worked more productively and supportively as a team. In these ways, personal and collective transformations feed off and contribute to each other.

The process and elements of transformative learning can relatively quickly lead to awareness, critical reflection, and shifts in individual and collective ways of being, doing, and knowing in particular contexts. In the CCCP scenario above, the introduction of conversational circles constituted the activity that offered the lens through which to both

critique and shift existing assumptions and practice. Yet, outdoor educators have an array of such activities and processes in their repertoires. Place provides a lens that enables critical reflection on taken-for-granted assumptions and the ways of being, doing, and knowing they perpetuate. Utilizing conversational circles on country enacts a cultural continuity thousands of years old. It can work to heighten and deepen embodied engagement with place and its inhabitants, both human and other-than-human.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have briefly and formatively explored a number of positions and propositions. Offered initially was an overview of a place-responsive critique of the field of outdoor education focusing on the taken-for-granted cultural assumptions of colonial and anthropocentric discourses and the ways such discourses impact outdoor education practices. Two perspectives on Aboriginal Lore were outlined and juxtaposed with these discourses. Building on the work of Quay (2015), who suggests that outdoor education provides contexts, capabilities, and opportunities to critically examine ways of being, doing, and knowing, I have proposed collaborations between outdoor educators and local Indigenous people for the purpose of examining assumptions and practices underlying the self–others–nature relationship. Transformative learning theory underpins the pedagogical processes, expressed chiefly through conversational circles, which characterize these critical examinations regarding ways of being, doing, and knowing in the field of outdoor education.

Notes

1. Uncle Paul Gordon points out that in the Ngemba worldview, the stories for country offered through the Lore provide morals about how to live on that country. From these morals come rules and from the rules the Law, which is a system of consequences for wrongdoing. Without the Lore (the stories), there is no Law (Callaghan, 2014. p. 19).

2. In Warlpiri language, *Marliyarra* means "without without" or "not empty." When you become a fully initiated man, that is what you are "full up" with — that *ngurra-kurlu* — that knowledge possesses you now (Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu et al., 2008, p. 17).

3. For an intriguing historical analysis of how the anthropocentric worldview was constructed and how it is perpetuated, see *Ishmael: An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit* (Quinn, 1992). In addition, the first 20 minutes or so of the iconic movie *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980) offers a clear and humorous analysis of the lived differences between anthropocentrism and eco-centrism (C.A.T. Films, 1980).

4. Several examples of such stories — and the knowledge, wisdom, and direction they provide Warlpiri — are offered in the paper "*Ngurra-Kurlu*: A Way of Working with Warlpiri People" (Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu et al., 2008).

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CHAPTER 6:

Journal Article 3 (JA3)

Spillman, D. (2018). The brumby dance episode: On the value of cultural continuity within the localized complexity of remote Indigenous education. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, (1), 19–28.

The brumby dance episode: on the value of cultural continuity within the localised complexity of remote Indigenous education

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Abstract: *The brumby dance episode occurred as a Warlpiri-inspired response to an emotionally charged conversation regarding the Northern Territory Emergency Response. It took place during the Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project, undertaken in the Northern Territory Department of Education, Employment and Training in 2008. This paper contextualises, describes and analyses the brumby dance episode, examining the perspectives and intentions underlying its enactment. This analysis proposes the brumby dance episode as an exemplar of the great value of cultural continuity processes in bringing traditional Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing and being to the localised complexity of contemporary Indigenous education in Australia, particularly in remote settings. Such strongly relational, strength-based approaches are juxtaposed with those of the currently dominant standardisation policy agenda in Indigenous education, critiqued as over-simplistic (one size fits all), deficit-focused and relationally impoverished.*

Introduction

The brumby dance episode occurred on day four of the Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project (CCCP), undertaken by the Northern Territory Department of Education, Employment and Training (NT DEET) in 2008. The CCCP aimed to 'significantly enhance levels of culturally competent collaboration within (all) DEET workplaces to improve student outcomes and service delivery' through the co-creation of a professional learning program for agency staff (NT DEET 2007). Participants were invited as Indigenous/non-Indigenous pairs. Eleven pairs participated in the nine days of investigative collaboration and learning, having been selected by a group of peers and managers, based upon their history of success as classroom practitioners, school-based leaders and/or as facilitators of strong partnerships between school staff and local families. The CCCP consisted of three forums (four days, three days, two days) over a six-month period.

Conversational circles were introduced and established from day one as the primary participatory process for sharing, reflecting, learning and innovation. They are an attempt to enact 'equal power relating' where the experiences, knowledge, ideas and aspirations of all in the circle are ideally accepted as equally valid and seriously considered (Stronger Smarter Institute 2014). As noted by an Indigenous participant, 'the circle is a physical manifestation of safety', which was 'quickly established by the group'. Subsequently, a different Indigenous participant suggested that due to

the 'group dynamic that [has] developed, there's been a lot of high-stakes disclosure, and people getting deeply into themselves to bring out attributes that can seed change'. It was this sense of safety and trust that enabled another Indigenous participant to speak openly and honestly on the morning of the fourth day of the first forum, setting in motion the events that would become the brumby dance episode.

In this paper I examine the ways the brumby dance episode demonstrates the value of cultural continuity processes, drawing on and creatively modifying traditional Aboriginal perspectives for particular purposes within the cross-cultural settings of Indigenous education. Further, I propose that such strength-based processes are required to adequately negotiate and respond to the complexity inherent in Indigenous education contexts, particularly in remote settings.

What follows in this paper is, first, a brief account of the research approach and background. A theoretical framework is then established, consisting of (i) a brief critique of the standardisation approach to Indigenous education in the Northern Territory, (ii) a consideration of the way Indigenous education can be approached as 'localised complexity', and (iii) a discussion of the value of cultural continuity in Indigenous education as a strength-based approach. The brumby dance episode was initiated by a CCCP participant's emotional outpouring regarding the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER). The NTER is briefly outlined with references to further critique provided. The brumby dance is described, with a link to a video clip of the ceremony/performance. The episode is analysed and discussed to highlight the value of cultural continuity approaches to the localised complexity of Indigenous education settings and contexts.

Research approach and background

In 2008 I was contracted to co-design and co-facilitate the CCCP. The required output was a professional learning program and resource for teachers and education workers. Approximately 36 hours of video footage of conversations, presentations and interviews were recorded for this purpose, including the performance of the brumby dance.

This research was undertaken as part of the requirements for the Doctor of Cultural Research qualification at Western Sydney University. Late in 2011, I sought and received written permission to use the video footage as the primary data set from NT DEET and all except one of the original CCCP participants. Permission was also given for publications emanating from the research, including the use of video excerpts. The participant who chose not to participate in the research did not feature in either the video of the performance or pre- or post-conversations.

In undertaking this research, I accept Lather's (1986) call for 'ideologically open research' supported by Cousins' (2002) notion of the impossibility of value-free research. In this regard, Stacey (2011) proposes self-reflexivity as the most valuable tool when working and researching with organisations. Self-reflexivity is grounded in the social complexity of life (and research). It is built on recognition that my account of experience, including research experience, is a product of my history at a particular point in time, and my history is inextricably interwoven with those of others, all of which are ever changing. Here I can never be an objective observer standing outside the research process, at best a rigorously inquiring participant, aware of my history and how it directs intention and interpretation (Stacey 2011). From this perspective, an examination of the histories that we as researchers bring to our research is imperative.

My experiences in remote Indigenous education in the Northern Territory as a teacher, school executive and eventually consultant-facilitator over a 17-year period led me to prioritise a broad set of beliefs and approaches regarding Indigenous education, ones that both informed the CCCP and the initial research framework and that were subsequently interrogated, challenged and significantly shifted through the research process.

Formative experiences in remote Indigenous education began for me in 1995. I still remember the early pervasive feeling that I was learning more than I was teaching, despite being an 'experienced teacher' from the east coast. It was clear that local people enacted ways of seeing, knowing, doing and being in the world that were significantly different to my own, ways I had no experience or understanding of yet felt compelled

to explore. So started an exciting and sometimes difficult journey, one that continues to this day. In those first few years my principal and co-teacher Jacky Costanzo and I, with our families, socialised with and learned greatly from bilingual educators living and working at Papunya, Utju and Yuendumu. Theirs was a strongly social and collaborative community of practice. As outsiders we felt humbled to be included. We glimpsed the life-enriching value to people and country of local language and culture, the joyous dignifying power of community-based dialogue and collaboration, and the rigor of bilingual education. We also became acutely aware that visiting teachers leave and local families stay in remote communities, a situation that continues today.

Following our bilingual counterparts, we began asking local Indigenous people about their educational aspirations for their children. In 1999 we co-created the Titjikala School Tjukurrpa to outline the educational aspirations of local families for their children. This became an important document for school governance for several years after we left. In 2003–04 Jacky and I worked as the executive of Group School East, a geographic grouping of 11 remote community schools around Alice Springs. We created and supported a collaborative process framework to enable staff in all schools to start a dialogue with local families regarding their expectations of schooling and aspirations for their children. This position of working locally with stakeholders to co-create a shared vision for each school created positive momentum and worked to finetune and make explicit school-based accountabilities (see Spillman and Costanzo 2004a, 2004b).

Moving back to Queensland in 2005, I took up the offer to join a consulting group so as to continue working in Indigenous education in the Northern Territory. Working with the director of the People and Learning directorate of NT DEET, we established the Indigenous Leaders Network (ILN), initially a forum of 35 Indigenous education leaders from across the Territory that grew to more than 60 through three ILN programs between 2005–07. This group identified bicultural competence, trust and decision making as the core challenges for NT DEET regarding Indigenous education. These challenges provided the impetus for the establishment of the CCCP in 2008.

Standardisation approach to Indigenous education

As the brumby dance episode occurred in 2008 during a nine-day professional learning project that aimed ultimately to improve the learning and achievement of Indigenous children in Northern Territory schools, a critique of the dominant educational approach from that time onwards is useful. Through this time, the dominant policy agenda in Indigenous education in the Northern Territory has focused on the standardisation of curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment. It has been argued that this standardisation approach continues to fail Indigenous children in remote settings in the Northern Territory (Bat and Guenther 2013; Fogarty et al. 2015; Spillman 2017). Further, and by its own standards, this failure extends more broadly within the field of Indigenous education. The flagship of this approach in Australia is the National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), a set of standardised national literacy and numeracy tests administered once a year for all year 3, 5, 7 and 9 students. However, Guenther (2013) points out that NAPLAN has come to operate as more than just an assessment framework — rather, being used to determine school funding, teaching and learning approaches, and direct professional learning. The Productivity Commission's 2013–14 Performance Assessment reports from 2008 to 2014 show there was 'little overall progress' throughout Australia regarding Indigenous children's literacy and numeracy results (Productivity Commission 2015:9).

Despite this bleak assessment, in 2014 the Northern Territory Department of Education and Community Services (DECS) accepted the findings and recommendations of its latest review of Indigenous education, *A share in the future* (Wilson 2014). This review is an exemplar of the standardisation approach to Indigenous education. For detailed critiques, see Fogarty et al. (2015) and Spillman (2017). While addressing the poor literacy and numeracy results of Indigenous children in the Northern Territory is clearly of great importance, this latest review and its recommendations are problematic in three major ways.

First, the review proposes a one-size-fits-all approach to curriculum and pedagogy in remote

(priority 1) schools. Here the review proposes that the 'educational need' of all Indigenous students in 79 remote and very remote schools is entirely the same and can be met by a technically focused, uniform instructional teaching and learning approach that focuses almost exclusively on English literacy and numeracy (Spillman 2017). This approach stands in stark contrast to the findings of a number of highly regarded Indigenous education researchers and organisations who focus heavily on the critical relational work of teachers with students, enabling them to understand and respond appropriately to the unique individual, social, economic, cultural and linguistic circumstances of each learner (Bishop 2012; Bishop et al. 2014; Sarra 2011; Shields et al. 1996; Stronger Smarter Institute 2014).

Second, this standardisation of teaching and assessment works to perpetuate a discourse of deficit and disadvantage regarding Indigenous children's educational achievement through its constant focus on the gap of achievement disparity. For further commentary here see Altman and Fogarty (2010), Fogarty et al. (2015), Guenther et al. (2013), McConaghy (2000), Nakata (2007), Sarra (2011), Spillman (2017) and Vass (2013). In doing this, it hands educational authority, expertise and decision making to Western educators and bureaucrats far removed from the local educational contexts (Fogarty et al. 2015; Spillman 2017). Here the knowledge and aspirations of local Indigenous people are devalued, becoming of little interest or concern to the educators of their children. This reinforces the notion of cultural incompatibility between traditional Aboriginal knowledge and practices, and modern-day schooling.

Third, this one-size-fits-all standardisation of curriculum and assessment rests upon the assumptions of simple systems thinking (Bates 2013). Bat and Guenther (2013) point out that simple systems are conceptualised as ordered and predictable with direct and understandable links between cause and effect. This thinking leads managers and leaders to the (delusional) belief they can stand 'outside', objectively analyse and strategically manipulate 'the system' to enhance whole-of-system performance (Stacey 2011). Such thinking and approaches are based upon over-simplistic abstractions of organisations that ignore the dynamic complexity of organisational and community life (Stacey 2011).

While the lack of progress in literacy and numeracy achievement by Indigenous children is of undoubted concern, I seek to contest the currently dominant standardisation approach and its underlying simple systems assumptions through this paper. The brumby dance episode provides evidence that effective approaches focus on working relationally within the linguistic, cultural and aspirational complexity of local school communities. The strength-based approach offered in the brumby dance episode worked to value and draw upon participants' knowledge and aspirations through a cultural continuity process.

Indigenous education as localised complexity

In critiquing the simple systems assumptions that currently underlie the dominant standardisation approach to remote Indigenous education, Bat and Guenther (2013) propose approaching remote Indigenous education as localised complexity. Through their argument, they emphasise the dynamic diversity of remote Indigenous education contexts. They suggest, for example, that local Indigenous people often have 'radically different' worldviews to those of teachers and educational bureaucrats, including views of 'success' in both schooling and life, and vastly differing conceptions of 'the problems' or challenges being faced (Bat and Guenther 2013:125). Add to this the impact of linguistic, economic and geographic factors, and the complexity of these local contexts becomes even more apparent.

Stacey (2011) has undertaken extensive critique of systems thinking in relation to organisational endeavour and life. Even a short overview is well beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say here that for Stacey (2011) the simplifications and abstractions of systems thinking work to stifle diversity and shift power relations in ways that devalue and change local interactions, where they 'inevitably leave behind real people, replacing them with simplified averages' (Stacey 2011:420). Stacey provides powerful, practical examples of how this has occurred. Interpreting Stacey's research into the field of education, Bates (2013:43) proposes standardisation as the

primary educational strategy of systems thinking, and writes that it:

> offers greater possibilities for centralised management, supervision, manipulation and experimentation. It facilitates the development of technical disciplines that can be codified and taught…However, it does so at the loss of local diversity, practical wisdom and the impoverishment of local relationships.

Although this standardisation approach to Indigenous education offers one useful perspective, as the dominant approach, its simple systems assumptions work to focus on numbers rather than people. The lived complexity of local people's lives — their stories, knowledge and aspirations — are ignored (Stacey 2011). This diminishes levels of trust, affecting the quality of relationships and thus the motivation and creative potential for positive change.

Those who participate in the kind of localised complexity described by both Bat and Guenther (2013) and Stacey (2011) often perceive high levels of unpredictability and change. Managing anxiety arising from such perceptions is critical to successful approaches and to wellness (Stacey 2011). Stacey (2011:345) has explored the psychological concept of 'good enough holding' in seeking ways to more productively overcome anxiety in complex circumstances. Good enough holding refers to interactions characterised by levels of trust sufficient to diminish but not remove anxiety, enabling people to work and interact more productively. It is a relational, not individual, characteristic. Conversations become more fluid and robust. People begin to feel they are in this together, rather than alone. Here the potential for the levels of creativity and novelty necessary to deal successfully with complexity is enhanced (Stacey 2011). Good enough holding also has implications for power relations where working towards a shared sense of value and power builds trust (Stacey 2011).

The perspectives outlined above reinforce Bat and Guenther's (2013) proposition that remote Indigenous education work must be founded on maintaining high-quality relationships among local stakeholders, particularly between education workers and local Aboriginal people. This constitutes a 'doing with' approach (rather than 'doing to' or 'doing for'), where the focus is on building trustful relationships and working locally with the humanity and diversity of Indigenous people's perspectives to create positive ways of moving forward together (Sarra 2015).

Cultural continuity: a strength-based approach

Strength-based approaches draw on the knowledge and aspirations of stakeholders within a locality. In Indigenous education they offer a positive alternative to the deficit focus perpetuated by the standardisation approach and have been advocated for by several education researchers and organisations (Fogarty et al. 2015; Gorringe and Spillman 2008; Sarra 2012; Spillman 2017; Stronger Smarter Institute 2014). Traditional Aboriginal knowledge and practices represent an important realm of strength within the settings of Indigenous education.

Cultural continuity refers to the reinterpretation of traditional knowledge and practices in ways that are meaningful and of value to life in a contemporary society. Several Aboriginal people and groups have invested in the promise of cultural continuity. The Milpirri Festival, undertaken bi-annually by Warlpiri in Lajamanu, Northern Territory, involves new ceremonies being created specifically for the purposes of reinterpreting traditional cultural stories and perspectives to guide young people in a contemporary world (Patrick 2008, 2015; Patrick et al. 2008; SBS 2016). During the CCCP we used Engoori, a strength-based conversational process from the Mithaka-Tjimpa people of far-western Queensland (Gorringe 2012; Gorringe and Spillman 2008). This process is a contemporary re-interpretation of an old Mithaka conflict resolution ceremony, and thus offers another example of cultural continuity. Other investments in cultural continuity within Indigenous education include Tyson Yunkaporta's (2009) eight ways of learning, Uncle Paul Gordon's six Ls — lore, love, look, listen, learn, lead — (Callaghan 2014), Davis-Warra's (2017) Durithunga process for growing urban Indigenous educational leadership, and Uncle Ernie Grant's (1998) *My land my tracks: a framework for holistic approach to Indigenous studies*.

From Lajamanu in the Northern Territory, Patrick et al. (2008) created a paper for the specific purpose of outlining how best to work with Warlpiri people. Titled *Ngurra-kurlu: a way of working with Warlpiri people*, the paper first outlines the centrality of *ngurra-kurlu* to Warlpiri life. Meaning both 'the home within' and 'a common sense of belonging', *ngurra-kurlu* is composed of interconnectedness to five elements — country, language, law, ceremony and kinship. In the introduction, Patrick et al. (2008:1) point out that *ngurra-kurlu* is both central to Warlpiri life and of value to those working with Warlpiri. The authors write:

> It can be thought of as:
> - a template for the whole of Warlpiri culture
> - an efficient pedagogy (way of teaching)
> - a process for building identity and self esteem
> - a way of looking after the health of people and the health of country
> - a framework to create successful projects that are relevant to Warlpiri people.

Notably, *ngurra-kurlu* is a 'new design'. While all Warlpiri people are familiar with the interconnectedness of the five elements, Stephen Jampijinpa Patrick and his father have in recent times popularised the phrase *ngurra-kurlu*, seemingly for a particular purpose. Interestingly, the brumby dance process also came from Stephen Jampijinpa Patrick and Lance Box Jangala, who, in 2008, were both participants in the CCCP. As the *ngurra-kurlu* report and the brumby dance were both created in the first year of the implementation of the NTER at Lajamanu, it seems likely that both represent Warlpiri responses to the NTER as calls to the strength of traditional ways of knowing, doing and being, through a cultural continuity process. The report represents a call to those working with Warlpiri, and the brumby dance to Warlpiri themselves, in order to overcome anxiety and fear in the face of the NTER, finding ways to move forward through solidarity with kin, country, language, law and ceremony.

The brumby dance

The NTER: the event of focus in this paper, the brumby dance episode, occurred on day four of the CCCP in response to an emotional conversation among participants regarding the NTER. The NTER was the federal government's response to the *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle, 'Little children are sacred'* report, released publicly on 15 June 2007 and documenting widespread sexual abuse of Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory (Anderson and Wild 2007). The NTER included a range of 'special measures' that sought to restrict harmful and antisocial behaviour and enforce law and order on 73 'prescribed' Aboriginal communities and camps, including quarantining of welfare payments, abolition of the Community Development Employment Projects, compulsory heath checks for children, and deployment of federal bureaucrats, federal police and the army to each community. Although clearly a strenuous response was required from both the federal and Northern Territory governments, the NTER has been heavily criticised on a variety of fronts. For detailed critiques, see Australian Human Rights Commission (2009), Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (2010), Behrendt and McCausland (2008), Edmunds (2010), Howard-Wagner (2012), Lovell (2012), Macoun (2011), Sarra (2012), Scrymgour (2007) and Trudgen (2008). From the perspective of this paper, the NTER epitomises a simple systems response to a host of complex challenges. In implementing a one-size-fits-all approach characterised by 'doing to' rather than 'doing with', the NTER unsurprisingly has worked to strongly reinforce a deficit discourse about Aboriginal people, and resulted in a widespread breakdown of relationships with, and loss of trust in, government.

The episode: on the fourth morning of the CCCP several participants began the daily circle check-in by saying how their experiences over the first three days had made them feel included, cared for and increasingly willing to speak openly. More participants joined in, indicating they were also feeling happy, connected and cared for. More than half the participants had checked-in in this vein, when an Indigenous male participant apologetically broke this flow, clearly experiencing some discomfort at doing so. He acknowledged the feelings of those participants who had already checked-in, and he agreed that in this circle he felt this way too. But he felt conflicted. How could he feel happy and safe, as he did in this circle,

when the NTER was creating so much misery and unhappiness for his family and people back home? He talked slowly and deliberately with tears, for about two minutes. I noticed the non-verbal emotional responses of many other participants. There was, what seemed, a long silence after he finished, possibly a few minutes, with some sobbing and tears. Then slowly others also began to speak of their experiences, concerns and bewilderment about the NTER. I noted in my facilitation notes that at least five people spoke about this, accompanied by a lot of nodding in agreement and emotionality. I also noted the rising sense of commitment in the group to talk and act in response, as well as my feelings of uncertainty about how to proceed from there. The check-in took well over an hour, with a great deal of emotional outpouring. I suggested to the group that we create a space after morning tea to address these experiences, feelings and concerns, and that we take as long as needed to do this. No one disagreed, much to my relief.

During the morning tea break Stephen Jampijinpa Patrick and Lance Box Jangala, both Warlpiri men (neither being the initiator of the NTER-focused conversation), approached me and asked if they could facilitate the ensuing session about the NTER. After a brief conversation about what they were proposing, I agreed, again noting my uncertainty at the time.

This experience had a significant positive impact on the way the group worked together from that point onwards and on participant feelings about the NTER. The pair worked slowly and gently. They facilitated a co-creative process to produce and enact what they called the brumby dance, originally created and used by Warlpiri at Lajamanu to deal with their fears and concerns about the NTER and to call forth courage and shared commitment to find ways to move forward. All the men were taken outside to parkland, where, with humour and gentleness, we were guided to co-create and practice a dance to accompany the song. The women remained inside, created costumes and percussion instruments, painted-up and practised singing. After well over an hour we came together to perform the dance, with remarkable effect. The words are reproduced below. A video of the ceremony/performance can be viewed at https://aiatsis.gov.au/7474552541.

Brumby is coming, will hurt us will hurt us
Brumby is coming, will hurt us will hurt us
Brumby is coming, is coming, is coming
Will hurt us, will hurt us
Brumby will hurt us
(Repeat)

Kicking and stomping and snorting and fighting
Kicking and stomping and snorting and fighting
Snorting and kicking, snorting and kicking
Fighting and stomping, stomping and fighting

Blanket and bridle, blanket and bridle
Blanket and bridle, blanket and bridle
Throw them on brumby, blanket and bridle
Blanket and bridle on brumby they throw

Mount up on brumby and sit out the kicking
Mount up on brumby and sit out the stomping
Sit out the stomping and sit out the kicking
Sit out the snorting and kicking and biting

Quiet down brumby and ride him and ride him
Quiet down brumby and ride him and ride him
Ride him and ride him to quiet down brumby
Ride him and ride him to country we long for.

Following the performance and a lunch break, we reconvened our circle and opened a space to allow people to once again talk about their feelings and perceptions of both the brumby dance episode and the NTER if they wished. No one spoke about the NTER. Rather, there was much relaxed laughter and finger pointing in jest with respect to our dance performance. When asked how he was doing, the Indigenous male who initiated the whole episode with his heartfelt check-in that morning simply said with a smile and a nod, 'I'm okay now. It's alright. Thankyou.' It is also worth noting that in that conversation the brumby dance facilitators indicated the substantial positive effect it had for people at Lajamanu in enabling then to work closely with the government administrator to co-direct the course of the NTER in that community.

Analysis and discussion

The brumby dance song was created to support Warlpiri in responding to the NTER. Its traditional Aboriginal form is clearly apparent. For example, it might appear to be of 'low aesthetic quality', repetitive and unimaginative, formal and descriptive. Yet this implies a political stoicism in the face of disruption, marking the ethic of survival inherent in traditional Aboriginal life (Hodge and Mishra 2006[1991]). There is also a clear but somewhat muted optimism and hope within the lyrics, when with persistence the 'snorting and kicking and biting' are sat out. A sense of collective agency emerges. Indeed, patience, optimism and agency confer the dominant underlying themes of the text. These are anchored by an unwavering belief in the power of traditional Aboriginal cultural practice grounded in 'the country we long for', indicating its traditional Aboriginal sentiment.

The choice of the brumby to represent the NTER metaphorically marks the transition of traditional Warlpiri knowledge and practices into the contemporary world. The brumby is an introduced species, sometimes seen as a pest, yet one also highly valued by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, thus representing both a new threat and valuable opportunity. The song originally created in Warlpiri had been translated into English so that all people could participate. In these ways the text offers a strong example of the creativity central to the positive intent of cultural continuity.

Stephen Jampijinpa Patrick and Lance Box Jangala, two of the authors of the *ngurra-kurlu* report, facilitated the brumby dance processes of creation, practice and performance. As with many important Aboriginal ceremonies, the men and women were separated for planning and given different roles. The pair worked gently and calmly with the men, with much smiling and laughing, seemingly intent on creating a relaxed, enjoyable shared experience. In a similar way the women negotiated the way they would sing the song and the style of percussion to accompany it. Through this episode the two facilitators enacted a strength-based approach by drawing on the strength of traditional Warlpiri perspectives and practices, and on the strengths the CCCP participants brought through the negotiation and co-creation of the dance.

As indicated in the post-performance interaction, described in the previous section, the episode worked to significantly reduce participants' anxiety about the NTER, replacing feelings of bewilderment and grief with a sense of optimism and hope, also having a positive effect in Lajamanu. As such, this episode offers a clear example of good enough holding in practice. By focusing on equal power relating, the regular use of conversational circles in the three days prior to the episode facilitated the development of shared perceptions of high levels of trust among participants. This enabled the initial participant to talk openly and honestly about his fears and anxieties regarding the NTER on the fourth morning, opening up a robust conversational space for others. These are the kind of strongly relational processes advocated by Bat and Guenther (2013) as essential to the localised complexity of remote Indigenous education. The brumby dance episode offers a strong example of a 'doing with' approach, in contrast to the 'doing for' and 'doing to' approaches of the NTER.

Conclusion

Processes that enact cultural continuity facilitate the reinterpretation of traditional Aboriginal perspectives and practices to meet contemporary needs and challenges. As demonstrated in this paper, such processes are particularly useful when dealing with the relational, cultural and political complexity inherent in Indigenous education contexts, especially in remote settings. These strength-based 'doing with' approaches enable the development of trustful relationships and robust conversational practices. In so doing, they may work locally to offset the deficit discourse so pervasive in Indigenous education. The brumby dance episode demonstrates how, when faced with a complex challenge, cultural continuity approaches enable the transformation of stakeholders' feelings of confusion, anxiety and despair into a collective sense of optimism and agency. I advocate that policy makers in Australian Indigenous education shift their gaze and thinking (though not exclusively) in the ways discussed in this paper.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: CCCP Key Learnings Report: For Original Participants of the CCCP (NT DEET 2012)

CCCP KEY LEARNINGS REPORT

For original participants of the

CROSS-CULTURAL COLLABORATION PROJECT (CCCP)

David Spillman
(Research undertaken towards Doctor of Cultural Research degree, UWS)

February 2013

Introduction: the purpose of this report
This report is for the original participants of the Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project (CCCP). The report presents some key research learnings from this project. You, the original CCCP participants are requested to read and respond to these key learnings. Your responses will be taken into consideration in re-drafting the Key Learnings report for relevant NT DECS personnel.

CCCP background
The Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project (CCCP) was undertaken in Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training (NT DEET) in 2008. CCCP was set up largely in response to the NT DEET Indigenous Leaders Network who in 2006 identified the need for professional learning approaches to:

- enhance the bi-cultural competence of NT DEET employees and
- establish deeper levels of trust within NT DEET workplaces and with local Indigenous people.

CCCP involved eleven Indigenous/ non-Indigenous participant pairs, all of whom worked in educational settings within NT DEET. Participants were invited together for a total of nine days, split into three forums over an eight-month period. Project aims included the:

- Co-creation of a group culture of trust, care and collaboration
- Enhancement of participants' cultural competence and their capacity to facilitate such enhancement within their workplaces
- Identification of frameworks, activities, processes, models and other resources to assist in facilitating the enhancement of cultural competence among workplace members, and transformations in workplace cultures towards cultures of care, trust and collaboration

CCCP participants completed evaluations of their learnings, experiences and workplace projects. These contributed significantly to the development of a professional learning resource and approach the *Cultures of Collaboration Program.* However, no formal evaluation of CCCP was undertaken.

Research Approach
About thirty hours of CCCP discussions, presentations and interviews were videoed. An opportunity therefore existed to go back and review these experiences for any additional learning. It is hoped this learning will enhance the implementation of the *Cultures of Collaboration Program* (CCP), and provide insights into creating positive and enabling intercultural learning spaces. David Spillman, the lead designer and facilitator of CCCP is undertaking this research as part of the Doctor of Cultural Research degree through the University of Western Sydney. It has full NT DECS and ethical approval.

This research process involves a thematic analysis of these videoed CCCP discussions, activities, presentations and interviews. A number of research lenses have been used to search for patterns of conversation and interacting among CCCP participants. These patterns mark sets of assumptions and habitual ways of thinking that may enable or disable individuals and groups. The research also draws upon participants lived

experience of learning and transformation and their attempts to facilitate transformative conversations with workplace peers.

How to respond to this report
Please read the Key Learnings that follow in this report. Reflect on these Key Learnings. The following questions may help with this reflection.

> *How do these Key Learnings sit with you? Do they connect with your experiences of CCCP? Do they make sense from your life and work experiences in the NT? In what ways?*
>
> *Have you already gained these learnings from CCCP or from other experiences? If so what impact have they had on your life and work?*
>
> *If these learnings are new to you, what impact might they have on your life and work?*

You may also have questions about the Key Learnings that you wish to discuss.

You can write responses, comments and questions, and email them to me OR make a time for me to ring you and talk it through. Hope you enjoy revisiting our journey together.

Thanks David Spillman

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How will your feedback and comments be used?
Your reflections, comments and questions will be considered in re-drafting the *CCCP Key Learnings Report* for key NT DECS personnel. Following discussions with these people regarding the implications of CCCP key learnings for NT DECS, a more detailed, fully referenced CCCP Key Learnings report will be provided.

CCCP Research Key Learnings

Key Learning 1 – 'Good relating' as the deeper purpose of culture

'Culture' lies at the heart of most conversations about, and approaches to Indigenous education. The ways we think about, talk about and enact 'culture' in Indigenous education have a huge impact on the quality of our relationships and the levels of trust we create. If we can focus such conversations on the question of 'how we are', we can build connectivity and trust, and co-create effective ways of working together. A 'culture of good relating' can then become the foundation for co-creating success with complex intercultural challenges.

Often 'cultural' conversations in Indigenous education focus on artifacts of Aboriginal cultures, the most visible and tangible products and activities – stories, songs, dance, artwork, ceremonies, language, kinship and country connections. These artifacts only tell us a little bit about a culture. Here, 'who' Aboriginal people are can be interpreted through 'what' they do – they share 'dreamtime' stories, sing songs, perform dances, create art, speak languages, connect with family and country. This view may affirm a sense of Aboriginal identities based upon relatively superficial aspects of culture.

When we focus our conversations in this way, on cultural artifacts, we may, without even knowing it, reinforce some assumptions that prevent us from co-creating the strong ways of communicating, relating and working together necessary to deal with the complex challenges we face. Some of these limiting assumptions emerged through the CCCP conversations and interactions.

Stereotyping - By focusing on Aboriginal cultural artifacts we can reinforce the idea that this is who all Aboriginal people are. They are dancers, songsters, storytellers, speakers of language, artists, family-oriented, connected to country etc. We confirm the notion, 'this is what all Aboriginal people do. It's what makes them all Aboriginal'. In this way we may come to stereotype Aboriginal people, see them as a homogenous identity group classified by these characteristics. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people may enact this form of stereotyping. By doing this we are defining Aboriginal group membership. At the same time we are also silently defining non-membership. The result is over-simplistic cultural binaries that can become the focus of our thinking and talking in Indigenous education. Such over-simplified binaries deny the complex tapestry of human identities in intercultural spaces, and may lead to perceptions of boundaries, separateness and cultural incompatibility. Such perceptions may work against the deeper communicating, understanding and relating required for trust and transformation in intercultural spaces. There were a significant number of instances during CCCP where this kind of binary stereotyping occurred. Here are two examples.

During day 2 of CCCP, following a whole group discussion, an Indigenous male participant made the observation that the first four speakers were all non-Indigenous. He then proceeded to explain that this occurred because non-Indigenous people like to talk and Indigenous people do less talking and more listening. Facilitators and participants alike actively accepted this belief, with further conversation reinforcing it and generalizing it to include all Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. No one questioned this position or offered an alternate explanation, of which there may have

been several. Interestingly the seven of the nine participants who didn't speak in the initial group conversation were Indigenous women. This went unnoticed. How much did gender as well as age, experience, position within the school and organization, existing relationships, personality and other factors also influence the pattern of conversation? This we'll never know as the analysis of initial group discussion closed with unanimous acceptance of this cultural binary about talking and listening. Here the problematic and over-simplistic assumption that all Indigenous people are good listeners and all non-Indigenous people talk too much, was affirmed.

On the first day of the second forum (day 5) participants were asked to reflect on their key learning from the previous forum. This was undertaken as individuals, and then in small groups. One group comprised two Indigenous women, experienced in Indigenous education from different remote communities and two non-Indigenous women, also both experienced teachers in Indigenous education. In their small group sharing the Indigenous women identified 'cultural' differences in the use of questioning as a key learning, a perception accepted by the two non-Indigenous women. Whilst there was some conversation about the complication of language translation with questioning, this difference was again broadly generalized to all Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The group later reported this back to the larger group as one of their shared key learnings.

> *In our culture we don't use much questions….. Sometimes it makes it hard for our people to understand them … putting up a question is like looking at my people when then have a little bit of English …. translate it …make it meaningful (Indigenous female).*

Both participants and facilitators accepted this perception with further examples provided to support this view. Later in the day one of the Indigenous women shared experiences and learnings from her workplace project with the whole group. Here she reported an animated and lengthy conversation amongst Indigenous community members during a school council meeting. When questioned about the topic of discussion she replied.

> *They are trying to find a good focus question for the community meeting.*

The problematic nature of the previously reinforced assumption about broadly generalisable cultural differences in questioning might have been identified and discussed here, but it wasn't. I cannot say for sure why neither facilitators nor participants picked this up. All I can offer is that 'underlying cultural assumptions' such as this one about cultural differences in questioning, operate out of our habitual awareness. They can strongly influence the small amount of information we collect with our senses, moment to moment, and the large amount we ignore. I am not suggesting here that there aren't cultural differences in the purpose, style and context of questioning. I am saying that this was not explored through these CCCP conversations. Rather a generalized assumption that non-Indigenous people use questioning a lot and Indigenous people do not was reinforced.

Aboriginal authenticity – These 'imagined' and stereotypical perceptions of Aboriginality can also lead us to make judgments about degrees of Aboriginality on a type of sliding scale. At one end, 'real' aborigines are 'full blood', still connected to

family, live on ancestral country, speak language, know and can perform and paint their dreamtime stories and songs. As each of these characteristics diminish so does one's degree of Aboriginality down the sliding scale. Such perceptions favour those Aboriginal people who have been least impacted by colonization. In so doing they may deny the humanity and identities of many Indigenous people of mixed heritage and / or who have been dispossessed of family and ancestry, language and country. These perceptions of degrees of Aboriginality may also deny us the benefits of the diversity of experiences, perceptions and learnings of all Aboriginal people.

Through self-analysis undertaken as part of this research, I became aware of some personal out-of-awareness assumptions operating during my time living and working in NT, including my work as the consultant facilitator of CCCP. These included the belief that 'culture' was central to identity for Indigenous people and that Indigenous people who still had first language, ancestral stories and who still occupied their ancestral lands had stronger or more 'real' Indigenous identities than those who did not. These assumptions became tools for judgment about who to listen to and ask question of, including whom to invite onto CCCP. Indeed six of the ten Indigenous participants invited onto CCCP were Yolgnu or Warlpiri, all being first language speakers, either living on or near their ancestral lands with regular visits to country. It is not surprising then that the majority of 'cultural' teachings offered through CCCP came from these six participants, and from two of their non-Indigenous male CCCP partners, both of whom were also language speakers though to varying degrees. All the Indigenous metaphors offered came from this group including Milpiri, Brackish Water, and the basket weaving metaphor (see Key Learning 5). This group also led the Brumby dance performance and the stolen generation re-enactment spoken entirely in Yolgnu Martha. It was also some of these participants who suggested and began dot painting to reinterpret sayings, provocations and perspectives offered through the project. Whilst other Indigenous participants did regularly offer their thoughts, feelings, perspectives and experiences throughout CCCP, they did not offer 'cultural' teachings or perspectives. Whilst these 'cultural' teaching - metaphors, performances and perspectives were extremely valuable to the experiences and learnings in CCCP, they were in another way exclusive. Here they may have worked to exclude or diminish the validity of the experiences and feelings of 'Aboriginality' of other Indigenous participants.

Trivializing or eulogizing aboriginal cultures and identities – These stereotyped constructions of Aboriginality and their associated cultural binaries can also lead to the view that Aboriginality and Aboriginal cultural perspectives are irrelevant in today's modern world; that they have little to offer. They are not sophisticated enough or technologically advanced enough to contribute anything of value to contemporary life. Here 'real aborigines' are easily positioned as 'primitive' and in need of 'bringing into the modern world'. This has been proposed as one of the central underlying assumptions of the NT intervention. There was no evidence of this assumption being invoked through any conversations in CCCP.

Similarly, but in an opposing manner, such stereotyped constructions can lead to the view that 'real Aborigines', those who live on their country with intact ancestry, language and dreaming have what the rest of us need, including other Indigenous people. This 'unique' group is given a position of privilege, being seen to hold superior knowledge and morality to the rest of us.

I have already provided a brief description of how Aboriginal 'cultural' teachings from a particular group of participants were provided a place of privilege in CCCP. There was also a clear pattern of interaction in CCCP where these perspectives were further enhanced by contrasting them with deficit views of 'whitefella' and organizational cultures.

Focusing cultural work on 'good relating'
In *Treading Lightly* Tex Scuthorpe reminds us that the purpose of cultural artifacts (e.g. stories) has always been to teach and affirm, to remind us, how we need to relate to self, others and country. In this way the question of '*who* Aboriginal people are' was focused on the deeper cultural purpose of '*how* Aboriginal people needed to be together, with others and with country.' Indeed Tex tells us that his old people believed whoever inhabited their lands were part of their community whether Aboriginal or not. Stories, paintings, ceremonies, walking on country, speaking language were all at the same time both an enactment of and teaching about good relating. Both these artifacts, and their enactment or reproduction contained knowledge and wisdom about how to be a good person, how to relate positively to self, others and country. In this way the deeper purpose of culture has always been to enact 'good relating'.

In CCCP we focused much of the early conversations and reflective work on building connectivity through good relating. This was about taking time to get to know ourselves, and each other at deeper levels.

> *CCCP focuses on relationships to self and relationship to others … ourselves and collectives at the same time. (Indigenous female)*

Participants were able to co-create strong reflective and conversational practices that led to the development of trust and conversational robustness.

> *The power and success of CCCP has been through the group dynamic that has developed. There's been a lot of high-stakes disclosure, and people getting deeply into themselves to bring our attributes that can seed change (Indigenous male)*

In this way CCCP participants co-created a culture of good relating that focused us on 'how' we needed to be together. This became a strong cultural foundation for considering some of the complex challenges participants faced in their workplaces.

> *CCCP has clarified that a lot of cross-cultural collaboration is about forming a strong relationship with that person you're working with or that group of people you're working with (non-Indigenous female)*

A variety of conversational tools were used to enable participants to co-create this 'culture of good relating.'

The circle was introduced and established early in CCCP as the primary site for conversation. Conversational circles are based upon the assumption that as human beings we all wish to connect to self and others in good ways, that is participate in good relating. In CCCP the circle was set up to enable group members to establish a space of

safety, where they could talk openly and without judgment about their feelings and thoughts.

> *The circle is a physical manifestation of safety. Early in our time we kept the circle tight. Now we can sit anywhere because of the trust. (non-Indigenous female)*

Over the first few days high-stakes disclosures and demonstrations of courage contributed to strong feelings of trust between group members and a sense of belonging. Through the rituals of checking-in and checking-out, whole and small group conversations, participants created a strong new set of habits of communicating, relating and sense-making. On two occasions, once in each of the second and third forums, I had planned for short check-ins at the start of the day due to my anxiety about outcomes and timelines. On both occasions the group over-rode me taking much longer to check-in, such had become the importance of beginning and closing the day in circle to affirm good relating.

Engoori is a three-phase conversational process for co-creating powerful responses to complex inter-cultural challenges. It was created, based upon a Mithaka, Tjimpa (black hawk) story from southwest Queensland. *Engoori* was introduced on day 3 of CCCP and used to focus participant on collectively responding to the question, 'how do we need to be together to be at our best?' Through *Engoori* CCCP participants collectively identified and committed to explicit behaviours to enact a robust culture of good relating and communicating.

As CCCP progressed, there was a quantifiable increase in the amount of humour and laughter in conversation and interactions. Laughter and humour contribute to positive group interactions and cultures in significant ways. In CCCP they served to reinforce a group culture that included levity, engagement and connectivity – good relating.

Key Learning 2 – Strength-based conversations and approaches

Much thinking and conversation in Indigenous education comes from a deficit perspective. A lot of funding in Indigenous education is based upon deficit data - data that shows how far behind Indigenous children are in their educational performance. In this way 'Closing the Gap' is a deficit agenda. This is not wrong. Indeed it may be necessary. Deficit perspectives may however perpetuate negative self-perceptions and a sense of powerlessness among Indigenous children and families. They may also reinforce this perception among school teachers, education and other government workers, reaffirming that we need to keep doing things 'to' or 'for' Indigenous people rather than 'with' them.

Strengths-based conversations are critical to affirming a positive sense of identity, power, agency and optimism.

The co-creation and enactment of the Brumby Dance by CCCP participants (day 4) offers one such example of the power of strength-based conversations and approaches. It worked to transform strong feelings of anger, resentment and bewilderment regarding the NT intervention into affirmations of cultural strength, agency and quite optimism for many Indigenous participants. Here, in response to strong emotional disclosures

initiated by an Indigenous male during the morning check-in, a Warlpiri participant pair offered a song created by Yapa in Lajamanu, in response to the NT intervention. The song tells of a wild brumby charging into camp creating chaos and frightening everyone. With courage and calmness the people catch, bridle and eventually ride and direct the brumby. They can steer it wherever they wish.

The men involved in CCCP were invited to co-create a dance to accompany the song. This was achieved with much laughter and humour and an emerging sense of cohesion and accomplishment. In a different place the women practiced singing the song and prepared the accompanying percussion and attire. We came together and performed the dance.

Following the performance and a lunch break, we reconvened our circle and opened a space to allow people to talk more about their feelings and perceptions of the NT intervention if they wished. No one did, though there was some laughter and finger pointing in jest with respect to our dance performance. When asked how he was doing, the Indigenous male who initiated the whole episode with his heartfelt check-in that morning simply said with a smile and nod, "*I'm okay now. It's alright. Thankyou."* I noted in my facilitator's journal that many around the circle non-verbally mirrored this sentiment.

Engoori has been introduced above. Phase 1 was undertaken on day 3 of CCCP. Here participants were asked to individually respond to the question 'What keeps me strong?' They were asked to draw a picture that told their story of strength. In small groups they then shared their stories and co-created a group story of strength that affirmed every individuals' strength. These were then shared with the whole group. A session that I had allocated one and a half hours, ran for over three having to be adjourned and continued the next morning, such was the engagement and enthusiasm.

One of the themes that emerged through these strengths-based conversations was the notion of 'family'. On reflecting upon their responses to the Phase 1 *Engoori* question 'what keeps me strong?' two participants offered:

> *It wasn't possible for me to think about me, without family. (Indigenous male)*
>
> *Yeah me too. I couldn't think of myself separate from my family, even before I was married (non-Indigenous male)*

This was a repeated theme as noted by another participant.

> *Yeah we all talked about family. Family's at the core. It's the heart. It's what keeps all of us strong (Indigenous male)*

Several Indigenous participants began referring to the CCCP participants as family.

> *I feel safe too… going back to my school and staff is a little bit difficult, … and I always think of this (group) as part of my family (Indigenous female)*

It was noted that many teachers get 'taken into family' when beginning to work on remote communities. Three Indigenous female participants also talked about how they see the children in their class as their children too.

> *I am their teacher … um … responsible for their learning and wellbeing. I also love and care for them as their mother…. I keep a mother eye open as well as a teacher eye … all the time.*

Enacting 'family' in teacher – student, and colleague relationships has been shown to enhance Indigenous student wellbeing, learning and performance. It offers one way of enacting a strengths-based approach that reinforces 'good relating'.

Key Learning 3 – Making it personal

As human beings we are largely habitual in nature. Our senses only pick up a small amount of the information available to us in each moment. These sensory perceptions are generally filtered by beliefs, values and stories (assumptions) that lie out of our awareness. These assumptions are built up through our lifetime. They arise through the interaction of preferences, drives and dispositions we carry into the world, with our experiences throughout our lives. Many people 'inherit' such sets of beliefs, values and stories through their family upbringing. Similarly, socialization into a profession through university study and professional practice is likely to embed additional sets of assumptions, as is membership of a sporting club or any other social group. Clearly then these beliefs, values and stories are contextual. In different situations and contexts, different assumptions are likely to be subconsciously activated. As a result we subconsciously search for and take in information that reinforces the particular assumptions 'at play' in a particular context. We then tend to think and make judgments about and respond to these perceptions in patterned ways that are also likely to be context dependent. It is in this sense that Gandhi made the statement, "We don't see the world as it is. We see it as we are."

In CCCP both these sets of assumptions (beliefs, value and stories) and the patterns of perceiving, thinking, feeling, judging and responding they invoked, were considered to make up both the culture (collective) and the cultural 'selves' (individuals) of a group.

An obvious and critical example of how this operates in Indigenous education is through deficit teacher talk. Deficit conversations about Indigenous children and families both come from and reinforce negative beliefs, values and stories about Indigenous children's ability to learn, their families and their external circumstances. The huge deficit data focus in Indigenous education serves to maintain these beliefs. Usually bound up in these conversations are judgments about levels of ability, wellbeing and care. In day to day interactions with Indigenous children and families, teachers who regularly participate in such conversations search, moment-to-moment, for evidence to reinforce these negative assumptions – without ever being fully aware of it. In addition, because of these reinforced assumptions and the associated 'low-expectations' of Indigenous children, such teachers often fail to invest much energy and effort into teaching and learning and 'good relating' with children or families. This deficit culture self-perpetuates.

Regular participation in deficit teacher talk keeps the 'finger of blame pointing outward' at Indigenous children, families and communities. Such patterned conversations and thinking saves teachers from having to look inward at their 'cultural selves', to challenge their own assumptions and practices. Yet this is what must happen to break the culture of deficit teacher talk. The group culture can only shift when one or more members become aware that this patterned way of seeing, thinking and interacting, this aspect of their 'cultural self' is disabling. When deficit perspectives and its associated 'low-expectations' teaching practices are challenged and overturned, positive transformation of expectations, relationships and learning outcomes become entirely and swiftly possible.

Through CCCP, in this way, participants were able to explore their cultural selves. Reflective tools were provided for them to identify particular personal patterns of perceiving, thinking, feeling, judging and behaving. This self-analysis was a dominant theme introduced early in CCCP.

> *The question I have been constantly challenged by in this program is what do I know about myself? (Indigenous female)*

Whilst there was no evidence of deficit assumptions of Indigenous children and families in CCCP conversations, most participants identified disabling aspects of their 'cultural selves' – personal habits that retarded their relationships and efforts.

> *This has challenged me personally to change some of my behaviours that I thought were normal. It's a work in progress … the ability to be challenged, accept it and move on. Being challenged has been a new but positive experience, has brought a lot out of me that I didn't think existed. (Indigenous male)*

Other disabling habits identified by participants included poor self-perception, fear of conflict, need for control and being the expert. All participants were able to shift these disabling habits in some way. Some participants felt that this personal transformative work enabled them to 'see' things differently;

> *The tools and processes provided in CCCP have given me a new perspective. I see the world in a different way now. (non-Indigenous female)*

….. suspend habitual responses and mend relationships;

> *I have been able to suspend my emotional response and judgement in a number of difficult situations. As a result I have been able to deal with these situations more calmly (non-Indigenous female).*

….. and create new positive habits.

> *The most significant change for me through CCCP is that I now challenge my own assumptions, challenging my reactions to certain situations. This allows me to choose different responses and decisions….. Through the CCCP projects things have come into my consciousness. It's allowed me to be a more relaxed leader. I can only ever change myself not others. I can now be the change I want to see. (Indigenous female)*

For many CCCP participants this introspective analysis of 'cultural selves' led to a shift in habits of relating to self and others. These small personal transformations enabled them to seed change through enhancing practices of 'good relating' and through facilitating conversations with work colleagues.

Effective listening was one of the key practices of focus taken up by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants.

> *I've been able to build stronger relationships through being a better listener … building more trust (non-Indigenous female)*
>
> *I've learnt a lot from listening to other peoples' journeys …. particularly through their stories. (Indigenous female)*
>
> *I can now understand other peoples' perspectives a lot better and am more aware of them. I am a more attentive listener now. It helps in everyday and work life (non-Indigenous male)*

Key Learning 4 – Changing the conversation

Changing personal or group beliefs and practices is best seeded when individuals within groups become aware of their disabling habits of seeing, thinking, judging and responding – when they become aware of their habitual patterns of thinking and talking that hold them and others back. If this is done gently in an environment of good relating, with trust and safety they are most likely to choose to do something about it. Changing the conversation offers a powerful way to enable this. This is not about changing 'what' groups of people are talking about, but about changing 'how' they are talking, changing the patterns of conversation.

There are many ways we can change or challenge patterns of thinking and talking within groups. One way is to change the physical layout for conversations. In CCCP all participant pairs chose to introduce the circle in their workplace projects. Most also introduced the conversational processes of checking-in and checking-out. All pairs noted a response to this. In some cases there was some initial resistance to changing this 'how' of conversation. An easing into this new conversational space, once this different way of being together had become familiar and safe most often followed. For one pair introducing the circle and checking-in and out completely transformed the ways that teachers and Indigenous assistant teachers interacted. They reported a significant shift in Indigenous assistant teachers' perceptions of power and relating between themselves and teachers. This led to much higher levels of Indigenous assistant teacher attendance, engagement and initiative in co-operative planning.

Many pairs also chose to use *Engoori* in their projects, all noting the high levels of engagement and positivity in these strength-based conversations. One CCCP pair initially asked their workplace colleagues to have a conversation about Indigenous student's learning at their school. Without intervening the CCCP pair noted that the pattern of conversation quickly moved to a deficit agenda. Without commenting on this they then introduced *Engoori* engaging the workplace participants in strength-based conversations about themselves. They noted the high level of engagement, laughter and emotionality in these conversations. Once this activity was completed they asked their workplace colleagues to think about the difference in this conversation and the

previous one they had about Indigenous student learning at their school. They reported that these differences were easily identified and acknowledged. The group then had a conversation about the impacts of deficit and strength-based conversations in Indigenous education. This simple conversational process gently enabled workplace participants to identify and own their disabling, habitual deficit talk, and experience an alternative, a positive strengths-based way of talking and thinking. The possibility of substantial transformation in 'seeing', thinking, judging and relating for this group of teachers was opened up.

Using powerful questions can also shift how people are talking and thinking. From the above example we can see that two questions about the same topic are may elicit very different patterns of talking and thinking. Think about the two questions below.

- *What's preventing Indigenous children in our school from learning as well as other children?*
- *What strengths do Indigenous children and families bring to this school?*

Deficit talking and thinking about Indigenous children and their learning will be immediately invoked by the first. Teachers regularly engaged in deficit talk will respond quickly to the first and may struggle with the second question. It will make them stop and think. It also offers the opportunity to recognize current deficit patterns of thinking and talking. Several CCCP pairs used powerful, open-ended questions in their workplace projects to elicit strengths-based conversations. For example, one pair used the following sequence of powerful questions with a group of teachers to seed enthusiasm, positivity, good relating and eventually, at the end of the two-hour session, group commitment to taking action.

- *What might a cross-culturally competent person look like?*
- *What behaviours and attitudes might they display?*
- *What might a cross-culturally proficient school look like?*
- *Where do you think we could go with this?*

Key Learning 5 – Metaphors, uncertainty and collective not-knowing

At various stages through CCCP, Indigenous participants introduced metaphors to highlight or provide ways of moving forward in the face of uncertainty and complexity. The Garma or brackish water and Milpiri metaphors were introduced on day 3 of the project, as Yolngu and Warlpiri ways of dealing with the tension, complexity and turbulence of two very different cultures coming together. They were offered as an expression of and encouragement for what we were attempting to enact together in our CCCP work. Whilst, if misunderstood, these two metaphors may reinforce over-simplistic cultural binaries they nevertheless highlight the opportunity available in these inter-cultural spaces of turbulence and complexity. If we can come to these spaces with courage, optimism, curiosity and good relating, whilst being relaxed about our 'not-knowing', we can co-create powerful ways of moving forward together.

The Brumby Dance event has already been briefly described. It's power in shifting participant perceptions and feelings from powerlessness and bewilderment to

optimism, solidarity and agency have been noted. The value of enacting the metaphor of family in teacher-student relationship has also been highlighted.

Each time a metaphor was introduced it was in response to either a particular challenge we were encountering in the CCCP group or one that participant pairs were encountering back in their workplaces. This is exemplified by the Brumby dance. They were not offered as abstract, esoteric wisdom but rather as pathways and guides for our shared, lived experiences and challenges. All metaphors we attempted to enact together, enhancing our solidarity, resilience and optimism. They also served to encourage our acceptance of not-knowing how best to respond to particular challenges, largely through also reinforcing the belief that together we could work it out.

Enacting these metaphors together also enabled us to better cope with the paradox and ambiguity that often accompanies intercultural relating and complex intercultural challenges. Another metaphor introduced by a Yolgnu participant was the 'basket weaving' metaphor. This metaphor highlighted the importance of both unity and difference, and indeed their interdependence. The basket is made of many strands of different characteristics – strengths, colours, materials and textures. Yet it is these differences and the unique way they are woven together that confers overall strength or unity. This metaphor assisted us to co-create a sense of solidarity and cohesion, whilst also exploring and utilising diversity among group members.

Key Learning 6 – The challenge of time

Strong cultures of good relating are necessary for any group of people facing complex intercultural challenges. The trust, care and safety enacted in such cultures enable group members to engage in challenging their patterns of seeing, thinking, talking an doing. This is often required for the transformations necessary for success to occur. Creating cultures of good relating and challenging assumptions and practices in ways that engage are time-intensive activities. This remains a critical challenge for schools at a time when 'quick-fix' solutions and performance agendas dominate.

As this work was core to the CCCP approach, adequate time was mostly allocated to these activities. Some tensions still arose about time to talk and relate, and outcomes and timelines. In their workplace projects, several participant pairs also encountered some level of resistance to enacting the circle and focusing group conversational tasks on quality of relating and communicating. This resistance was largely from school leadership, the general theme being that they wanted 'concrete results' from the project. One principal strongly advised the CCCP pair to 'get on with it'; saying as a principal she occupied a 'racy space'. This incident created tension and conflict. However as this was dealt with directly by the whole group, through conversational processes that affirmed 'good relating', it resulted in deeper understanding and commitment to the project work.

Providing school leadership with a strong and clear justification for the importance of allocating time to co-create strong cultures of good relating within their schools, is critical.

Appendix 2: CCCP Key Learnings Report: For NT DECS Personnel (NT DEET 2012)

CROSS-CULTURAL COLLABORATION PROJECT (CCCP)

KEY LEARNINGS REPORT

For NT DECS personnel

David Spillman
(Research undertaken towards Doctor of Cultural Research degree, UWS)

March 2013

Introduction: the purpose of this report
This report is for key personnel in NT DECS. The report presents some key research learnings from the Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project (CCCP) for your consideration. These Key Learnings and the conversations they stimulate may have implications for a number of NT DECS priorities, including the:

- Education NT School Review process
- Community Driven Schools process, and
- Cultures of Collaboration.

The report is designed as a stimulus for a sense-making conversation. Stimulus questions are provided below.

CCCP background
The Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project (CCCP) was undertaken in Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training (NT DEET) in 2008. CCCP was set up largely in response to the NT DEET Indigenous Leaders Network who in 2006 identified the need for professional learning approaches to:

- enhance the bi-cultural competence of NT DEET employees and
- establish deeper levels of trust within NT DEET workplaces and with local Indigenous people.

CCCP involved eleven Indigenous/ non-Indigenous participant pairs, all of whom worked in educational settings within NT DEET. Participants were invited together for a total of nine days, split into three forums over an eight-month period. Project aims included the:

- Co-creation of a group culture of trust, care and collaboration
- Enhancement of participants' cultural competence and their capacity to facilitate such enhancement within their workplaces
- Identification of frameworks, activities, processes, models and other resources to assist in facilitating the enhancement of cultural competence among workplace members, and transformations in workplace cultures towards cultures of care, trust and collaboration

CCCP participants completed evaluations of their learnings, experiences and workplace projects. These contributed significantly to the development of a professional learning resource and approach the *Cultures of Collaboration Program.* However, no formal evaluation of CCCP was undertaken.

Research Approach
About thirty hours of CCCP discussions, presentations and interviews were videoed. An opportunity therefore existed to go back and review these experiences for any additional learning. It is hoped this learning will enhance the implementation of the *Cultures of Collaboration Program* (CCP), and provide insights into creating positive and enabling intercultural learning spaces. David Spillman, the lead designer and facilitator of CCCP is undertaking this research as part of the Doctor of Cultural Research degree through the University of Western Sydney. It has full NT DECS and ethical approval.

This research process involves a thematic analysis of these videoed CCCP discussions, activities, presentations and interviews. A number of research lenses have been used to search for patterns of conversation and interacting among CCCP participants. These patterns mark sets of assumptions and habitual ways of thinking that may enable or disable individuals and groups. The research also draws upon participants lived experience of learning and transformation and their attempts to facilitate transformative conversations with workplace peers.

About the Key Learnings

These key learnings are not offered as facts or truths. Rather, they reflect patterns of conversation and interaction that occurred during CCCP when reviewed through particular research lenses. Had other research lenses been used different patterns of conversation and interaction may have been noticed. The value of these key learnings to NT DECS is dependent upon the extent to which we can 'read-out' from CCCP to the broader array of conversations and interactions occurring in intercultural education spaces and contexts.

How to respond to this report

Please read the Key Learnings that follow in this report. Reflect on these Key Learnings. The following questions may help with this reflection.

> *What are your personal feelings and responses to these Key Learnings? Do they invoke memories of incidents, stories or events from your past?*
>
> *What are your professional responses to these Key Learnings?*
>
> *To what extent and in what ways can these patterns of thinking, talking and responding be 'read-out', generalized to intercultural education contexts and spaces beyond the CCCP experience?*
>
> *What might be the implications for your life and work?*
>
> *How can you best progress these?*

You may also have questions about the Key Learnings that you wish to discuss. You can write responses, comments and questions, and email them to me OR make a time for me to ring you and talk it through.

Thanks David Spillman

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CCCP Research Key Learnings

Key Learning 1 – 'Good relating' as the deeper purpose of culture

'Culture' lies at the heart of most conversations about, and approaches to Indigenous education. The ways we think about, talk about and enact 'culture' in Indigenous education have a huge impact on the quality of our relationships and the levels of trust we create. If we can focus such conversations on the question of 'how we are', we can build connectivity and trust, and co-create effective ways of working together. A 'culture of good relating' can then become the foundation for co-creating success with complex intercultural challenges.

Often 'cultural' conversations in Indigenous education focus on artifacts of Aboriginal cultures, the most visible and tangible products and activities – stories, songs, dance, artwork, ceremonies, language, kinship and country connections. These artifacts only tell us a little bit about a culture. Here, 'who' Aboriginal people are can be interpreted through 'what' they do – they share 'dreamtime' stories, sing songs, perform dances, create art, speak languages, connect with family and country. This view may affirm a sense of Aboriginal identities based upon relatively superficial aspects of culture.

When we focus our conversations in this way, on cultural artifacts, we may, without even knowing it, reinforce some assumptions that prevent us from co-creating the strong ways of communicating, relating and working together necessary to deal with the complex challenges we face. Some of these limiting assumptions emerged through the CCCP conversations and interactions.

Stereotyping - By focusing on Aboriginal cultural artifacts we can reinforce the idea that this is who all Aboriginal people are. They are dancers, songsters, storytellers, speakers of language, artists, family-oriented, connected to country etc. We confirm the notion, 'this is what all Aboriginal people do. It's what makes them all Aboriginal'. In this way we may come to stereotype Aboriginal people, see them as a homogenous identity group classified by these characteristics. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people may enact this form of stereotyping. By doing this we are defining Aboriginal group membership. At the same time we are also silently defining non-membership. The result is over-simplistic cultural binaries that can become the focus of our thinking and talking in Indigenous education. Such over-simplified binaries deny the complex tapestry of human identities in intercultural spaces, and may lead to perceptions of boundaries, separateness and cultural incompatibility. Such perceptions may work against the deeper communicating, understanding and relating required for trust and transformation in intercultural spaces. There were a significant number of instances during CCCP where this kind of binary stereotyping occurred. Here are two examples.

During day 2 of CCCP, following a whole group discussion, an Indigenous male participant made the observation that the first four speakers were all non-Indigenous. He then proceeded to explain that this occurred because non-Indigenous people like to talk and Indigenous people do less talking and more listening. Facilitators and participants alike actively accepted this belief, with further conversation reinforcing it and generalizing it to include all Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. No one questioned this position or offered an alternate explanation, of which there may have

been several. Interestingly the seven of the nine participants who didn't speak in the initial group conversation were Indigenous women. This went unnoticed. How much did gender as well as age, experience, position within the school and organization, existing relationships, personality and other factors also influence the pattern of conversation? This we'll never know as the analysis of initial group discussion closed with unanimous acceptance of this cultural binary about talking and listening. Here the problematic and over-simplistic assumption that all Indigenous people are good listeners and all non-Indigenous people talk too much, was affirmed.

On the first day of the second forum (day 5) participants were asked to reflect on their key learning from the previous forum. This was undertaken as individuals, and then in small groups. One group comprised two Indigenous women, experienced in Indigenous education from different remote communities and two non-Indigenous women, also both experienced teachers in Indigenous education. In their small group sharing the Indigenous women identified 'cultural' differences in the use of questioning as a key learning, a perception accepted by the two non-Indigenous women. Whilst there was some conversation about the complication of language translation with questioning, this difference was again broadly generalized to all Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The group later reported this back to the larger group as one of their shared key learnings.

> *In our culture we don't use much questions….. Sometimes it makes it hard for our people to understand them … putting up a question is like looking at my people when then have a little bit of English …. translate it …make it meaningful (Indigenous female).*

Both participants and facilitators accepted this perception with further examples provided to support this view. Later in the day one of the Indigenous women shared experiences and learnings from her workplace project with the whole group. Here she reported an animated and lengthy conversation amongst Indigenous community members during a school council meeting. When questioned about the topic of discussion she replied.

> *They are trying to find a good focus question for the community meeting.*

The problematic nature of the previously reinforced assumption about broadly generalisable cultural differences in questioning might have been identified and discussed here, but it wasn't. I cannot say for sure why neither facilitators nor participants picked this up. All I can offer is that 'underlying cultural assumptions' such as this one about cultural differences in questioning, operate out of our habitual awareness. They can strongly influence the small amount of information we collect with our senses, moment to moment, and the large amount we ignore. I am not suggesting here that there aren't cultural differences in the purpose, style and context of questioning. I am saying that this was not explored through these CCCP conversations. Rather a generalized assumption that non-Indigenous people use questioning a lot and Indigenous people do not was reinforced.

Aboriginal authenticity – These 'imagined' and stereotypical perceptions of Aboriginality can also lead us to make judgments about degrees of Aboriginality on a type of sliding scale. At one end, 'real' aborigines are 'full blood', still connected to

family, live on ancestral country, speak language, know and can perform and paint their dreamtime stories and songs. As each of these characteristics diminish so does one's degree of Aboriginality down the sliding scale. Such perceptions favour those Aboriginal people who have been least impacted by colonization. In so doing they may deny the humanity and identities of many Indigenous people of mixed heritage and / or who have been dispossessed of family and ancestry, language and country. These perceptions of degrees of Aboriginality may also deny us the benefits of the diversity of experiences, perceptions and learnings of all Aboriginal people.

Through self-analysis undertaken as part of this research, I became aware of some personal out-of-awareness assumptions operating during my time living and working in NT, including my work as the consultant facilitator of CCCP. These included the belief that 'culture' was central to identity for Indigenous people and that Indigenous people who still had first language, ancestral stories and who still occupied their ancestral lands had stronger or more 'real' Indigenous identities than those who did not. These assumptions became tools for judgment about who to listen to and ask question of, including whom to invite onto CCCP. Indeed six of the ten Indigenous participants invited onto CCCP were Yolgnu or Warlpiri, all being first language speakers, either living on or near their ancestral lands with regular visits to country. It is not surprising then that the majority of 'cultural' teachings offered through CCCP came from these six participants, and from two of their non-Indigenous male CCCP partners, both of whom were also language speakers though to varying degrees. All the Indigenous metaphors offered came from this group including Milpiri, Brackish Water, and the basket weaving metaphor (see Key Learning 5). This group also led the Brumby dance performance and the stolen generation re-enactment spoken entirely in Yolgnu Martha. It was also some of these participants who suggested and began dot painting to reinterpret sayings, provocations and perspectives offered through the project. Whilst other Indigenous participants did regularly offer their thoughts, feelings, perspectives and experiences throughout CCCP, they did not offer 'cultural' teachings or perspectives. Whilst these 'cultural' teaching - metaphors, performances and perspectives were extremely valuable to the experiences and learnings in CCCP, they were in another way exclusive. Here they may have worked to exclude or diminish the validity of the experiences and feelings of 'Aboriginality' of other Indigenous participants.

Trivializing or eulogizing aboriginal cultures and identities – These stereotyped constructions of Aboriginality and their associated cultural binaries can also lead to the view that Aboriginality and Aboriginal cultural perspectives are irrelevant in today's modern world; that they have little to offer. They are not sophisticated enough or technologically advanced enough to contribute anything of value to contemporary life. Here 'real aborigines' are easily positioned as 'primitive' and in need of 'bringing into the modern world'. This has been proposed as one of the central underlying assumptions of the NT intervention. There was no evidence of this assumption being invoked through any conversations in CCCP.

Similarly, but in an opposing manner, such stereotyped constructions can lead to the view that 'real Aborigines', those who live on their country with intact ancestry, language and dreaming have what the rest of us need, including other Indigenous people. This 'unique' group is given a position of privilege, being seen to hold superior knowledge and morality to the rest of us.

I have already provided a brief description of how Aboriginal 'cultural' teachings from a particular group of participants were provided a place of privilege in CCCP. There was also a clear pattern of interaction in CCCP where these perspectives were further enhanced by contrasting them with deficit views of 'whitefella' and organizational cultures.

Focusing cultural work on 'good relating'
In *Treading Lightly* Tex Scuthorpe reminds us that the purpose of cultural artifacts (e.g. stories) has always been to teach and affirm, to remind us, how we need to relate to self, others and country. In this way the question of '*who* Aboriginal people are' was focused on the deeper cultural purpose of '*how* Aboriginal people needed to be together, with others and with country.' Indeed Tex tells us that his old people believed whoever inhabited their lands were part of their community whether Aboriginal or not. Stories, paintings, ceremonies, walking on country, speaking language were all at the same time both an enactment of and teaching about good relating. Both these artifacts, and their enactment or reproduction contained knowledge and wisdom about how to be a good person, how to relate positively to self, others and country. In this way the deeper purpose of culture has always been to enact 'good relating'.

In CCCP we focused much of the early conversations and reflective work on building connectivity through good relating. This was about taking time to get to know ourselves, and each other at deeper levels.

> *CCCP focuses on relationships to self and relationship to others … ourselves and collectives at the same time. (Indigenous female)*

Participants were able to co-create strong reflective and conversational practices that led to the development of trust and conversational robustness.

> *The power and success of CCCP has been through the group dynamic that has developed. There's been a lot of high-stakes disclosure, and people getting deeply into themselves to bring our attributes that can seed change (Indigenous male)*

In this way CCCP participants co-created a culture of good relating that focused us on 'how' we needed to be together. This became a strong cultural foundation for considering some of the complex challenges participants faced in their workplaces.

> *CCCP has clarified that a lot of cross-cultural collaboration is about forming a strong relationship with that person you're working with or that group of people you're working with (non-Indigenous female)*

A variety of conversational tools were used to enable participants to co-create this 'culture of good relating.'

The circle was introduced and established early in CCCP as the primary site for conversation. Conversational circles are based upon the assumption that as human beings we all wish to connect to self and others in good ways, that is participate in good relating. In CCCP the circle was set up to enable group members to establish a space of

safety, where they could talk openly and without judgment about their feelings and thoughts.

> *The circle is a physical manifestation of safety. Early in our time we kept the circle tight. Now we can sit anywhere because of the trust. (non-Indigenous female)*

Over the first few days high-stakes disclosures and demonstrations of courage contributed to strong feelings of trust between group members and a sense of belonging. Through the rituals of checking-in and checking-out, whole and small group conversations, participants created a strong new set of habits of communicating, relating and sense-making. On two occasions, once in each of the second and third forums, I had planned for short check-ins at the start of the day due to my anxiety about outcomes and timelines. On both occasions the group over-rode me taking much longer to check-in, such had become the importance of beginning and closing the day in circle to affirm good relating.

Engoori is a three-phase conversational process for co-creating powerful responses to complex inter-cultural challenges. It was created, based upon a Mithaka, Tjimpa (black hawk) story from southwest Queensland. *Engoori* was introduced on day 3 of CCCP and used to focus participant on collectively responding to the question, 'how do we need to be together to be at our best?' Through *Engoori* CCCP participants collectively identified and committed to explicit behaviours to enact a robust culture of good relating and communicating.

As CCCP progressed, there was a quantifiable increase in the amount of humour and laughter in conversation and interactions. Laughter and humour contribute to positive group interactions and cultures in significant ways. In CCCP they served to reinforce a group culture that included levity, engagement and connectivity – good relating.

Key Learning 2 – Strength-based conversations and approaches

Much thinking and conversation in Indigenous education comes from a deficit perspective. A lot of funding in Indigenous education is based upon deficit data - data that shows how far behind Indigenous children are in their educational performance. In this way 'Closing the Gap' is a deficit agenda. This is not wrong. Indeed it may be necessary. Deficit perspectives may however perpetuate negative self-perceptions and a sense of powerlessness among Indigenous children and families. They may also reinforce this perception among school teachers, education and other government workers, reaffirming that we need to keep doing things 'to' or 'for' Indigenous people rather than 'with' them.

Strengths-based conversations are critical to affirming a positive sense of identity, power, agency and optimism.

The co-creation and enactment of the Brumby Dance by CCCP participants (day 4) offers one such example of the power of strength-based conversations and approaches. It worked to transform strong feelings of anger, resentment and bewilderment regarding the NT intervention into affirmations of cultural strength, agency and quite optimism for many Indigenous participants. Here, in response to strong emotional disclosures

initiated by an Indigenous male during the morning check-in, a Warlpiri participant pair offered a song created by Yapa in Lajamanu, in response to the NT intervention. The song tells of a wild brumby charging into camp creating chaos and frightening everyone. With courage and calmness the people catch, bridle and eventually ride and direct the brumby. They can steer it wherever they wish.

The men involved in CCCP were invited to co-create a dance to accompany the song. This was achieved with much laughter and humour and an emerging sense of cohesion and accomplishment. In a different place the women practiced singing the song and prepared the accompanying percussion and attire. We came together and performed the dance.

Following the performance and a lunch break, we reconvened our circle and opened a space to allow people to talk more about their feelings and perceptions of the NT intervention if they wished. No one did, though there was some laughter and finger pointing in jest with respect to our dance performance. When asked how he was doing, the Indigenous male who initiated the whole episode with his heartfelt check-in that morning simply said with a smile and nod, "*I'm okay now. It's alright. Thankyou."* I noted in my facilitator's journal that many around the circle non-verbally mirrored this sentiment.

Engoori has been introduced above. Phase 1 was undertaken on day 3 of CCCP. Here participants were asked to individually respond to the question 'What keeps me strong?' They were asked to draw a picture that told their story of strength. In small groups they then shared their stories and co-created a group story of strength that affirmed every individuals' strength. These were then shared with the whole group. A session that I had allocated one and a half hours, ran for over three having to be adjourned and continued the next morning, such was the engagement and enthusiasm.

One of the themes that emerged through these strengths-based conversations was the notion of 'family'. On reflecting upon their responses to the Phase 1 *Engoori* question 'what keeps me strong?' two participants offered:

> *It wasn't possible for me to think about me, without family. (Indigenous male)*
>
> *Yeah me too. I couldn't think of myself separate from my family, even before I was married (non-Indigenous male)*

This was a repeated theme as noted by another participant.

> *Yeah we all talked about family. Family's at the core. It's the heart. It's what keeps all of us strong (Indigenous male)*

Several Indigenous participants began referring to the CCCP participants as family.

> *I feel safe too… going back to my school and staff is a little bit difficult, … and I always think of this (group) as part of my family (Indigenous female)*

It was noted that many teachers get 'taken into family' when beginning to work on remote communities. Three Indigenous female participants also talked about how they see the children in their class as their children too.

> *I am their teacher … um … responsible for their learning and wellbeing. I also love and care for them as their mother…. I keep a mother eye open as well as a teacher eye … all the time.*

Enacting 'family' in teacher – student, and colleague relationships has been shown to enhance Indigenous student wellbeing, learning and performance. It offers one way of enacting a strengths-based approach that reinforces 'good relating'.

Key Learning 3 – Making it personal

As human beings we are largely habitual in nature. Our senses only pick up a small amount of the information available to us in each moment. These sensory perceptions are generally filtered by beliefs, values and stories (assumptions) that lie out of our awareness. These assumptions are built up through our lifetime. They arise through the interaction of preferences, drives and dispositions we carry into the world, with our experiences throughout our lives. Many people 'inherit' such sets of beliefs, values and stories through their family upbringing. Similarly, socialization into a profession through university study and professional practice is likely to embed additional sets of assumptions, as is membership of a sporting club or any other social group. Clearly then these beliefs, values and stories are contextual. In different situations and contexts, different assumptions are likely to be subconsciously activated. As a result we subconsciously search for and take in information that reinforces the particular assumptions 'at play' in a particular context. We then tend to think and make judgments about and respond to these perceptions in patterned ways that are also likely to be context dependent. It is in this sense that Gandhi made the statement, "We don't see the world as it is. We see it as we are."

In CCCP both these sets of assumptions (beliefs, value and stories) and the patterns of perceiving, thinking, feeling, judging and responding they invoked, were considered to make up both the culture (collective) and the cultural 'selves' (individuals) of a group.

An obvious and critical example of how this operates in Indigenous education is through deficit teacher talk. Deficit conversations about Indigenous children and families both come from and reinforce negative beliefs, values and stories about Indigenous children's ability to learn, their families and their external circumstances. The huge deficit data focus in Indigenous education serves to maintain these beliefs. Usually bound up in these conversations are judgments about levels of ability, wellbeing and care. In day to day interactions with Indigenous children and families, teachers who regularly participate in such conversations search, moment-to-moment, for evidence to reinforce these negative assumptions – without ever being fully aware of it. In addition, because of these reinforced assumptions and the associated 'low-expectations' of Indigenous children, such teachers often fail to invest much energy and effort into teaching and learning and 'good relating' with children or families. This deficit culture self-perpetuates.

Regular participation in deficit teacher talk keeps the 'finger of blame pointing outward' at Indigenous children, families and communities. Such patterned conversations and thinking saves teachers from having to look inward at their 'cultural selves', to challenge their own assumptions and practices. Yet this is what must happen to break the culture of deficit teacher talk. The group culture can only shift when one or more members become aware that this patterned way of seeing, thinking and interacting, this aspect of their 'cultural self' is disabling. When deficit perspectives and its associated 'low-expectations' teaching practices are challenged and overturned, positive transformation of expectations, relationships and learning outcomes become entirely and swiftly possible.

Through CCCP, in this way, participants were able to explore their cultural selves. Reflective tools were provided for them to identify particular personal patterns of perceiving, thinking, feeling, judging and behaving. This self-analysis was a dominant theme introduced early in CCCP.

> *The question I have been constantly challenged by in this program is what do I know about myself? (Indigenous female)*

Whilst there was no evidence of deficit assumptions of Indigenous children and families in CCCP conversations, most participants identified disabling aspects of their 'cultural selves' – personal habits that retarded their relationships and efforts.

> *This has challenged me personally to change some of my behaviours that I thought were normal. It's a work in progress … the ability to be challenged, accept it and move on. Being challenged has been a new but positive experience, has brought a lot out of me that I didn't think existed. (Indigenous male)*

Other disabling habits identified by participants included poor self-perception, fear of conflict, need for control and being the expert. All participants were able to shift these disabling habits in some way. Some participants felt that this personal transformative work enabled them to 'see' things differently;

> *The tools and processes provided in CCCP have given me a new perspective. I see the world in a different way now. (non-Indigenous female)*

….. suspend habitual responses and mend relationships;

> *I have been able to suspend my emotional response and judgement in a number of difficult situations. As a result I have been able to deal with these situations more calmly (non-Indigenous female).*

….. and create new positive habits.

> *The most significant change for me through CCCP is that I now challenge my own assumptions, challenging my reactions to certain situations. This allows me to choose different responses and decisions….. Through the CCCP projects things have come into my consciousness. It's allowed me to be a more relaxed leader. I can only ever change myself not others. I can now be the change I want to see. (Indigenous female)*

For many CCCP participants this introspective analysis of 'cultural selves' led to a shift in habits of relating to self and others. These small personal transformations enabled them to seed change through enhancing practices of 'good relating' and through facilitating conversations with work colleagues.

Effective listening was one of the key practices of focus taken up by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants.

> *I've been able to build stronger relationships through being a better listener … building more trust (non-Indigenous female)*
>
> *I've learnt a lot from listening to other peoples' journeys …. particularly through their stories. (Indigenous female)*
>
> *I can now understand other peoples' perspectives a lot better and am more aware of them. I am a more attentive listener now. It helps in everyday and work life (non-Indigenous male)*

Key Learning 4 – Changing the conversation

Changing personal or group beliefs and practices is best seeded when individuals within groups become aware of their disabling habits of seeing, thinking, judging and responding – when they become aware of their habitual patterns of thinking and talking that hold them and others back. If this is done gently in an environment of good relating, with trust and safety they are most likely to choose to do something about it. Changing the conversation offers a powerful way to enable this. This is not about changing 'what' groups of people are talking about, but about changing 'how' they are talking, changing the patterns of conversation.

There are many ways we can change or challenge patterns of thinking and talking within groups. One way is to change the physical layout for conversations. In CCCP all participant pairs chose to introduce the circle in their workplace projects. Most also introduced the conversational processes of checking-in and checking-out. All pairs noted a response to this. In some cases there was some initial resistance to changing this 'how' of conversation. An easing into this new conversational space, once this different way of being together had become familiar and safe most often followed. For one pair introducing the circle and checking-in and out completely transformed the ways that teachers and Indigenous assistant teachers interacted. They reported a significant shift in Indigenous assistant teachers' perceptions of power and relating between themselves and teachers. This led to much higher levels of Indigenous assistant teacher attendance, engagement and initiative in co-operative planning.

Many pairs also chose to use *Engoori* in their projects, all noting the high levels of engagement and positivity in these strength-based conversations. One CCCP pair initially asked their workplace colleagues to have a conversation about Indigenous student's learning at their school. Without intervening the CCCP pair noted that the pattern of conversation quickly moved to a deficit agenda. Without commenting on this they then introduced *Engoori* engaging the workplace participants in strength-based conversations about themselves. They noted the high level of engagement, laughter and emotionality in these conversations. Once this activity was completed they asked their workplace colleagues to think about the difference in this conversation and the

previous one they had about Indigenous student learning at their school. They reported that these differences were easily identified and acknowledged. The group then had a conversation about the impacts of deficit and strength-based conversations in Indigenous education. This simple conversational process gently enabled workplace participants to identify and own their disabling, habitual deficit talk, and experience an alternative, a positive strengths-based way of talking and thinking. The possibility of substantial transformation in 'seeing', thinking, judging and relating for this group of teachers was opened up.

Using powerful questions can also shift how people are talking and thinking. From the above example we can see that two questions about the same topic are may elicit very different patterns of talking and thinking. Think about the two questions below.

- *What's preventing Indigenous children in our school from learning as well as other children?*
- *What strengths do Indigenous children and families bring to this school?*

Deficit talking and thinking about Indigenous children and their learning will be immediately invoked by the first. Teachers regularly engaged in deficit talk will respond quickly to the first and may struggle with the second question. It will make them stop and think. It also offers the opportunity to recognize current deficit patterns of thinking and talking. Several CCCP pairs used powerful, open-ended questions in their workplace projects to elicit strengths-based conversations. For example, one pair used the following sequence of powerful questions with a group of teachers to seed enthusiasm, positivity, good relating and eventually, at the end of the two-hour session, group commitment to taking action.

- *What might a cross-culturally competent person look like?*
- *What behaviours and attitudes might they display?*
- *What might a cross-culturally proficient school look like?*
- *Where do you think we could go with this?*

Key Learning 5 – Metaphors, uncertainty and collective not-knowing

At various stages through CCCP, Indigenous participants introduced metaphors to highlight or provide ways of moving forward in the face of uncertainty and complexity. The Garma or brackish water and Milpiri metaphors were introduced on day 3 of the project, as Yolngu and Warlpiri ways of dealing with the tension, complexity and turbulence of two very different cultures coming together. They were offered as an expression of and encouragement for what we were attempting to enact together in our CCCP work. Whilst, if misunderstood, these two metaphors may reinforce over-simplistic cultural binaries they nevertheless highlight the opportunity available in these inter-cultural spaces of turbulence and complexity. If we can come to these spaces with courage, optimism, curiosity and good relating, whilst being relaxed about our 'not-knowing', we can co-create powerful ways of moving forward together.

The Brumby Dance event has already been briefly described. It's power in shifting participant perceptions and feelings from powerlessness and bewilderment to

optimism, solidarity and agency have been noted. The value of enacting the metaphor of family in teacher-student relationship has also been highlighted.

Each time a metaphor was introduced it was in response to either a particular challenge we were encountering in the CCCP group or one that participant pairs were encountering back in their workplaces. This is exemplified by the Brumby dance. They were not offered as abstract, esoteric wisdom but rather as pathways and guides for our shared, lived experiences and challenges. All metaphors we attempted to enact together, enhancing our solidarity, resilience and optimism. They also served to encourage our acceptance of not-knowing how best to respond to particular challenges, largely through also reinforcing the belief that together we could work it out.

Enacting these metaphors together also enabled us to better cope with the paradox and ambiguity that often accompanies intercultural relating and complex intercultural challenges. Another metaphor introduced by a Yolgnu participant was the 'basket weaving' metaphor. This metaphor highlighted the importance of both unity and difference, and indeed their interdependence. The basket is made of many strands of different characteristics – strengths, colours, materials and textures. Yet it is these differences and the unique way they are woven together that confers overall strength or unity. This metaphor assisted us to co-create a sense of solidarity and cohesion, whilst also exploring and utilising diversity among group members.

Key Learning 6 – The challenge of time

Strong cultures of good relating are necessary for any group of people facing complex intercultural challenges. The trust, care and safety enacted in such cultures enable group members to engage in challenging their patterns of seeing, thinking, talking an doing. This is often required for the transformations necessary for success to occur. Creating cultures of good relating and challenging assumptions and practices in ways that engage are time-intensive activities. This remains a critical challenge for schools at a time when 'quick-fix' solutions and performance agendas dominate.

As this work was core to the CCCP approach, adequate time was mostly allocated to these activities. Some tensions still arose about time to talk and relate, and outcomes and timelines. In their workplace projects, several participant pairs also encountered some level of resistance to enacting the circle and focusing group conversational tasks on quality of relating and communicating. This resistance was largely from school leadership, the general theme being that they wanted 'concrete results' from the project. One principal strongly advised the CCCP pair to 'get on with it'; saying as a principal she occupied a 'racy space'. This incident created tension and conflict. However as this was dealt with directly by the whole group, through conversational processes that affirmed 'good relating', it resulted in deeper understanding and commitment to the project work.

Providing school leadership with a strong and clear justification for the importance of allocating time to co-create strong cultures of good relating within their schools, is critical.

Appendix 3a: Conference Abstract: Buunji 2003

(A) PROPOSAL

WORKSHOP TITLE 100 characters max	'How' are we together?' Focusing 'cultural work' in Indigenous education on practices and capabilities of 'good relating' through strengths-based conversations and approaches.
ABSTRACT Please provide a concise and focused summary of your presentation. The detail submitted here will be used for publication in the program should you be accepted to present. 250 words max	The problematic nature of 'Aboriginal identity and authenticity' both from Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives has been well documented. (Gorringe et al 2011, Kickett-Tucker 2009, Moore 2008, Paradies 2006, Cowlishaw 2006). The ambivalent positioning and stigma of 'white anti-racists' working with Aboriginal people through the self-determination agenda has also been highlighted (Kowal 2010). Like McConaghy (2000) we accept that these variously held representations of 'Aboriginality' and self-perceptions among Indigenous and non-Indigenous people working in Indigenous education can lead to limiting or disabling patterns of perceiving, judging, thinking, talking and behaving. Interactions based upon such patterns often lead to blame, anger, argument and conflict. Indeed, the relational spaces of Indigenous education are complex spaces to navigate, particularly when notions of 'Aboriginal identity and authenticity ' are central considerations (McConaghy 2000, Gorringe and Spillman 2008). Using a Mithaka conversational process called *Engoori,* we focus initial conversations in the intercultural spaces of Indigenous education on the questions of 'What keeps me/ us strong? and 'How do we need to be together to be the best we can be, individually and collectively? (Gorringe and Spillman 2011). This focus builds connectivity, empathy, resilience and trust – a culture of 'good relating'. On such a platform productive conversations around challenging political issues such as 'Aboriginal identity and authenticity' become possible, if people still feel the need to go there. Through this work people rediscover a strong sense of 'who they are', 'how they belong' and 'how they can best work together' in the complex relational spaces of Indigenous education.
FIRST PRESENTER'S BIOGRAPHY Please note the detail submitted here will be used for publication in the program should you be accepted to present a workshop. 150 words max	David Spillman is the lead facilitator for MurriMatters Consulting, an Aboriginal owned and run business. Along with Scott Gorringe, the Director of MurriMatters Consulting, David has co-facilitated the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program since 2008. They also undertake work with Aboriginal organisations in governance and leadership, and with partner organizations such as NAPCAN, the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect. David's passion is adult learning, working with adults to explore the array of strengths, talents, capabilities, habits and assumptions they carry with them, and the ways these may enable and/or limit their learning and contributions. David is also passionate about fun and music. He has a teaching background and spent most of the time between 1995 and 2005 working and learning in teaching and leadership positions in remote community schools in NT. He is currently studying for the Doctor of Cultural Research degree through UWS.
SECOND & SUBSEQUENT CO-PRESENTER/S BIOGRAPHY/IES	Scott is a Mithaka man from far western Queensland. Scott's passion is to see the conversation of deficit in and around anything Aboriginal shift to conversations of strength. His paper (Gorringe et al 2011: 'Will the real Aborigine please stand up') provokes deeper conversations and thinking to navigate through ways of perceiving and thinking about 'Aboriginality'.

Please note the detail submitted here will be used for publication in the program should you be accepted to present. 150 words max	Scott is Director of Murrimatters Consulting, and is co-designer and facilitator of the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program. Scott's approach is founded on the belief, that all groups of people bring a collective knowledge and strong value based ethics, and that this will always provide a solid foundation from which to build something powerful on. He is passionate about bringing people together around approaches to complex challenges. He believes the challenge is to reconnect with self, others and environment. He has a Masters and has studied in Canada. This National and International experiences broadened Scott's knowledge and understanding of other Indigenous societies which places him at the forefront of articulating Aboriginal futures.
INTERACTIVE ACTIVITIES YOU PLAN TO USE 150 words max	1. Circle conversations – checking in / out, sharing perspectives and stories, collective-sense-making conversations 2. Engoori – a Mithaka three phase, strengths-based conversational process 3. Personal critical reflection around powerful questions and assumptions
PROPOSED SESSION	1. Describe your proposed session Using *Engoori* we will begin this session by engaging participants in small group conversations about the strengths and expectations they have brought with them. We will then offer as particularly useful in Indigenous education contexts a behavioural view of 'culture', one that focuses initial conversations on the question of 'how we are' rather than 'who we are'. Using this view of culture we will engage participants in conversational and reflective experiences to better understand themselves as unique, cultural and habitual beings. Small group sense-making conversations will follow about how our habits of perceiving, thinking, judging, responding and behaving can enable and/or limit our relational effectiveness, particularly in Indigenous education contexts. Finally some research data demonstrating challenges around notions of 'Aboriginal identity and authenticity' will be presented, including an overview of the necessary reflective, relational and collaborative capabilities and practices required to co-create success in Indigenous education contexts. Participants will be left with some powerful questions about how these perspectives play out in their lives and work. 2. Is your session evidence based? Based upon a combination of: • Research being undertaken by David Spillman for Doctor of Cultural Research degree through UWS (including literature reviews). Thesis title: *Exploring transformative opportunities in the intercultural spaces of Indigenous education* • Research undertaken through AITSIS (Gorringe et al 2011) • Our shared experiences facilitating SSLP and Engoori processes
PROPOSED OUTCOMES OF SESSION 100 words max	Through a strength-based approach we aim to create a safe conversational space for participants to critically consider, reflect upon and discuss the challenges of working together effectively in Indigenous education contexts, including the challenge of how to create safe spaces to talk about 'Aboriginal identity and authenticity'.
HAVE YOU PRESENTED BEFORE? IF SO PROVIDE DETAIL	Our day-to-day work is in facilitating challenging conversations, largely with school and education leadership, teachers, parents and carers and interagency representatives. Our last conference presentation was at the World Indigenous Peoples Conference held in Melbourne in 2008. There we presented a paper titled: *Creating Stronger Smarter Learning Communities: The role of*

	Culturally Competent Leadership
MAXIMUM NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS IF APPLICABLE	Must be enough room for participants to sit in small circles of 5-6 people with no tables. Once the requirement is met the total number is unlimited.
ADDITIONAL AV REQUIREMENTS? Data projector and screen will be provided. A laptop can be provided if required however it is recommended that you bring and present on your own laptop.	Audio with the data projector, white board,
OTHER REQUIREMENTS Incl DIETARY/MOBILITY	

(B) MAIN PRESENTER'S DETAILS

FAMILY NAME	Spillman		**TITLE (MR, MS, DR ETC)**	Mr
GIVEN NAME	David			
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(C) CO-PRESENTER'S DETAILS

FAMILY NAME	Gorringe	**TITLE (MR, MS, DR ETC)**	Mr

GIVEN NAME	Scott		
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POSITION	Director		
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Appendix 3b: Conference Abstract: National Outdoor Educators Conference, 2016

National Outdoor Educators Conference (NOEC)
Sunshine Coast University
April 2016

Lore, Law the Land and Us – Considering power and positionality in relation to country

This practitioner's workshop will work to explore different assumptions regarding the relationship between land (variously known as 'country', 'the environment', 'Mother Earth'), human beings and all living things. The implications and impact of such assumptions on teaching and learning in educational settings will also be formatively considered. To enact this challenge, this workshop of conversations will draw upon the perspectives of two of NSW's most senior Aboriginal Lore men, Uncle Paul Callaghan (Worimi) and Uncle Paul Gordon (Ngemba) (Callaghan, 2014), and the research findings from the Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project (CCCP) undertaken in the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training in 2008 (Spillman 2013).

Participants will be introduced to and reflect upon a number of Indigenous conversational processes and perspectives, central to traditional Aboriginal life, to highlight a set of assumptions different to those of dominant western perspectives. The six L's will be introduced – Lore, Love, Look, Listen, Learn, Lead, which 'demonstrate the relevance of the wisdom of the Old People in our modern world' (Callaghan, 2014, p. 15). Focusing on Lore, conversational circles and strengths-based conversations such as Engoori (MurriMatters 2014) will be introduced and considered in terms of their underlying assumptions regarding power and positionality in relation to country, human beings and all living things.

References

Callaghan, P. (2014). *Iridescence: Finding Your Colours and Living Your Story*. MoshPit Publishing, Hazelwood, NSW.

Murrimatters. (2012). *ENGOORI: A strength based approach to complex intercultural challenges*. DVD, copyright MurriMatters Pty Ltd, Canberra.

Spillman, D. (2013). *Exploring transformative opportunities in the intercultural spaces of Indigenous education.* Unpublished Interim Research Report to Chief Executive of Northern Territory Department of Education and Community Services, Darwin.

Appendix 3b: Conference Abstract: Earth Ethics, 2017

Positioning ourselves in relation to Mother Earth: Aboriginal lore as a reflective lens

Proposal for Earth Ethics Conference

David Spillman

Conference Focus Area Relevant to this Proposal:

Perspectives and approaches from First Nations Peoples

Type of Participation Proposed:

Discussion group

Abstract

In recognition of the current ecological and social challenges we are facing, this session offers participants a number of experiences that utilise Indigenous perspectives to explore the ways we position ourselves in relation to Mother Earth and all that dwell on her. The six L's of Uncle Paul Gordon, a Ngemba loreman (Brewarrina area, NSW) will be introduced along with a Warlpiri perspective *ngurra-kurlu* (central Northern Territory). Processes for individual and collective cultural analysis will be offered as well as a Ngemba story, song and dance to highlight connectedness and obligation to country through cross-species kinship. Partner, small and whole group discussion will revolve around powerful, open-ended questions in relation to these shared experiences. In acknowledging adult learning processes, the 'dillybag' metaphor will be invoked to highlight and share the diversity of experiential perceptions and learning.

Biography

David Spillman has taught in remote, rural, regional and urban schools in Queensland and the Northern Territory, including nine years in teaching and leadership positions in remote Indigenous schooling. Since 2006, David has worked for the Stronger Smarter Institute and as a consultant in the areas of Indigenous education leadership and community governance of schooling. In 2014, David was conferred the privilege and obligation of being taken into Ngemba men's lore. David currently runs Learning on Country programs for Queensland school students on Ugarapul country at Maroon Outdoor Education Centre, and is in the final stage of writing for the Doctor of Cultural Research degree (University of Western Sydney).