



# Country as pedagogical: enacting an Australian foundation for culturally responsive pedagogy

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## ABSTRACT

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) has become a driving force for change in North America and New Zealand and is gaining some recognition in Indigenous education in Australia. But as a model of learning and teaching, it cannot be imported unproblematically into Australian schools, wherein the past Indigenous students have had limited success. Given that Country is positioned in the Australian Curriculum as a priority concept, we investigate how it might be leveraged as a foundation of CRP. We conduct a review of the international and Australian literature in order to identify research studies that provide evidence of clear links between Learning from Country as a pedagogical approach in school-based education and improved learning outcomes. Results of the review demonstrate that using Country as a ‘teacher’ of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures enacts a sense of belonging for students. As intrinsically pedagogical, Country enacts the seasons, the direction of winds, tides, light and sun. Country presents in the review of literature as a solid foundation for thinking beyond the cultural backgrounds of students, and beyond accusations of cultural assimilation, to position both Indigenous and western epistemologies at the centre of the Australian Curriculum.

## KEYWORDS

Culturally responsive pedagogy; Indigenous; *Learning from Country*; belonging; representation

## Background to culturally responsive pedagogy

Teacher understandings of the students’ cultures are widely accepted as being fundamental to the achievement of effective schooling outcomes (Gay, 2010). This is, of course, valid for the wide diversity of students, including both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Lucky for some students though, the culture of the classroom *is* the context for learning, yet for others, the outside world must be activated by the teacher and student in order to make learning meaningful. Gay (2010) expresses this gloss as the need to connect learning and teaching to the social and cultural experiences of students through a model of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP). Alim and Paris (2017) provide an additional perspective to argue that CPR must be a means of sustaining cultural ways of being. An effective CRP must account for the cultural beliefs and values of students. Doucet (2017) adds to this in arguing that all children ‘are deserving of classrooms in which their humanity is seen and honoured, and in which their cultures, languages, and family histories can be bolstered and sustained’ (p. 200).

Writing in an Australian context, Vass (2017) identifies the driving force of CRP as more than culture. In a study of three preservice teachers undertaking their practicums in urban schools, Vass (2017) observes the ways in which student teachers endeavour to put CPR into action. Vass (2017)

and Shevalier and McKenzie (2012) observe that teachers who apply culturally responsive teaching practices do a better job of educating students, adding that a successful approach to CRP must combine concern, compassion and commitment with the teacher's understanding of the students' cultural backgrounds. A CRP must include a 'culture of caring' (Cavanagh, Macfarlane, Glynn, & Macfarlane, 2012, p. 443). Vass (2017) finds in his study that educators need to develop a suite of skills and knowledges that allows them to support their students, adding that teachers must know the cultural backgrounds of the students as well as the knowledge and skills that these students need to learn in the classroom.

Vass (2017) concludes that CRP has to do more than 'celebrate cultural diversity', suggesting that 'educators must move beyond thinking about the cultural backgrounds of their students' (p. 460) to evaluate the impact of CRP on student learning and outcomes. The call from Vass (2017) to evaluate the impact of CRP on student learning led us to review the impact of *Country* as a key concept in the *Australian Curriculum* (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2019), as well as articulating a possible foundation for CRP in Australia. We were motivated by the need to identify evidence that would support the assertion from Vass (2017) and Shevalier and McKenzie (2012) that teachers who apply culturally responsive teaching practices do a better job of educating students.

We focus on the key concept of *Country* because it is of crucial importance to many Indigenous people throughout Australia. *Country* is also one of the key concepts of the Australian Curriculum and is essential learning in each of the Learning Areas. Importantly, *Country* offers teachers a means to embed Indigenous histories and cultures in school curricula. The significance of this study, therefore, lies in the potential of *Country* as a method of honouring the cultures, languages, and family histories of Indigenous people in the curriculum. We also recognise that *Country* is usually conceptualised as 'land' in North America and New Zealand.

Following calls to 'move beyond thinking about the cultural backgrounds of students' (Vass, 2017, p. 460), this paper evaluates past research that reports the impact of learning from *Country* on improved learning outcomes. We define 'improved learning outcomes' not only in terms of national assessment results and Federal Government *Closing the Gap* targets (Biddle, Gray, & Schwab, 2017), but also as community and parental involvement and reconnecting students to their forebears and Elders (Guenther, Disbray, & Osborne, 2015; Rioux, 2015). Our review of the international and Australian literature is limited to school-based research, although studies focusing on Australian higher education have been extensive (for example, Harrison, Page, & Tobin, 2016; McKnight, 2017). It is widely acknowledged (Country et al., 2015; Harrison & McLean, 2017; Whitehouse, Watkin Lui, Sellwood, Barrett, & Chigeza, 2014) that *Country* is important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in urban, rural and remote regions of Australia. The study looks beyond the inherent benefits of recognising the cultural background of students, in order to establish a deeper rationale for learning and teaching from *Country*. To this end, a thorough review of the international and Australian literature is conducted to identify evidence for using *Country* as a foundational concept for the development of a CRP in Australia. The intention of this paper is to identify current programs where students learn from *Country* in school-based education and to articulate the impact of this learning on student outcomes. We are guided by the question: can the concept of *Country* act as a foundation for CRP in Australia?

## Learning from country

As a pedagogical concept, *Country* is positioned as an engaging medium for teaching all students about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is representative of the ontologies of Indigenous people throughout Australia, as expressed by Aunty Edna: 'it's me, it's my homeland, it's my identity, it's who I am' (Harrison & McLean, 2017, p. 363). *Country* is also viewed as a way of teaching children about the environment in their local area. One of the fathers of place-based education in North America, David Gruenewald (2003) lamented long ago that sitting in classrooms

provides little opportunity for developing an appreciation for nonhuman life or a 'sense of wonder, curiosity and respect' (p. 638) for the relations between places and people, adding that we need to be able to see or hear 'what places are telling us' (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 645). Such observations about children's links to the 'outside world' are usually glossed as environmental education, although it is much more than that for both Gruenewald and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia (Harrison, Mackinlay, Bodkin, & Bodkin-Andrews, 2017).

However, there is a more important reason for learning from Country, than learning Indigenous histories and cultures and teaching children about the environment. This relates to students learning to *belong*. Aunty Fran highlights the imperative of teaching students to belong in the context of those children who move away from their Country to live elsewhere. She notes that these children continue to long for something outside themselves, adding:

they need to learn about Country otherwise they'll never be satisfied here and I think that's what's wrong with my generation and the next generation down is that so many of them have not been taught about Country (Harrison & McLean, 2017, p. 362).

Aunty Fran then proceeds to explain why this connection to Country is important:

Well, it's the sense of belonging. People talk about homesick, you're feeling homesick, it is familiar for me. It's what you know. It's the things you grow up around, in your childhood. All the smells, the sights, the things you hear, the people who are around you, the lifestyle that they live. There's a familiarity that comes with that (Harrison & McLean, 2017, p. 363).

We teach about Country in Australian schools in order to provide connections for children. These are connections to Country, to relations, to family and to forbears. These connections are important in order that children have a strong sense of belonging. Developing a sense of belonging among students, including connections to family, understanding of the local seasons, and language is the driving force and desire of teaching Country in the Australian Curriculum.

We have noted above how the Australian Curriculum focuses on Country for several reasons. The obvious one is that many teachers teach (about) Country because they are required to do so! Country is positioned in the curriculum as a priority concept because it has the power to promote a sense of belonging, particularly among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This is relevant when we acknowledge the ongoing relationship between Country and wellbeing (Ganesharajah, 2009), and the need to ensure that Indigenous children are connected to Country.

## Methodology

In order to conduct this review of the literature published in the area of CRP, we established a review protocol including four stages (a) searching the literature—data collection, (b) reviewing and assessing the search results, (c) analysing the results, and d) reporting the literature review. The following international databases of authoritative academic resources and publishers were searched: EBSCO (Academic Search Premier, Education Research Complete, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection), ERIC (ProQuest), Google Scholar, Science Direct. International journals and selected conference proceedings were also scanned. The following combination of search terms was used: 'learning from Country', 'Indigenous students', 'Aboriginal students', 'belonging', 'connectedness', 'culturally responsive/sustaining pedagogy', 'student outcomes', 'achievement'. These search terms were chosen after a scan of the literature on culturally responsive pedagogy. The abstracts were then read in order to judge whether the inclusion criteria were met. Furthermore, government websites were searched for relevant reports. Finally, the reference list for the studies included in this paper was reviewed for any additional studies relevant to the search criteria. A number of further criteria were specified to select appropriate studies for inclusion in the review. To be included in the current review, papers had to (a) present an empirical study and include school-age Indigenous students, (b) be published during the period 2000 to 2018, (c)

be peer reviewed, (d) be published in English, and (e) provide insights into the links between learning from Country and students outcomes (as defined above).

The search terms identified a large number of papers (17,500) demonstrating the huge growth of interest in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy during the time period 2000–2018. We selected papers on the basis of inclusion criteria and after deleting the duplicate records, the search yielded 72 results. Of these 72 studies, only 21 of them were considered central to our key topic, based on the combination of the inclusive criteria. Finally, we used non-statistical methods to evaluate and interpret the findings of the collected studies and conduct the synthesis of this review. We now focus on CRP research that has been conducted in North America and New Zealand, although the presentation of results will be brief given the extensive literature that has previously been reported in this area.

## CRP in North America and New Zealand

The bulk of research in CRP has been conducted in North America and New Zealand, including the work of Ladson-Billings (1995), Ladson-Billings (2014), Gay (2010) and more recently Paris and Alim (2014). The work of Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005) has also been enormously influential in highlighting the need for educators and school leaders to focus their attention on modifying the curriculum to include the cultural backgrounds and interests of Indigenous students. The Kamehameha Early Elementary Project (KEEP) for Native Hawaiian students (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008) is one of the strongest examples of embedding CRP into classrooms with Indigenous students. Castagno and Brayboy (2008) argue that culturally responsive educators engage the cultural strengths of students, as well as engaging with their families and communities in order to create and facilitate effective conditions for learning. The KEEP program provided culturally responsive language and maths instructions to Native Hawaiian students, and had a positive effect on reading and maths achievement of the participating students as compared to students not enrolled in the program.

Similar research conducted in Alaska with Yup'ik Eskimo students found that rural Yup'ik students outperformed students from an Alaskan regional centre on a test of practical knowledge (Grigorenko et al., 2004). Yup'ik elders, researchers, and teachers have demonstrated how to connect practical and cultural knowledge to a school's math curriculum (Lipka, Wildfeuer, Wahlberg, George, & Ezran, 2001). For example, the Elders used the everyday practice of building a fish rack, a rectangular structure used to dry salmon, and connected this to the mathematical topics of perimeter, area, and physical proofs (Lipka & Mohatt, 1998). These practical activities involving the analytical and memory aspects of traditional curriculum required students to think in novel ways about geometry. In this way, students from the Yup'ik culture were offered a culturally accessible curriculum that addressed the different abilities and skills of learners (Lipka et al., 2001). The study demonstrated how instructions provided within a cultural context are superior to face to face instruction. In this instance, teaching from Country impacted student achievement (Sternberg, Lipka, Newman, Wildfeuer, & Grigorenko, 2006).

Villegas and Lucas (2002) develop a theory of the culturally responsive teacher who (a) is culturally conscious, (b) knows about the lives of his or her students and accepts diversity (c) is capable of bringing about educational change that will make schools more responsive to all students, (d) accepts that students produce knowledge in different ways, and (e) uses his or her knowledge about students' lives to design instruction that builds on what they already know while stretching them beyond the familiar.

In New Zealand, Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, and Teddy (2007) argue that a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations will be accomplished when educators create learning contexts within their classroom where power is shared between self-determining individuals within non-dominating relations of interdependence, where culture counts, where learning is interactive, where participants are connected to one another through the establishment of a common vision for what constitutes excellence in educational outcomes.

CRP emphasises how 'culture counts' and this is indeed an important aspect of the foundational work of Gay (2010), Bishop et al. (2007), Bishop, Berryman, Wearmouth, Peter, and Clapham (2012). But

why does it count? CRP assumes that culture is important so that it fits children into the school, and therefore provides them with a sense of recognition that they count in the school culture, and that this sense of recognition then supports the student to learn the target curriculum. A similar argument is applied in bilingual education, where students use the student's home language as a bridge for learning the target language. This reminds us of Vass (2017) call to look beyond the inherent benefits of recognising the cultural backgrounds of students in order to produce better learning outcomes for Indigenous students. Such calls have inspired this project to look for a deeper rational purpose for teaching about Country in the Australian Curriculum.

Te Kotahitanga is a New Zealand Kaupapa Maori research and development project that includes many of these dimensions. This project aims to improve outcomes in the achievement of Maori students in mainstream secondary schools (Bishop et al., 2012). A total of 33 secondary schools participated in the professional development programme, 12 that participated for four years and 21 schools for two years. The percentage of Maori students at each school ranged from 20% to 80%, with the remaining student population comprising New Zealand, European, Asian, Pacific, and other smaller groups. The schools that were involved in this project witnessed some tremendous changes in student engagement and learning (Meyer et al., 2010). Te Kotahitanga has been implemented widely to challenge low expectations for Indigenous Maori students held by mainstream teachers and to shift classroom instruction from the transmission to more discursive, interactive models (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2009). The project commenced in 2001 and initially included only two phases with small number of schools (Bishop, 2008). Following this progress, the project was expanded into three further phases with more sets of schools (Bishop et al., 2012). Thus, Te Kotahitanga sought to address educational debt and power imbalances for Maori students by repositioning teachers as learners and students as the experts. Substantive findings from the evaluation report concluded that Te Kotahitanga was a sound and effective process for improving classroom teaching and learning for Māori students (Meyer et al., 2010). Phase 5 of Te Kotahitanga demonstrated that being culturally responsive to Māori students within relationships of interdependence would statistically increase the participation and educational equity of Māori students in mainstream schools (Alton-Lee, 2015). Bishop et al. (2007) added that the active involvement of schools in Te Kotahitanga had contributed to significant improvements in Māori student literacy and numeracy at Years 9 and 10.

In the following section, we focus on the Australian context. Here we take Country as a key foundational concept for learning in the Australian curriculum. A review of the Australian literature is conducted in order to identify evidence for using Country as a foundation of CRP in Australia. To this end, we are looking for evidence that demonstrates explicit links between learning from Country in school-based education and improved learning outcomes.

## Country as a foundation for CRP in Australia

Although the capacity to teach ethnically diverse cohorts is a professional imperative in Australia, it remains a challenge for many teachers (Achinstein & Athanases, 2005; Vass, 2017). Teachers indeed struggle to address the needs of ethnic and racial minority students, a significant proportion of whom continues to achieve educational outcomes well below their 'mainstream' peers (Luciak, 2006; Rahman, 2013). According to Perso (2003a, 2003b) effective teachers of Indigenous students in primary schools respond to each individual student and their local community cultural context. They demonstrate a capacity to be relevant and responsive to their students' social, cultural, and academic identities (Perso, 2003a, 2003b). As well as advocating the use of CRP, and demonstrating the implications of different learning styles and ways of seeing the Perso (2003a, 2003b) argues for a pedagogy where teachers learn from students as well as students learning from teachers. The core focus of education should be to facilitate each individual student's learning. Perso (2012) has further argued:

... there seems little doubt that in order to provide successful schooling experiences for Indigenous students, educators must become more bi-cultural, that is we must better understand the belief systems and values of

the primary culture of each of our students. This does not mean that non-Indigenous teachers will be given a “skin-name” or gain membership to Indigenous cultures. Rather it implies that teachers are willing to learn to understand their students and to meet their needs (p. 83).

In other words, students are required to speak theoretically about the world outside the classroom (always talking about the world), rather than situating themselves in the context of their own history and culture (Harrison, 2013). Students learn *about* the wind, rain and sun, but they do not learn *from* it (Guyula, 2010). Guyula intimates here how learning outside the classroom has a pedagogical function beyond the motivations of humans, including teachers and students.

Perso (2012) also highlights that cultural responsiveness of the teachers results from cultural competence (or awareness or sensitivity) which respects and values the unique identity of each child. In comparison with cultural sensitivity, which focuses on the importance of knowing and being sensitive to the culture of children, cultural competence is a skill-focused paradigm (Chin, 2000) and is, therefore, a journey rather than merely a stage in the transition from cultural sensitivity to cultural responsiveness. In order to actively respond in appropriate ways to the needs of children, teachers need to be culturally competent.

Matthews, Cooper, and Baturo (2007) argue that Eurocentric teaching methods in Australia have been displaced by efforts to contextualise mathematics pedagogy within Indigenous cultures and connection to the land. These researchers adopt a story-telling approach in teaching of mathematics, where the storytelling starts with simple arithmetic but moves to algebraic thinking, patterning and structure within a context that is familiar. Other researchers also working in the field of mathematics teaching in Queensland have found that the role of oral language in developing understanding, especially for students whose first language is not English, cannot be underestimated (Warren, Young, & de Vries, 2007).

A study conducted in two remote communities on an island in the northern waters of Australia included Aboriginal students who were involved during their schooltime in different social and cultural activities such as hunting, ceremony, art, sport and recreation, domestic and work-related activities (Jorgensen, Sullivan, & Grootenboer, 2013). Through their participation in these activities, children accumulated different bodies of knowledge and used various literate practices in the enactment of the activities. Parents and other community members felt it was their responsibility to teach and share their skills, values, beliefs and knowledge with others. Reading involved more than print-based texts. In addition to print texts such as library books, magazines and newspapers, students read the environment, the water, the body, dances and various artworks. Stories were often more than a recounting of experiences. They were used as a teaching methodology and were inextricably entwined with the lives and identity of the children. Songs, dances, paintings, carvings, places, hunting rituals, ceremony, language and people were each part of a complex puzzle of a person’s identity. Storytelling was a frequent activity and the students talked about listening to stories from older members of their family, and the caregivers talked about the sharing of stories with their children.

The research findings showed that students were very good at explaining how to find, cook and make things. Embedded in their explanations was the ability to articulate oral procedural texts. There was also evidence of different reading practices throughout the data. These students not only read print and digital text forms, but they also read the land, the water, the mind and body, paintings and dance (Jorgensen et al., 2013).

Ewing’s (2012, 2014) studies set in a Torres Strait Islander community in Australia clearly link learning from Country with student learning. Ewing (2012) emphasises how learning can be rich and purposeful when it is situated within the culture, community and home-language of the group. Indigenous ways of knowing and learning are described by Ewing (2014) as relational and interconnected because they viewed from a holistic perspective. They are about preparation for life rather than a measure of achievement and control. Ewing (2014) describes the educational use of the funds of knowledge concept that incorporates the mathematical knowledge used by Torres

Strait families in Australia in their traditional practices of sorting shells and giving fish. The study included 20 adults and eight children that took part in the voluntary community consultation meeting and workshops. The study found that Indigenous ways of knowing mathematics were deeply embedded in rich cultural practices that were tied to the community. Indigenous ways of knowing become useful within the mathematics curriculum in schools as a means of stimulating and engaging students' and their parents' curiosity about their environment and their cultural practices in a context that is relevant to their lives (Ewing, 2014).

Meanwhile, Keddie (2014) presents an epistemology where community, kinship and family networks are at the centre of all relations, reflecting an ethos around a stable identity, and providing a cultural anchor that reflects the shared beliefs and behaviour of the Indigenous community. Keddie (2014) draws on a case study of a small alternative Indigenous school in Queensland, Australia to examine an 'epistemology of relationality' (p. 69). Drawing predominantly on the voices of three of the school's Indigenous Elders, the study explores the potential of an Indigenous epistemology of relationality as a shared collective vision to move beyond the problematics of reductionism that can undermine the efficacy of culturally responsive schooling. Prioritising this epistemology enabled both the articulation of a stable identity but also recognition of the complexity and diversity of Indigenous identities. This focus on relationality where community, kinship and family networks are at the centre of all relations is supported in the small Indigenous-led alternative environment of Indigo House. The emphasis is on learning through (as well as learning about) Indigenous cultures, which reflects an important shift within recent policy in Queensland (Keddie, 2014). In this study, we witness family and kinship as a key to an ongoing sense of belonging for students.

The prioritising of an epistemology of relationality (Keddie, 2014) is clear in their interactions with students and the broader community at Indigo House. Aunty A's weekend barbecues for the children living under the bridge, Aunty K's transportation of students to and from school and Uncle A's work to connect students with their clan group within the school are guided by the principles of generosity, empathy and care. Such values transcend generations extend beyond immediate kin (Moreton-Robinson, 2000), and constitute powerful outcomes for students learning to belong. These interactions reflect the collectivity and interconnectedness that are central to Indigenous cultures. In this regard, Elders and the Indigo site are cultural anchors that represent a stable and solid Indigenous identity of belonging and shared beliefs that are rebuilding and rekindling lost connections and fractured pasts for both students and staff (Borofsky, Barth, Shweder, Rodseth, & Stoltzenberg, 2001; Moreton-Robinson, 2000).

Meanwhile, Rioux (2015) examines the process of merging local Indigenous knowledge into the Montessori zoology curriculum (non-Indigenous) to produce localised, Indigenised and contextualised teaching/learning materials. Embedding the Porky (Short-beaked echidna) narrative into the biology curriculum was critical in Koora for the science class because of the local history of Aboriginal maltreatment by government authorities of the past. Forced removal from ancestral lands and incarceration in Koora, last century, still anger Elders to this day when they recall their relatives' stories or their own education in the community. However, a small vertebrate is holding the community together, and the impact of the animal narratives was to reconnect the students to their forebears, to a kinship alliance with the Elders and with history. This reconnection and a greater sense of belonging are clearly a learning outcome for the community, but not something that is currently accounted for in the national assessment regimes.

McNamara and McNamara (2011) document, collate, analyse and assemble local knowledge from Elders into a seasonal calendar specifically for Erub Island, located in the eastern group of islands in the Torres Strait. This knowledge was gathered through a number of in-depth, unstructured interviews with Elders on Erub Island during November 2009 and May 2010. The knowledge collected ranged from information about wind directions, wet and dry seasons, patterns in bird migration and nesting, and plant and cropping cycles, and the islands major totems then transcribed, collated and synthesised into tables, with the final product of a seasonal calendar and

major school mural. The calendar and interactive mural that were constructed with the participation of young people is an example of engaging young people in climate change-related issues through creative means. Furthermore, mnemonics such as these act as triggers for future cohorts of students to also learn about, and engage with, this knowledge of seasons and reading landscapes.

The benefits of these activities were twofold. Initially, it provided a new way for students to learn about the importance of different species in their local environment as environmental indicators and as integral parts of ecosystem functioning. Secondly, it was likely that this hands-on participation provided another way for students to access the knowledge that was held by the community Elders. Such environmental knowledge and traditional laws, based around leaving enough for tomorrow, needed to be passed on to the young people so that they too could listen to, and read, their Country. Listening to Country and reading landscapes are often considered to be the hallmark of Indigenous science (Cajete, 2000). For Berkes (2008, p. 161), reading Country is part of 'ways of knowing', which can then be applied to care for and provide custodianship of local environments. Again, we return to a notion of enacted learning where listening to and observing the patterns of Country constitute a pedagogical function beyond the motivations of humans. The studies from Keddie (2014), Ewing (2012, 2014), McNamara and McNamara (2011) and Berkes (2008) support a notion of Country as intrinsically pedagogical.

Harrison and Greenfield (2011) examined how 12 schools in New South Wales, Australia incorporated Indigenous perspectives. It involved eight schools from Sydney, New South Wales and four from the central coast immediately north of Sydney. At six of these 12 schools, teachers worked together with parents to weave Aboriginal knowledge into the fabric of the curriculum through careful negotiations with Aboriginal Elders and the community (for example, Aboriginal shelters, foods, bush gardens, Aboriginal art and dancing). The teachers at one of the schools reported that their approach to doing business with parents has changed dramatically since 2006, which is evidenced in their statistics on suspensions. In 2006, there were 386 suspensions at the school, in 2007 there were 170 suspensions and in 2008 there were 17 suspensions. Another school constructed an outdoor learning space where Elders worked with students to reconnect them to local places and history. Developing a sense of belonging among students was integral in the delivery of the curriculum. The school reported increased student engagement and improved outcomes in the NAPLAN results to the point where all students were achieving minimum standards in reading and writing (Harrison and Greenfield (2011).)

## Belonging to country

This paper has examined the possibility of applying Country as a foundation of CRP in Australia. We have conducted a review of the international and Australian literature in order to identify research studies that demonstrate a clear link between learning from Country and improved learning outcomes. The number of studies that focus on evaluating the impact of learning from Country in the school sector is small, though they are more widespread in Higher Education, including the work of McKnight (2016) on Yuin Country and Harrison et al. (2016) on Darug Country. In particular, we have been searching for a means of measuring success outside the annual *Closing the Gap* targets and NAPLAN results. We have therefore been motivated to establish a measure of success that represents the wishes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and is not limited to short-term results.

Various studies have identified the importance of learning from Country as a means of improving student outcomes, although many of these do not provide evidence of impact on student learning. For example, Sofa (2014) explores outdoor learning in a Western Australian context to discover whether an outdoor learning pedagogy can respond to disparities in learning outcomes and offer alternative early learning opportunities. However, evidence of impact on student learning is not explicated in the research. Verran and Christie (2007, p. 80) remark that 'knowledge traditions' refer not only to a knowledge of place but also the performance of that knowledge of place and its people through social traditions. The stories that are sometimes told to children by



Aboriginal Elders of the school are a performance of Aboriginal knowledge and identity rather than a representation of it. However, there is no evidence of impact on learning. This is also true of the *Make It Count* (MIC) project (Owens, 2015) and Rahman (2013) study of secondary schools in South Australia. It remains unclear, apart from the proposal that learning became more 'enjoyable', just what the impact of the intervention was.

There are a small number of studies that provide clear evidence of the impact of Country on student learning. Research conducted in northern Australia demonstrates explicit connections between learning from Country (and using Indigenous ways of knowing) and improved learning outcomes in the key learning areas of mathematics (Ewing, 2012, 2014), science (McNamara & McNamara, 2011; Rioux, 2015) and reading (Jorgensen et al., 2013). McNamara and McNamara (2011) worked with Elders on Erub Island to develop a seasonal calendar, documenting information about wind directions, wet and dry seasons, patterns in bird migration and nesting, and plant and cropping cycles, and the islands major totems, then transcribed, collated and synthesised into tables, with the final product of a seasonal calendar and major school mural. The result was a stronger sense of belonging for the students, including their connections to family. Similarly, Rioux's (2015) research, based in rural Queensland, reports on how the development of an intervention based on animal narratives acted to reconnect students to their forebears, and to a kinship alliance with the Elders and community. A highlight of any CRP is how students are able to teach the teachers about community kinship networks (Bishop et al., 2012; Ewing, 2014; Keddie, 2014; Rioux, 2015).

In New South Wales, Harrison and Greenfield (2011) present clear evidence to show how learning from Elders in the Learning Circle had a significant impact on student engagement (reduced suspensions, increased attention) and learning (improved NAPLAN results). Keddie (2014) highlights the impact of learning from Country on developing student identities.

The pervasive message arising from each of these studies is the impact of learning from Country on the student's sense of belonging. Belonging is developed through connections to kinship and family, and through understandings of Country (winds, seasons, bird migration), and use of local language to ground students in the local community and its networks. Belonging is the physical, emotional, cognitive and sensory/somatic, and is both collective and individual. Rioux's (2015) study demonstrates how belonging is developed when the child understands that he or she can trust others in the context of colonisation. It refers to the recognition that one receives in a kinship network (Ewing, 2014; Keddie, 2014), or home language spoken by the collective community.

Physicality of belonging refers to water or wind as symbolic of belonging as well as providing a sense of home and belonging to place. Emotional belonging involves the senses. Aunty Edna poignantly illustrates sensory/somatic belonging as a bodily response to re-entering her Country after an absence of many years.

## **A new foundation for CRP in Australia, North America and New Zealand**

We are always looking for something better in education, and this includes CRP as an approach to change. CRP is driven by the imperative to make a difference, but this drive concomitantly engages its critiques. As a pedagogical foundation, it is sometimes criticised as a convenient mode for assimilating students into the dominant curriculum. It acts as a bridge, for example, to fit Indigenous students into a western practice, using the home language of children as a medium for learning the target cultures of the school, albeit maths and English in Australia. This brought us to enquire how we might conceptualise the role of education outside the desire to fit students into the mainstream culture of the school and its society.

The study has explored what CRP might look like in Australia. In this context, we have presented the concept of Country (and land in North America and New Zealand) as a foundation for CRP, to argue that Country as pedagogy is an example of CRP in practice. Through a search of the literature, we have endeavoured to identify evidence of the impact of learning from Country on student engagement and learning. Our search revealed data to support the conclusion that

learning from Country works in two ways. First, increased student engagement is demonstrated through indicators of belonging and identity. CRP in Australia, therefore, needs to account for belonging and identity as markers of success, in addition to indicators such as attendance and assessment results. Second, Country has the potential to displace the (colonial) authority of the teacher, in situations where Country is the 'teacher', and students and teachers are able to listen and observe the patterns of Country. The studies from Keddie (2014), Ewing (2012, 2014), McNamara and McNamara (2011) and Berkes (2008) above support a notion of Country as intrinsically pedagogical. The evidence from this review shows us that Country as pedagogical enacts the seasons, the direction of winds, tides, light and sun. It teaches through repetition and relationships, so the structure is already there for us to learn.

Country as pedagogy is significant for two reasons. As highlighted above, the first relates to the colonial histories of Australia, New Zealand and North America. We have observed that Country as pedagogy has the potential to displace the role of teacher as a symbol of colonial authority. The second is linked to problems of representation. One of the ironies of pedagogy is that the teacher devotes so much time to consider how best to explain the outside world to a culturally diverse group of students, who happen to be sitting inside a school room. The teacher's task is to represent the seasons, wind direction, rain, sun, trees, animals and so forth through books and pictures, the internet, videos and lots of languages. We have noted above how Country *is* the context for student learning, without the teacher having to leverage the background of 30 students in order to link past experiences to new content.

It is difficult for teachers to know the cultural background of so many students, particularly in high schools. We have thus been looking for better ways of supporting their values and beliefs, and in doing so, a concept of Country as context, content and pedagogy is proposed. Country as a foundation of CRP is performative rather than representational. Students and teachers simply need to know that they can learn *from* Country, rather than explaining or talking about it from a distance. Knowledge of seasons, of the flora and fauna and their associations, are annual performances of Country. CRP is learning to recognise these annual performances through observation and listening.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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