

# What form(s) of pedagogy are necessary for increasing the engagement of Aboriginal school students?

A Research Doctoral Thesis written by

Michael Joseph Donovan

E.N., Dip. T.C.M., B. Teaching (Honours) Class 1

Doctorate of Philosophy (Education)

12<sup>th</sup> October 2016

## Statement of Originality

I certify that this thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository\*\*, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

\*\*Unless an Embargo has been approved fro the determined period.

---

MICHAEL JOSEPH DONOVAN

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## **Participants**

Firstly I would like to thank the generosity of the Aboriginal student participants' for allowing me into their educational lives and who shared their stories of their educational experiences. Thank you for sharing in our collaborative discussion about what are good educational practices for Aboriginal students can be in schools, curriculum and for teachers.

I want to also thank all the Aboriginal education workers who invited me into their schools and allowed me to engage with some of your Aboriginal students and examining some of the educational practices of those schools and to the principals and executive staff who agreed to support this research task and the examination of Aboriginal education.

## **Colleagues**

I would like to thank my peers at the Wollotuka institute at the University of Newcastle who have shared in discussions, standpoints and understandings about Aboriginal students and education frequently over a cup of coffee. To the many Aboriginal community Elders who visit Wollotuka and check up or give advice to me about my work, thank you for your patience and support.

## **Supervisors**

To my supervisors I need to thank you for your patience and support through this entire journey of discovery for me. Thank you for the advice, direction and allowing me the time and space to build my understandings of my thesis across all aspects from the question, to the design of the study through to the analysis of the stories.

## **NSW AECG**

I would like to thank the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) for allowing me to discuss my questions on Aboriginal education within your forums. I would like to thank many AECG bodies from the State, Regional and

Local groups for listening to my interpretations and enquires about Aboriginal education including giving guidance on the suitability of my questions towards best pedagogical practices to support Aboriginal students' and educating all students about Aboriginal Australia.

### **Family**

I must thank my wife Jodie and my children for allowing me the time to work on and complete this learning journey on Aboriginal education from an Aboriginal students' perspective. Kopara and Djalar thank you for allowing me the time to write and think and for you to listen to my dull pedagogical interpretations about an educational world you have seen as a student not as an academic. Thank you both for allowing me the time to research and write when I could have been participating in our lives together.

Jodie, thank you for the patience in allowing me the time to complete this work I know it has been a long and stressful journey for you as well. You have carried this learning journey as much as I have through allowing me to go out on fieldwork and conference attendance to present my findings whilst you keep the home and our children's lives moving forward. Thank you, Thank you, to such a beautiful lady.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of contents	5
Acronyms	10
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>11</b>
Introduction	11
Author's introduction for Aboriginal readers	11
Abstract	12
Question	13
Rationale	13
Background	16
History of Aboriginal education in NSW	21
Theoretical framework	26
Design of the study	26
Research Intent	30
Previous studies	30
Aims of the research project	31
Brief description of methodology for this research	34`
Toward a focus on Aboriginal student voices	37
What can this research add to Aboriginal pedagogical theory?	38
<b>Chapter 2 Literature Review</b>	<b>41</b>
Recognition of Aboriginal culture	42
Relationships with the Aboriginal learner	46
The importance of the teacher and Aboriginal student relationship	46
Building relationships with the Aboriginal community	49
Placing learning in context	52
Group and peer supported learning	57
Safe environment; free from racism	59
Dynamic teaching practices	63
Responsibility for their learning	65
Questioning as a learning tool	67
Use of reflective learning	69
Deficit thinking and Australian Aboriginal students	70

Current pedagogical models	75
Australian Professional Standards for Teachers	75
Te Kotahitanga	79
8 Ways Aboriginal Ways of Learning	82
Quality Teaching Framework	84
Stronger Smarter	88
Dare To Lead and What Works'	94
<b>Chapter 3 Methodology</b>	<b>98</b>
My position as an Aboriginal researcher in an Aboriginal methodology	98
The significance of Aboriginal cultural recognition in Aboriginal educational research	100
Epistemic privilege	102
The benefits from listening to student voices	107
Why ask students about education?	110
The use of story (narrative) as a tool for Aboriginal voices	125
Story and the research partnership	127
Stories and educational relationships	130
The authority of story	133
Objectivity and social inquiry	136
Yarning Circle design	137
Validity and Generalisability of this study	140
Validity	140
Generalisability	141
<b>Chapter 4 Discussion Point 1 Schools</b>	<b>144</b>
Analysis and themes from fieldwork	144
Interview population	144
School is social	145
Aboriginal room	151
Aboriginal Education Officer (AEO)	157
Changes to the learning environments and activities	165
Aboriginal cultural activities	168
Aboriginal identity at schools with Aboriginal youth	176

Staffing Issues	184
Limit the use of substitute teachers and high teacher turnover	184
The use of mentors	186
<b>Chapter 5 Discussion point 2 Teachers</b>	<b>191</b>
Qualities of good teachers	191
Some good teachers but only a few great teachers	191
Relationship	195
Fun and enthusiastic teachers	200
Effective communication with Aboriginal students	205
Teachers with good pedagogical practices	212
Summary	215
<b>Chapter 6 Discussion Point 3 Curriculum</b>	<b>217</b>
Curriculum and pedagogical understandings	217
Is it the subject and it's content or the teacher that engages Aboriginal students?	218
Aboriginal cultural knowledge across the KLAs	221
Teachers' expectations of Aboriginal students cultural knowledge	223
Diverse teaching practices that Aboriginal students engage with	225
Changeable learning environments	225
Interactive teacher participation	227
Effective questioning with Aboriginal students	231
Group work	233
Hands on and physical learning activities	236
Using real world examples to engage with Aboriginal students	238
<b>Chapter 7 Site-specific issues and comparisons</b>	<b>240</b>
Remoteness and school size	242
Limited number of teaching staff	242
Small student numbers	243
Remote school institutional position across the whole community	244
Transient teacher population	246

Cultural influences in the wider Aboriginal community	248
Revitalisation of Aboriginal languages'	248
Engagement of Elders and Aboriginal cultural protocols	249
Continuous reciprocal relationships	249
Academic standards and opportunities to socialise with teachers	251
Mandatory homework sessions	251
Homework centres and academic support	252
What didn't the Aboriginal students say?	253
<b>Chapter 8 Discussion</b>	<b>256</b>
(i) What can I inform the field in working with Aboriginal students?	256
Relationship	256
Get to know your students	259
Effective communication your Aboriginal students	261
Teacher expectations	264
Stereotypes and dealing with racism	267
Fun	269
Interactive learning	271
Place learning in context to the Aboriginal students worldview	273
Hands on learning experiences & changing the learning environment	274
Aboriginal culture	277
Representing the Aboriginal students culture in the classroom	277
Teachers need to gain knowledge about Aboriginal society	280
Aboriginal rooms and Aboriginal Education workers	283
(ii) What are the limitations to this analysis in validating these observations?	288
(iii) Can this study be repeated in other sites?	292



<b>Chapter 9 Conclusion</b>	<b>294</b>
Schools	296
Aboriginal rooms	296
Aboriginal education workers	299
Qualities of good teachers	302
Relationship	303
Interactive pedagogical practices	305
Curriculum and pedagogical understandings	306
Future studies that can be drawn from my analysis	309
References	313
<b>Diagrams</b>	
Figure 1: Campsite image	156
Figure 2: Pedagogical considerations between Aboriginal students, teachers, learning experiences and the Aboriginal community	287
<b>Tables</b>	
Table 1: School site information from My School website	30

## ACRONYMS

<b>AEO</b>	Aboriginal Education Officer
<b>AEW</b>	Aboriginal Education Worker
<b>NSW AECG</b>	New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group
<b>NSW DEC</b>	New South Wales Department of Education and Communities
<b>NSW DET</b>	New South Wales Department of Education and Training
<b>NSW DSE</b>	New South Wales Department of School Education
<b>KLA</b>	Key Learning Areas
<b>HSIE</b>	Human Society and Its Environment
<b>PDHPE</b>	Personal Development, Health & Physical Education
<b>PAAS</b>	Physical Activity and Sports
<b>TAS</b>	Technical and Applied Studies
<b>CAPA</b>	Creative and Performing Arts
<b>TAFE</b>	Technical and Further Education
<b>VET</b>	Vocational Education and Training
<b>QT</b>	Quality Teaching framework
<b>CK</b>	Cultural Knowledge
<b>BK</b>	Background Knowledge

# Chapter 1 Introduction

**Student:** Michael Donovan

**Student Number:** 2121160

**Program:** Doctorate of Philosophy in education

**Topic Question:** What form(s) of pedagogy are necessary for increasing the engagement of Aboriginal school students?

**Current Ethics Application:** Using Aboriginal students voice in their views of what is best when engaging them in their education

**Ethics Approval (UON RIMS) Number:** DEV-000178

**NSW DET Ethics Approval (SERAP) Number:** 2013005

## Author's introduction for Aboriginal readers

My name is Michael Donovan; I belong to the Gumbaynggirr Nation from the North Coast of NSW around Nambucca Heads, I am a saltwater man. I grew up in the Western suburbs of Sydney, so I also identify as an 'urban blackfella'. I am very fortunate in that I have always known that I am an Aboriginal person, who my family is, where my country is, and where I call home. My father is Charlie Donovan from Nambucca Heads; his parents are Marshall John Donovan from Nambucca Heads and Ruby Donovan (née Flanders) from the Clarence River near Maclean. This is my Aboriginal heritage. My mother is Marcia Donovan (née Single); she is a non-Aboriginal woman from Sydney.

This brief formal introduction is particularly for the Aboriginal readers of this thesis, to allow them to place the author into their worldview and acknowledge how I relate to them within their kinship structure and their knowledge systems. This introduction also serves to highlight how the intellectual interpretations presented in this thesis are founded on my Aboriginal standpoint as a Gumbaynggirr man. This acknowledgement is to allow other Aboriginal readers to position my standpoint within their knowledge systems as Aboriginal peoples.

## **Abstract**

This thesis was developed on the basis of Aboriginal educational practices that have been acknowledged in the field as best practice when engaging Aboriginal school-age students in their education. Within my history of engaging with Aboriginal school-age students and preparing pre-service teachers to work with Aboriginal students I have consistently supported many of the Aboriginal pedagogical theorists' understandings of what stands for best practice when working with Aboriginal students.

Some of these pedagogical understandings came as standard pedagogical practices as an Aboriginal person working with younger Aboriginal students. The recognition of these standard best pedagogical practices came from my working with Aboriginal students in a primary school setting as an Aboriginal Educational Assistant (AEA) and were later refined through exposure to other educational professionals and through my own studies as a teacher which I undertook whilst working as an AEA. I entered higher education as an academic in 1996 and started teaching pre-service teachers about working with Aboriginal students in 1997; this is a role I have continued to the present date. During this time I have extended my reading and my professional networks to include many of the authors who have developed the foundational understandings of what is considered best practice when working on the engagement of Aboriginal students in their schools.

Whilst examining the existing research, I noted that many of these studies had been conducted on a small scale. The majority of them included single class or school samples, with some involving only teachers and administrative staff who were directly interviewed about which practices most effectively engage Aboriginal students in their schooling. There has been a more recent change in the approach to this process with Aboriginal parents now being interviewed about what they believe is best for their children. But, to date, there have been very limited research-based inquiries that have targeted Aboriginal students as the primary source of inquiry in gaining an understanding of what best engages Aboriginal school-age students in their schooling.

This is where my research study fits within the current literature: it examines which form(s) of pedagogy are necessary for increasing the engagement of Aboriginal school students. I have used research practices that are grounded within Aboriginal cultural understandings that consider a culturally safe inquiry process and targeted school-age Aboriginal students from a variety of social, economic, geographical, and cultural settings and asked them what best engages them in their schooling. This study uses the Aboriginal students' standpoint and understandings as the primary point of reference to ascertain which practices are most effective in engaging Aboriginal students.

### **Question**

What form(s) of pedagogy are necessary for increasing the engagement of Aboriginal school students?

When designing this research study I wanted to find some clear examples of Aboriginal students' views on their education. Three focal points for this question were directed to the Aboriginal students in the Yarning Circles about their views on what works for them in relation to their school, the teachers they work with, and the curriculum or content that is presented to them.

### **Rationale**

This work is an extension on my current research, which focused mainly on teachers and their ability to engage with Aboriginal students. The rationale behind this particular study was to ask Aboriginal students to voice what they believed to be best practice when working with them. Placing Aboriginal students' standpoint at the centre of the argument is an approach derived from the literature on pedagogical practice and best practice when working with Aboriginal students, as discussed below.

This research was not developed to present another form of educational practice to increase the academic outcomes of Aboriginal school-age students.

This research was designed to inquire about what Aboriginal students understood as the best educational practices that have been presented to them and engage them in their education. As we are entering the twenty-first century, current students are experiencing a very different society and education to what many Aboriginal pedagogical theorists have experienced. Asking students themselves and listening to their standpoints is one form of investigation that will help to better understand current Aboriginal students' views on their educational experiences.

The decision to make the student the primary focal point in my examinations initially came about from my review of other Indigenous educational theorists' work such as that of Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, and Richardson (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003) who developed Te Kotahitanga, a model for educational reform. Bishop et al. (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003) asked Maori students their opinions on what is best for them in their education. Asking Maori students their opinion was a focal point but was later extended to include asking Maori community their views. Placing Aboriginal students' understandings at the centre of the investigation is an important feature that allows the insider (Indigenous student) to vocalise their standpoint from their understandings and their terms of reference.

Examining educational research where the student voice is the central point, I drew upon the works of Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2002), Australian researchers who had completed work on student voice in Australian schools. These examinations attempted to identify if any research had been done with Aboriginal students on what practices are best to engage them, however differences in the cultural identity of students did not appear to be present in any of the research.

This issue of cultural difference has been a significant argument of many Aboriginal pedagogical theorists who state that Aboriginal culture strongly impacts on Aboriginal students' learning and understandings (Bamblett, 2006; Bin-Sallik, 2003; Donovan, 2009; Halse & Robinson, 1999; Harris, 1980; Heitmeyer, 2004; Hughes, More, & Williams, 2004; Mellor & Corrigan, 2004;

Nakata, 2007; Sarra, 2011). This research will explore whether these observations are accurate from the standpoint of Aboriginal students. The importance of this research is that the question, "What form(s) of pedagogy are necessary for increasing the engagement of Aboriginal school students", has not clearly been examined using the standpoint of Australian Aboriginal students.

There have been various inquiries, reviews, and studies into ways of engaging with and supporting Aboriginal students in schools (Bourke, Rigby, & Burden, 2000; Fitzgerald, 1976; Johnston, 1991; Nsw Aboriginal Education Consultative Group & Nsw Department of Education & Training, 2004; Wilson & Dodson, 1997). Many of these studies, conducted over the last 30 years across most Australian States and Territories, investigated why Aboriginal students had not been succeeding at similar levels to non-Aboriginal students or why they are unsuccessful in Australian schools. Some Aboriginal pedagogical theorists developed possible pedagogical understanding of Aboriginal students' learning differences and strategies to support these differences in Australian schools.

From all these studies there has been very limited acknowledgement of Aboriginal students' voices and why they are not engaging with schools. Much of the research has targeted teachers and academics about their experiences and perceptions regarding the most appropriate manner to engage Aboriginal students in schools. Many Aboriginal parents and communities have been asked what is best for their children's education in more recent work highlighting the importance of community when working with Aboriginal students. In some enquiries, small groups of Aboriginal students have been targeted to voice their understandings about aspects of education but not what the Aboriginal students believe is best for them as students.

Of these studies Gutman-Black (1992) asked urban Aboriginal primary school students about their views on different aspects of schooling and the changes they advocate to make school a better place. This study is the closest I have identified that asked Aboriginal students for their viewpoint but it primarily targeted urban primary school students. I have focussed my study on Stage 5

Aboriginal students who will be able to articulate their standpoint on what is best for them as Aboriginal students and validate their views with some reasoning as to why. The age group is also targeted because the Aboriginal students' identity should be developed enough so any issues regarding cultural difference or cultural understandings can be expressed from a personal position (Bishop & Berryman, 2006).

## **Background**

Aboriginal students are failing within Australian educational systems. Sixty-six percent of Aboriginal students fall below the national average literacy and numeracy benchmarks and approximately 20 percentage points below all students in literacy levels (Nsw Aboriginal Education Consultative Group & Nsw Department of Education & Training, 2004). There has been a consistent stream of research and statistical evaluations highlighting the under-achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian schools. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has reported on this over its history since the early 1970s with a series of other inquiries substantiating this at state and national levels (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995; De Bortoli & Thomson, 2010; Johnston, 1991; Nsw Aboriginal Education Consultative Group & Nsw Department of Education & Training, 2004; Thomson, De Bortoli, & Buckley, 2013). Each of these reports and inquiries has shown great disparity and limited success of Aboriginal students compared with non-Aboriginal students in achieving educational benchmarks. In the PISA 2012 review of Australian results, Aboriginal students were cited as being approximately 30 months behind the educational benchmarks of their non-Aboriginal peers (Thomson, De Bortoli, & Buckley, 2013, pp. xv-xvi).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities are some of the most disadvantaged groups globally. Much of the lack of success for Indigenous students can be related to the inappropriate educational practices directed at them through non-Indigenous pedagogical filters of the Western educational systems (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Donovan, 2015; Fraser & Hewitt, 2004; Hughes, More, & Williams, 2004). Pedagogical



and systemic change needs to take into account the needs and learning styles of Aboriginal students if Aboriginal students are to have "equitable access to and opportunities in schooling so that their learning outcomes improve and overtime match those of other students" (Ministerial Council for Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1999, p. 3). If Australian society and its institutions want to develop an equitable society and highlight the important place Aboriginal society has within the Australian identity then the development of equitable partnerships need to be maintained. The National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) highlighted this position as early as 1985 when it stated:

*Education must be a process which builds on what we are by recognising and developing our natural potential and cultural heritage [and] ... allows us to take our place as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians with pride in our identity and with confidence that we can play our part in Australian society.* (National Aboriginal Education Committee, 1985, p. 5)

Ladwig and King (2003) note that pedagogy is the primary point for any educational change or development. They inform us through their consolidation of educational research that pedagogical development has greater influence on student improvement than the impact of curriculum and school organisation (Ladwig & King, 2003, p. 3). But they also suggest the need for further research to determine what kinds of pedagogy do promote improvement. By asking Aboriginal students about what they believe is most important to engage them in their education this research is situated within and designed to contribute to the current literature on Aboriginal education.

Some reports have attempted to highlight a number of reasons for the relative failing of Aboriginal students. Poor attendance records of Aboriginal students have been regularly identified as a significant factor in their low academic achievement (Bourke, Rigby, & Burden, 2000; Department of Social Services, 2015; Sarra, 2011). There appears to be some conflicting evidence in the exact levels of attendance rates of Aboriginal students. This can be due to different measures being applied across systems and states with no clear picture of

attendance levels evident. Statements of limited attendance come from literature in the field and they tend to come from single systems or smaller scale examples. As Bourke (2000) informs us in his review of Aboriginal students' attendance "the extent and nature of the day to day attendance of Indigenous Australian children at schools and pre-schools is unavoidably speculative" (Bourke, Rigby, & Burden, 2000, p. 1).

Attendance is important but it may not have been as significant or overarching an issue as previously portrayed (Bourke, Rigby, & Burden, 2000). School attendance patterns between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students appear to have had limited variation but Aboriginal attendance has had a much wider distribution. There have been similar attendance figures of high or moderate attendance rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students but a "strikingly much higher proportion of Indigenous students' attendance in low or very low levels" (Bourke, Rigby, & Burden, 2000, p. 14). This small group of 'strikingly larger proportion' of Aboriginal non-attenders was significant enough to skew overall statistical levels of Aboriginal attendance towards negative attendance rates. Bourke stated "the major difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance rates is due to the much larger proportion of Indigenous students who are absent from school for a comparatively large number of days" (Bourke, Rigby, & Burden, 2000, p. 2).

Bourke (2000) identified some issues that relate to non-attendance and the low academic achievement of Aboriginal students but also highlighted that there is no evidence to inform us if poor attendance is in fact the cause:

*There appears to be no definitive evidence in the research literature as to whether poor attendance is a cause of the problems experienced by Indigenous students in this area of school learning or whether it is an effect of these problems. (Bourke, Rigby, & Burden, 2000, p. 5)*

Other significant factors that will be drawn upon later in this literature review and were identified in Bourke's report include: developing positive teacher-student relationships; making classrooms welcoming environments; increasing teacher

professional development; and cross-cultural training for teachers when working with Aboriginal students which would include tailoring teaching strategies and content to suit Aboriginal students' needs. Another feature that is highlighted is teachers working on the improvement of relationships with Aboriginal communities to support teachers' understandings of the local environment and of Aboriginal students.

Teachers and teaching practice are consistent factors when examining any aspect of why Aboriginal students are not succeeding in Australian schools. Fullarton (2002) has shown that Aboriginal students experience limited engagement at schools and that a significant portion of this lack of engagement is associated with differences between classroom teachers (p. 22). Teachers and their pedagogy in classrooms should therefore be a key factor when examining the engagement of Aboriginal students in schools. When looking at pedagogy for Aboriginal students, Aboriginal Cultural Knowledge (ACK) needs to be included as stated consistently by many Aboriginal pedagogical theorists (Donovan, 2009; Halse & Robinson, 1999; Harris, 1987; Heitmeyer, 2004; Hughes, More, & Williams, 2004; Nakata, 2007; Sarra, 2011; West, 2000; Yunkaporta, 2009). The 2004 NSW Department of Education & Training (DET) review of Aboriginal education highlighted the limited understanding of teachers and the teachers' request to gain better training in understanding Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal pedagogical practices (Nsw Aboriginal Education Consultative Group & Nsw Department of Education & Training, 2004, p. 92).

The low expectations placed upon Aboriginal students' educational abilities are another issue that should be noted in relation to quality pedagogy. Low teacher expectations have been argued to exist in relation to Aboriginal students for a long time. Fitzgerald highlighted teachers' poor expectations of Aboriginal students' abilities in his 1976 report into poverty and education in Australia (Fitzgerald, 1976). In NSW schools many Aboriginal Communities' members have stated that the expectations placed on their children by their teachers have led to very little support for their children in extending themselves in learning situations (Nsw Aboriginal Education Consultative Group & Nsw Department of Education & Training, 2004). Bishop, O'Sullivan, and Berryman (2010) and

Bourke (2000) have highlighted this deficit model of thinking in relation to Indigenous students and how it devalues the experiences and cultures they bring into the learning experiences, which can lead to the Indigenous students disengaging from the school due to seeing little value for themselves in a classroom with a deficit-thinking teacher (Bishop & Berryman, 2006).

Educational practices that involve Aboriginal understandings will help Aboriginal students engage within the educational system effectively. As Magga (2004) stated when addressing the UN Permanent Forum on Aboriginal Issues:

*All Aboriginal peoples also have this right and the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. (Magga, 2004, p. 3)*

This right is formalised in the 2008 NSW DET Aboriginal Education and Training Policy (Part 1.7), which states that:

*The Department will work with other government agencies and non-government organisations to build capacity within Aboriginal communities to ensure that Aboriginal people participate as equal partners in education and training. (Nsw Department of Education & Training, 2008, p. 15)*

In light of the significant proportion of Aboriginal students who are underachieving within the Australian education system, there is a need to critically examine how education can be reformed to engage Aboriginal students in high quality, socially just education. Freire (1972) highlighted more than 40 years ago that to engage with educationally disadvantaged populations like Aboriginal students, the oppressors, policymakers, and educators of our educational systems should look at the part they play in the on going disparities afflicting Aboriginal students.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities are some of the most disadvantaged groups globally. Much of the lack of success for Aboriginal

students can be related to the inappropriate educational practices directed at them through the dominant (non-Aboriginal) approaches of Australian educational systems. Pedagogical and systemic change needs to take account of the needs and learning preferences of Aboriginal students if Aboriginal students are to have “equitable access to, and opportunities in, schooling so that their learning outcomes improve and, overtime, match those of other students” (Ministerial Council for Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1999, p. 3). If Australian society and its institutions want to develop an equitable society and highlight the important place that Aboriginal society has within the Australian identity then the development of equitable partnerships need to be maintained. The National Aboriginal Education Committee (1985) presented this argument stating that:

*Education must be a process which builds on what we [Aboriginal people] are by recognising and developing our natural potential and cultural heritage [and] ... allows us to take our place as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians with pride in our identity and with confidence that we can play our part in Australian society. (National Aboriginal Education Committee, 1985, p. 5)*

This is the position that this study will work from to gain an equitable voice by Aboriginal students. I will ask the Aboriginal students what they believe is best for them when it comes to engaging in their education.

### **History of Aboriginal schooling in NSW**

With European invasion on the Australian continent occurring in the boundaries of the Eora Nation (Sydney basin), the South Eastern Coast of NSW took the brunt of many of the effects of invasion. This initial contact could have developed into some form of positive co-existence between the two different cultures of Aboriginal and European peoples as were suggested by British authorities prior to the expedition of discovery around the South Pacific Ocean (Parbury, 2005). But this appearance of co-existence did not occur; instead, it was a form of systematic destruction through slaughter, superiority, and later

assimilation of Aboriginal culture as a goal of colonisation. Many contemporary Australian historians have argued this standpoint (Goodall, 1996; Maynard, 2007; Parbury, 2005; Reynolds, 1999).

From the onset of co-existence Aboriginal Communities were pushed to the fringes of this new colonial society, even though they were given the benefits of being British subjects post-invasion (Goodall, 1996; Parbury, 2005). Acknowledgment of the Aboriginal Community only occurred when their existence became an impediment to the spread of this developing colonial settlement and when there was a need to support the colonial society through the Aboriginal communities' knowledge of the environment. This support included European explorers following Aboriginal people as guides in their travels across NSW in an attempt to open up greater access for the colony.

There are some examples of the inclusion of the Aboriginal Community into colonial society. Whilst colonial reformists had the best interests of the Aboriginal Community in mind, their actions did not succeed in benefiting the Aboriginal Community. William Shelley, a former London Missionary Society missionary, can be credited for one such example of this misguided humanitarian action through the development of the 1814 Parramatta Native Institute (Brook & Kohen, 1991). With the support of Governor Lachlan Macquarie, Shelley developed a Native school where he felt the best way to civilise Aboriginal children was to educate and Christianise them away from the negative influences of their parents and the Aboriginal Community. The children were housed in dormitory-style accommodation in isolation from their Community. Shelley educated these children in a civilised manner giving them the benefit of his educated and Christian culture. Education was usually in reading, writing, and arithmetic with the Bible as a strong motivator towards appropriate content.

The Native Institute had some academic success in one of the Aboriginal students coming first in the Colony in the Sunday School Bible studies exam (Parbury, 2011). But when students were allowed to return to their parents from the mission they all did so and left this so-called civilised culture behind to rejoin

their community (Brook & Kohen, 1991).

This form of schooling practice became a forerunner to the residential apprentice institutes for Aboriginal children. There were homes where Aboriginal children were removed from their families and Community to give them some basic education and skills in either domestic service or manual labour (Brook & Kohen, 1991; Parbury, 2011). These institutes were alien environments where aspects of Aboriginal culture such as language and cultural maintenance were forbidden and foreign educational practices with inappropriate learning styles were enforced upon the children to de-Aboriginalise them in preparation for a better-assimilated existence (Heitmeyer, 2004).

These values of colonising the Aboriginal population into British society for their civilisation have been evident through the co-existing history period since 1788 (Heitmeyer, 2004). The concept of improving these destitute savages through various policy practices such as protection and later assimilation has been maintained due to the position of superiority and paternalism of British and then Australian society. The concept of deficit thinking towards Aboriginal people has been embedded within all aspects of Australian society and has a foundation to many of these discriminatory practices against Aboriginal self-determination (Reynolds, 2009). These ideas of paternalism can be highlighted through the various policy adaptations relating to Aboriginal students since the establishment of the NSW Department of School Education (DSE) 1880 Public Instruction Act (Heitmeyer, 2004; Parbury, 2011).

The history of education in NSW has had a strong connection to Aboriginal education and has established the foundations to discriminatory educational practice towards Aboriginal students. The NSW 1880 Public Instruction Act was the first NSW education policy and mandated that all students within a two-mile radius of a NSW schoolhouse had to attend 76 days of schooling each year (Reynolds, 1999). Trained teachers with a developing school curriculum would support these schools. Many Aboriginal families enrolled their children into these schools because by 1880 many Aboriginal communities in NSW were

dispossessed from their lands and living in fringe settlements around townships. Colonial policy mandated that they must attend school but public opinion did not want this to occur. Due to public protest and to appease the non-Aboriginal public opinion against Aboriginal student attendance in schools, the NSW DSE established the 1884 Clean, Clad and Courteous Policy (Fletcher, 1989).

The 1884 Clean, Clad and Courteous Policy allowed teachers to send students home if they did not meet the minimum criteria of presenting themselves at school in a clean state, dressed in acceptable clothing, and behaving in a courteous or publically acceptable manner. This led to teacher discretion in maintaining this policy and in some cases outright discriminatory practices were maintained whereby if one Aboriginal student did not fit what the teacher judged as appropriate then all Aboriginal students were sent home and told not to ever return to this school (Fletcher, 1989). This did not happen at all schools; many teachers maintained an acceptable practice in relation to the policy but non-Aboriginal parent protest continued. In 1902 NSW had a change of Government that led to a change in policy direction from the minor discriminatory policy to overt institutional discriminatory policy practices.

The 1902 Exclusion on Demand Policy changed State direction to support the public demand that Aboriginal students were not equal to non-Aboriginal students and should not be treated in this manner. The 1902 Exclusion on Demand Policy allowed school principals to exclude all Aboriginal students from school if one non-Aboriginal parent complained about having Aboriginal students in their school (Fletcher, 1989; Heitmeyer, 2004; Parbury, 2011). This policy led to widespread exclusion of Aboriginal students across NSW. To emphasise this embedded view of deficit thinking towards Aboriginal people by NSW teachers this policy was maintained in the NSW Principals' Handbook until 1972 when a non-Aboriginal socially-just teacher applying for a principal position noted the policy and demanded that the Department remove this policy from its practices (Heitmeyer, 2004).

Improvements in attitudes towards Aboriginal students did not automatically change with the removal of this discriminatory policy, but newly formed



Aboriginal educational bodies, such as the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) and the NSW AECG lobbied the NSW Government to develop more appropriate policy changes (Parbury, 2011). These included the establishment of a NSW DSE Aboriginal Education Unit in 1981 and the 1982 Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP). NSW was the first State to develop an AEP for directing its teachers on best practices when supporting Aboriginal students and their communities. Again through significant lobbying by the NSW AECG this policy became mandatory for NSW DSE teachers in 1987 (Parbury, 2011). This was a positive education strategy but the major complaint by the AECG and concerned Aboriginal communities was that this policy was developed by the DSE without consultation with Aboriginal communities. The Aboriginal community therefore felt there was some embedded paternalism within this policy document.

The Aboriginal community voiced their concerns and desire for a policy review that was initiated in 1995. The policy was then re-developed and re-released in 1996 after an 18-month consultation process between the NSW DSE and the NSW AECG. This included super group meetings across NSW with AECG members, Aboriginal Education workers, and concerned individuals about Aboriginal education (Parbury, 2010). This new policy had support training documents and a wide-scale implementation and training package attached to it. This training was to inform and embed appropriate Aboriginal education understandings within school practices in classrooms and curriculum across a two-year period.

With the new development in school policy came the Department of Education and Training (DET); this was an organisational change to the former NSW Department of Education but a change in name only. With very limited system requirements to enforce mandatory participation in the 1996 NSW AEP by teachers in schools, the only significant change to school systems was the annual reporting about Aboriginal education in school, region, and State annual reports. Thus, some form of systematic change was suggested up to the most senior levels of NSW Education. The NSW DET was attempting to be transparent about its Aboriginal educational practices and positive changes but

much of this change was directed at administrative change with very limited targeted pedagogical action directed towards or monitored in classrooms.

An important feature of the 1996 NSW AEP was a statutory review after five years of implementation; this should have occurred by 2001 but after some significant lobbying by the NSW AECG was initiated in 2003. The review of the 1996 NSW AEP was embedded within a wide-scale study of Aboriginal education across NSW. This study involved a team of researchers who spent a weeklong visit at various sites across NSW with significant Aboriginal student populations interviewing school staff, teachers, principals, AEOs, Aboriginal students, and the local Aboriginal community. The final report of the review of Aboriginal education was released in 2004, providing a damning report on the state of Aboriginal education in NSW schools (Heitmeyer, 2004). These criticisms were not just directed from the Aboriginal community but many complaints came from school teachers and principals about their inability to deal with the differences that Aboriginal students brought to school environments and the embedded discriminatory attitudes within the system towards Aboriginal students. Some of the problems identified by educators in their interviews stemmed from limited teacher understanding of Aboriginal students. Many teachers interviewed as part of the Review stated:

*a belief that Aboriginal students learn differently from other students. Teachers' lack of awareness and understanding of Aboriginal students' Aboriginality, culture and language may impact on their relationships and interactions with Aboriginal students, which may in turn impact on the way Aboriginal students respond or behave. (Nsw Aboriginal Education Consultative Group & Nsw Department of Education & Training, 2004, p. 92)*

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Design of the Study**

This study involved interviewing Aboriginal High School students on what they believe is best for them in improving their engagement at school. The study is

consistent with the principles of self-determination, as the Aboriginal students were asked to identify, through their own stories, what they see as the best practices when engaging with Aboriginal students. The interviews were held at a variety of school locations to identify whether place, socio-economic status, geographical area, or culture has any significant effects on the students' perspectives.

These discussions were held in a Yarning Circle structure. A Yarning Circle is a level space where all participants are equal in terms of the value of their voice in the discussion. These structures of circular discussions are present within traditional and contemporary Aboriginal community meetings. It is a structure that is recognised as a part of the Aboriginal student community life (Donovan, 2015; Lewthwaite, Osborne, Lloyd, Llewellyn, Boon, Webber, Laffin, Kemp, Day, Wills, & Harrison, 2015; Yunkaporta, 2009). This structure has been used by Indigenous cultures including Aboriginal Australians for as long as human memory (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010).

As Edwards (1988), Bird-Rose (1992), Berndt and Berndt (1964) all highlight that community decision-making is where all participants within a community from Elders to youth all participate within community decisions. These discussions are facilitated by Elders (knowledge holders) who guide group consensus in decision-making where all members of a community have their right to voice their opinion and discuss their position in a safe, cultural bound forum. At times not all members stated their standpoint but their attendance and acceptance of discussions is a form of participatory action within this format. This Yarning Circle structure is founded on these principles where all the participants sit in a circle facing each other, which allows all participants to see each other comfortably. In a traditional sense a facilitator, someone who is respected for their wisdom or ability to guide their community, leads the Yarning Circle. Within the Yarning Circle all voices are heard and all voices carry the same value in the discussion.

In contemporary times this structure has been used for restorative justice meetings within many Indigenous communities including in Canada, Aotearoa

(New Zealand), and Australia, where victims of crimes can present themselves to offenders, allowing the victims to show the effects of the crimes to the offenders and members of their communities. These open discussions are discussions where victims of the crime could inform the perpetrator of the effects that the criminal actions have on them. It allows for some peace of mind to discuss these effects in a safe environment under the guiding eyes of respected local Indigenous Elders'. These restorative justice circles allow the community to sit as equals in the decision-making process with significant members of their community as adjudicators to the decision. They decide on the best form of restorative justice to maintain balance within their community under a form of localised decision-making where cultural moderators (Elders) can guide through informed decisions. (Schurrer, 2004)

The use of a yarning circle establishes a safe, non-hierarchical place where everyone present around the circle has the opportunity to speak without interruptions. As this is generally an Aboriginal community recognised structure, the use of this format was used so the Aboriginal students may feel welcomed and culturally safe amongst other Aboriginal people whilst being asked their opinion on their education. In a research context the researcher will facilitate the process by introducing the discussion topics and supporting the open discussion. This can be done by clarifying comments, probing further, or inviting participants into the Yarning Circle to allow for comments from all parties. For many non-Aboriginal researchers this structure may appear similar to that of a focus group. But for many Aboriginal peoples this circular structure is the norm for community meetings, especially at important meetings where the community leaders are bringing issues to the community for open discussion. It is a known structure and a comfortable space. This type of forum can be seen as a culturally secure space for open discussion in Aboriginal communities.

As I have highlighted the Aboriginal cultural similarities within the design of these Yarning Circles has been developed to engage the Aboriginal students in a known culturally familiar structure. I believe this structure has limited pitfalls when lead by a culturally secure investigator in relation to engaging Aboriginal students in open discussions. But if the researcher has had limited experience

facilitating group lead discussions then aspects of participatory imbalance from participants may appear. Through focusing on the Aboriginal student participation with regular intervention by the researcher to allow for an open discussion from all parts of the Yarning Circle.

The design of the Yarning Circle accommodated approximately five high school students in Stage 5 (Year 9 and 10) to discuss what they believed were best practices in engaging Aboriginal students at school. A targeted approach in the identification of schools was taken rather than a random selection of schools with significant Aboriginal student populations. This was done because there is very limited evidence of regular Aboriginal student success across all schools in NSW, so schools that have had some recent success or engagement in positive change were identified.

A total of eight high schools were visited with initially four schools in a targeted school district identified. This district was targeted because it covered both urban and rural areas and the four schools had some of the largest Aboriginal student numbers in them. This initial investigation of the study set the norm from the participant responses. Four other schools that were targeted had particular features associated with Aboriginal populations that made them interesting sites of study; namely, an urban school in a low-socioeconomic area, a remote school, a school that featured Aboriginal culture with a long-standing Aboriginal languages program, and an elite independent single-sex boarding school that had a strong long-term mentorship program.

Schools	Location	Student population	Aboriginal percentage	ICESA	Attendance rate, %
1	Metropolitan	553	15	895	81
2	Provincial	1221	8	959	90
3	Metropolitan	867	10	956	88
4	Metropolitan	529	13	927	88
5	Metropolitan	535	12	872	85
6	Metropolitan	1056	3	1145	100

7	Remote	101	65	771	85
8	Provincial	401	21	911	85

Table 1: School site information from My School website (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014)

A total of 50 students participated in the Yarning Circles. Some schools invited more than the five students to participate; this was an individual school-based decision that I was happy to accommodate. There were 33 male and 17 female students who participated and as I intended to visit a single-sex school, gender balance was not an identifiable feature suggested to principals when they targeted students for participation.

The Yarning Circle evolved from informal introductions and establishment of cultural positioning or relationships of family and community between the student researcher and the participants. The significance of a formal introduction of family and place has been identified in other Aboriginal researchers' works especially when engaging with Aboriginal communities. This behaviour will allow the Aboriginal community to position the researcher within the worldview of that community and their participants (Blair, 2008; Hanlen, 2002). From there we proceeded to more targeted discussions around the research question. Within these discussions the students gave their standpoint on the issues they wanted to address about engagement at school, with their teachers and their curriculum.

## **Research Intent**

Within the current Australian educational system Aboriginal students are highly over-represented at the lower ends of any statistical measure (Thomson, De Bortoli, & Buckley, 2013). There has been limited successful change across Aboriginal student populations since national records on Aboriginal populations have been maintained. This position is highlighted in the NSW Review of Aboriginal Education where it was noted that:

*One of the most evaluated, reviewed and inquired about areas of education in Australia is Aboriginal education. Yet education systems around the nation have been unable to deliver the same levels of success for Aboriginal students as they do for other students. The gap persists despite the efforts of educators in schools and on TAFE campuses. There is reason to believe that what we are currently doing is not working. Put simply, it is time for a new approach. (Nsw Aboriginal Education Consultative Group & Nsw Department of Education & Training, 2004, p. 12)*

This study takes these understandings into account in the development and engagement of a research-based examination of Aboriginal education in NSW. This goal is achieved through engagement with the Aboriginal students' standpoint as the central form of evidence to base the analysis of what the Aboriginal students believe is the best practices to support their engagement in schools.

### **Previous Studies**

Upon examining the literature, only two similar studies have been identified. Much of my study design is based on the work of Russell Bishop and Mere Berryman whose New Zealand school reformation practices called Te Kotahitanga initiated their study through firstly asking Maori students what was involved in improving their educational achievement, by gathering a number of narratives of students' classroom experiences through 'Collaborative Storying' from a range of Maori students in mainstream schools. The students clearly identified the main influences on their educational achievement and told the researchers how teachers related and interacted with Maori students in their classrooms and how they could create a context for learning where the students' educational achievement could improve (Bishop & Berryman, 2006). This position of self-determining research is how I address the question regarding 'what form(s) of pedagogy are necessary for increasing the engagement of Aboriginal school students'.

In an Australian context there have been a very limited number of research studies where Aboriginal students were asked about their views of schools, teachers, and what they found valuable in their schooling experience. Two of those studies worth noting include Dr Basia Black-Gutman completed one in 1992 where she interviewed some urban primary school Aboriginal students (Gutman-Black, 1992). This work was identified primarily to support teachers to interpret Aboriginal students' behaviour in class and communicate more effectively with them. This work aimed to inform teachers about urban Aboriginal Primary School students' behaviour and their likes about school. My study differs from Gutman-Black's work in that the collaborative storying or narrative of the students will inform the author about their understanding of the best teaching practices (pedagogy) that engage these Aboriginal high school students. Also, the use of high school students was identified because this age group of students is capable of articulating appropriate pedagogical practices that suit their learning preferences.

The early stages of a more recent research project was published in May 2015 where Lewthwaite, Osborne, Lloyd, Llewellyn, and Boon from James Cook University partnered with Webber, Laffin, Kemp, Day, Willis, and Harrison from the Diocese of Catholic Education, Townsville (Lewthwaite, Osborne, Lloyd, Llewellyn, Boon, Webber, Laffin, Kemp, Day, Wills, & Harrison, 2015). This study interviewed Aboriginal students, Aboriginal parents, and some Aboriginal teachers involved in up to five Diocese schools about their educational experiences in formal and informal settings in trying to develop an Effective Teaching Profile (ETP) for working with Aboriginal students. This research used a similar narrative style interview discussion and also acknowledged Bishop's work with Maori students (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003) but it differs in that Aboriginal parents as well as students were interviewed in the development of an ETP. My focus on engaging with Indigenous students aligns with Bishop's work rather than engaging in what Lewthwaite et al., (2015) acknowledged as presenting a very different pedagogical focus when engaging with parent views.



My research task is more aligned with the Bishop model of collaborative storytelling (Bishop, 1997) which allows the narratives of the Aboriginal students to inform this work about the main influences on their educational achievement and engagement in relation to their teachers and schools. Collaborative storytelling is a narrative between the Aboriginal students and the Aboriginal researcher. The use of a yarning circle structure of open discussion around issues relating to the study rather than a question-response interview structure is intended to enable the Aboriginal students' standpoint and their articulation of their understandings to be verbalised as the primary form of evidence. This form of inquiry has been found to be an effective form for Aboriginal participants allowing a free-flowing investigative discussion within a culturally appropriate setting (Blair, 2008; Hanlen, 2002).

The study involves a rolling sample of student participants with the first part of the investigation examining one school district as an initial sample of NSW schools. These first four schools were chosen as they have the four largest Aboriginal high school student populations in that district. From this sample the Yarning Circle interviews were transcribed and coded to identify factors relating to effective practices that engage Aboriginal students. Next, the study was extended to identify any differences when examining regional settings, socio-economic factors, or Aboriginal cultural practices. As there is very limited evidence of regular Aboriginal student success a targeted approach has been taken rather than a random selection of schools (with significant Aboriginal student populations). To test the validity of the study beyond the four initial schools four diverse schools were chosen for characteristics significant to Aboriginal society. These classifications were a school with strong Aboriginal cultural practices through the school's Aboriginal language development, a remote school, a low socio-economic urban setting, and a school in a high socioeconomic setting with a strong Aboriginal student mentorship program.

When examining the Yarning Circle discussions some pedagogical features that have been consistently noted by Aboriginal pedagogical theorists since the late 1970s will be reinforced if participants also emphasise these features. Such features include:

- 1) Recognition of Aboriginal culture;
- 2) Relationship development between teacher and Aboriginal student;
- 3) Localised content and placing the learning in context with Aboriginal society and Aboriginal worldview;
- 4) Use of group- and peer-supported learning;
- 5) Adapting the learning environment to be safe and free from racism;
- 6) Dynamic teaching practices to support various preferred Aboriginal learning styles;
- 7) Allowing Aboriginal students to be responsible for their learning with some choice within the educational framework; and
- 8) Acknowledging the use of reflective learning.

## **Aims of the research project**

The primary aim of this study was to identify forms of pedagogy that will best engage Aboriginal students in school, based on the evidence presented through the use of Yarning Circles within culturally safe environments. The analysis was filtered through the Aboriginal cultural foundations of the author as an Aboriginal educational researcher.

From these observations I identify what the Aboriginal student participants stated are the educational practices that they found were best in engaging them with their schools, teachers, and curriculum. I then interpret the students' observations to explore pedagogical features that might help teachers to gain a better understanding of how to engage Aboriginal school age students.

## **Brief description of my methodology for this research**

In this study, Aboriginal high school students were interviewed about their experiences and what they believe is needed to improve their engagement at school. The study draws on the importance of self-determination by valuing Aboriginal students' attempts to identify what practices are best for engaging them in education. I use the principle of self-determination based on the definition of Jonas in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

2002 Social Justice report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission & Jonas, 2002). Jonas defines self-determination as community controlled empowerment without assimilating into the practices of mainstream Australia and allowing Aboriginal peoples to represent themselves through their own unique cultural expressions and decisions (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission & Jonas, 2002). Jonas and Hall (1983) developed this definition based on some earlier work where they highlight self-determination as,

- a) Aboriginal expectations in everyday reality of their own situation,
  - b) That Aboriginal people would articulate and prioritise their needs, possibly identifying solutions as well as problems and
  - c) That Aboriginal peoples perception of their needs would result in quantifiable patterns which could form useful bases for policy making.
- (p. 7)

Bishop, O'Sullivan and Berryman (2010) support these relational principles of self-determination where they state, "self-determination meaning that right determine one's own destiny, to define what that destiny will be and to define and pursue the means of attaining that destiny". (p. 65)

Conducting this research at a variety of school locations was designed to identify if place, socioeconomic standing, and culture have any significant influence in shaping students' views. Also due to the key group of informants being Aboriginal students, a student population being identified as a severely disadvantaged population (Blanchard, 1985; Commonwealth of Australia, 1995; Nsw Aboriginal Education Consultative Group & Nsw Department of Education & Training, 2004) then grounded theory methods needed to be used to engage with a social just research practice.

The study used a rolling sample of schools based in grounded theory principles of purposive non-probability sampling, using theoretical sampling techniques (Bryman, 2012). The use of theoretical sampling based under grounded theory principles were used until the researcher noted a theoretical saturation where confirmation of significance were noted through student participants repetition of categories. This theoretical sampling technique was built with the initial

investigation examining a specific school district as a normative sample for NSW schools. These first four schools were chosen due to having the largest Aboriginal high school student populations. From this sample the study identified potential categories related to effective practices that engage Aboriginal students. The study was extended from there to identify if there were any significant differences when examining regional settings, socio-economic factors or Aboriginal cultural practices.

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) highlight that a grounded theory approach engaging with Aboriginal students as the target opinion is suited to contemporary educational research protocol because, “the reality of the present differs from the past” (p. 205). This building of new knowledge through grounded theory methods has the ability to engage with the sensitivity of content relevant to socially just change through improving Aboriginal students educational outcomes. The grounded theory method gives the researcher the opportunity to pursue emergent questions with the research discussions’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Strauss, 1993). This thesis focuses on developing theory to support improving teacher pedagogy when engaging Aboriginal students and as Patton (2002) suggests, “grounded theory focuses on the process of generating theory rather than a particular theoretical content” (p. 125).

So by engaging with Aboriginal students as crucial informants then their understandings’ are key elements of investigating the key elements of this thesis. So a targeted approach was taken rather than a random selection of schools with significant Aboriginal student populations to gain a significant sample size of Aboriginal students and these specific schools were identified given the very limited evidence of Aboriginal student success in education. As a result, the eight schools that investigated can be described as follows:

- 1- 4. Four schools with high Aboriginal student populations in an identified school district that features both urban and rural settings
5. A remote school
6. A school with strong cultural foundations through a long running local Aboriginal language program

7. An elite high socioeconomic status school
8. A low socioeconomic status urban school

### **Toward a focus on Aboriginal students' voices**

The original focus question for study was the “Use of the NSW Quality Teaching framework and its comparison to what Aboriginal pedagogical theorists suggest as best practice for improvements of educational outcomes of Aboriginal students”. The original design of my study revolved around the examination of the NSW Quality Teaching (QT) framework and if this pedagogical tool would be useful in supporting the education of Aboriginal students. I was able to organise two of the authors of QT as supervisors, which was beneficial to me in gaining access to their expertise for considering the framework. My primary focus at this point was to see what teachers did when it came to working with Aboriginal students. My standpoint has never involved positioning Aboriginal students as somehow in deficit. Rather, I was concerned that something was missing when it came to teachers working with Aboriginal students. It was not the students whom I targeted; it was the teachers and what they had not been able to present to Aboriginal students when engaging them in their education.

After some early work with QT that included winning an Australian Research Council (ARC) Indigenous Discovery grant, my work was in part superseded by the findings of the Systematic Implications of Pedagogy and Achievement (SIPA) study, the first longitudinal study of QT in NSW schools. From this study, part of the research team analysed Aboriginal student results in SIPA schools and found that with the use of QT Aboriginal students' academic outcomes increased (Amosa, Ladwig, Griffiths, & Gore, 2007). These results left me wondering where I could go with my work. After some discussion with my supervisors and an examination of what publications I had produced so far in my research on this topic, I realised that much of my work had targeted a particular area of QT, namely the use of Cultural Knowledge (CK) when working with Aboriginal students. This was the new direction that I took when I presented my work for confirmation of my PhD candidature.

During the development of my peer-reviewed confirmation of my PhD I re-organised the focus of my PhD question, to examine “*What form(s) of teaching are necessary for increasing the engagement of Aboriginal school students?*” This new direction was then guided towards the use of Aboriginal students’ voices as the target source of data for gaining evidence for responding to this question.

### **What can this research add to Aboriginal pedagogical theory?**

This thesis makes a unique contribution to the field of Aboriginal pedagogical theory. By unique I am not suggesting a unique methodology or discovery for the field; rather, this study is unique as it is the first example of qualitative empirical research on Aboriginal pedagogical practices from the standpoint of Aboriginal students only.

There has been a great deal of research and presentations on best practice for engaging Aboriginal students in schools. These arguments have been regularly stated since the late 1970s by various teachers and educational researchers, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. These arguments highlight the need for specific understandings and pedagogical behaviours to engage Aboriginal students. A summary of this research and pedagogical observations has been provided earlier with reference to academic work associated with various pedagogical understandings.

Some differences between this study and earlier works is that this work does not hypothesise about best pedagogical practices; it does not simply highlight observations noted by the authors between their Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students; nor does it compare Aboriginal students to other students in their schools. This empirical research used established qualitative research practices across a diverse and wide range of school environments that took into account societal and educational elements that have been associated with Aboriginal students.

From the examination and analysis of the data that was collected from the Yarning Circles many of these earlier anecdotal and small-scale school-based observations that have been developing the field of Aboriginal pedagogical theory have been validated. But through the use of Aboriginal student voices as the sole data source some greater detail and slightly different focus on specific educational and school structural practices have been highlighted. This research has been developed within established and recognised educational research frameworks following appropriate protocols in scientific research practice with the inclusion of maintaining Aboriginal cultural ethical procedures.

Having worked in Aboriginal education in higher education institutions since 1996 I have been fortunate to collaborate with, attend conference presentations, and read works from most of the experts in Aboriginal pedagogical theory, including established experts who have been working in this field since the 1980s through to some of the more recent early career researchers. None of the observations made from my research could challenge the validity of the arguments presented by these Aboriginal educational experts. What I am highlighting here is that my research is filling a gap in this research field, in terms of empirical research to 'test' and validate the pedagogical arguments that have been highlighted by these educational researchers. Many of the observations that I make in the following chapters can be seen as very similar to earlier research observations, but I can confidently argue the theoretical validity and generalisability of this work through the established research practices utilised. These issues will be examined in later chapters.

Another feature of this research that is different to many other research practices in this field is that all of the data was taken from Aboriginal students only. This was done to gain the understandings of the primary participants in Aboriginal educational practice, the Aboriginal students themselves. The use of the Aboriginal student voice only is not completely unique as Godfrey, Partington, Richer, and Harslett (2001) have also used Aboriginal students' voice as their data set. But the difference between our works is that my research was based on Aboriginal student response to open-ended questions on school, teachers, and the curriculum, while the Godfrey et al. work is a

survey requiring Aboriginal students to fit their interpretations of the questions into the closest answer developed by the researcher, a pre-established response on a scale worded by the researcher, not emerging from the voice of the Aboriginal student. This significant factor will be elaborated later in this thesis.