Walanbaa warramildanha: Standing their ground: Honouring Aboriginal standpoint to effect teachers’ professional knowledge.

by

Kevin Lowe


A thesis submitted to The University of Newcastle in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy December 2015
Statement of Originality

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains 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.

17 April 2016

Kevin Lowe
Acknowledgements

No work of this nature can be either undertaken or be brought to fruition without the significant and ongoing support over the course of its life from friends, advisors and supervisors, loved ones and the many people who sustained my various needs throughout this journey. There is always a beginning and mine commenced when my good friend and mentor Assoc. Prof Peter Howard convinced me that the issue of understanding how parental engagement with schools and teachers could be a critical element in the larger task of improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students.

This work which emanates out of long held Aboriginal community aspirations to be active partners in their children’s education, is representative of these desires, and their knowledge, wisdom, skills and critical facilities that have ensured their survival and cultural renaissance. Their resilience has been a beacon when little sense could be made of this world we inhabit, and guiding us back to Country where lost connections can be healed and sleeping knowledge woken.

While I take responsibility for the structure and content of this work, I freely admit that I was guided by two wonderful supervisors Dr. Margot Ford and Dr. Rachel Buchanan who tutored my unruly mind, reigned in my thoughts and kept me to the task of being genuine to community aspirations. One of my greatest joys and sadness was the period with my initial supervisors Dr. Wendy Miller, who tragically passed away during this journey and Assoc. Prof James Ladwig and Prof James Albright. They each helped me to see the wood from the trees and provided guidance and direction in the early stages of this work.

I also want to thank a group of extraordinary academics at Sydney University who gave me support when I was in that dark space and not knowing how to move forward. It was Prof Gabrielle Meagher and Assoc. Prof Judy Anderson who found me a safe space to work, who organised seminars and critiqued my early work. I thank them for their ongoing support. I was also very lucky to have the opportunity to work with others, like Vivien Wood who transcribed every interview, Dr. Jennifer St George who taught me about the astonishing capacities and vagaries of NVivo and whose support was invaluable. I want to also acknowledge my many friends and colleagues at the Wollotuka Institute at Newcastle University who provided much support over the last six years.

Lastly, I want to thank Janet, my wonderful wife who was literally my fellow traveller, seeing me off on my week’s away while visiting communities, reading everything I wrote, critiquing my ideas, and generally being the best friend one could hope for. I also acknowledge my four prodigious children, Katherine, Georgina, Alex and Myra, for supporting my endeavour and for always showing genuine interest in my progress. I thank them all from the bottom of my heart. Lastly, I want to thank my sister Philippa, who supported me on my many trips to Newcastle.

I want to thank you collectively for supporting me, providing moral and ethical
direction the intellectual rigour that is required to complete this work. It's been an exhilarating to date, but we are still just at the beginning of this most important of journeys.

Walanbaa warramildanha

Maaru Yanaya

Yaluu Ngali Ngamilay

(go well until I see you again)
## Table of Contents

Statement of Originality ........................................................................................................... i
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................... ii
Table of Contents .................................................................................................................... iv
List of Figures .......................................................................................................................... vii
List of Tables ........................................................................................................................... viii
List of Abbreviations ............................................................................................................... ix
Abstract ..................................................................................................................................... x

### Chapter 1: Realising messages from marginal voices ......................................................... 1

1.1 Journeys into the landscape .............................................................................................. 1
1.2 Purpose of the study .......................................................................................................... 2
1.3 So there’s a problem in Aboriginal education? ................................................................. 4
1.4 Significance of the study .................................................................................................. 6
1.5 Research design .............................................................................................................. 6
1.6 Research questions ......................................................................................................... 8
1.7 The road map .................................................................................................................. 9
1.8 Overarching findings ...................................................................................................... 11

### Chapter 2: The field of community and school engagement ............................................. 14

2.1 Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 14
2.2 Indigenous standpoint and the act of engagement at the cultural interface .................. 14
2.3 Education – schools and community engagement ......................................................... 20
2.4 Teachers' professional knowledge and change ............................................................... 26
2.5 Teacher professional change ........................................................................................... 27

### Chapter 3: Methodology .................................................................................................... 32

3.1 Traversing dangerous ground ......................................................................................... 32
3.2 Establishing a critical Indigenous research methodology .............................................. 38

### Chapter 4: A research method for critical Indigenous ethnographic case studies .......... 45

4.1 Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 45
4.2 A multisite ethnographic research design in Aboriginal communities 45
Chapter 5: Interrogating the ‘native’ - acts of epistemic misappropriation ............. 68
  5.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................. 68
  5.2 Epistemic contestation: Positioning Aboriginal people in the dominant western paradigm ......................................................................................................................... 70
  5.3 Power, knowledge and place .................................................................................... 76
  5.4 Power knowledge and learning ............................................................................... 81

Chapter 6: Localised acts of Aboriginal agency and resistance ...................................... 93
  6.1 Agency and Resistance ............................................................................................. 93
  6.2 Agency: The predisposition for social action .......................................................... 97
  6.3 Spiritual connectedness and Indigenous identity ..................................................... 107
  6.4 Relational engagement ............................................................................................ 115

Chapter 7: Aboriginal standpoint ........................................................................................ 124
  7.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................... 124
  7.2 Tubbagah: ............................................................................................................... 127
  7.3 Karrajong .................................................................................................................. 133
  7.4 Wurtindelly ............................................................................................................... 139
  7.5 Mayanbri .................................................................................................................. 146

Chapter 8: Dissonance, accommodation and collaboration .............................................. 156
  8.1 Introduction .............................................................................................................. 156
  8.2 Tubbagah: ............................................................................................................... 162
  8.3 Mayanbri .................................................................................................................. 169
  8.4 Concluding remarks ................................................................................................. 177

Chapter 9: Effecting change through cultural engagement .............................................. 179
  9.1 Introduction .............................................................................................................. 179
  9.2 Wurtindelly ............................................................................................................... 180
Chapter 10: Effecting teacher change – authentic engagement and teachers’ professional knowledge

10.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 204
10.2 Authentic community and school engagement ................................................. 206
10.3 Teacher Professional knowledge ........................................................................ 214
10.4 Community engagement and teacher professional knowledge ................. 217
10.5 Effect of community school engagement, and teachers’ professional knowledge ........................................................................................................... 220
10.6 Dynamic school and community engagement’s impact on teachers’ professional knowledge ........................................................................................................... 223

Chapter 11: Walanbaa warramildanha (we are) standing strong ......................... 231

11.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 231
11.2 Mapping back to the question .............................................................................. 232
11.3 Drawing the threads ............................................................................................... 240
11.4 Limitations ............................................................................................................. 243
11.5 Implications ............................................................................................................ 244
11.6 Concluding commentary ....................................................................................... 246

References ...................................................................................................................... 248
List of Figures

Figure 3.1: Interactions of Indigenous theory, methodology and research .................. 44
Figure 4.1: Western DET region ........................................................................... 49
Figure 5.1: Epistemic misappropriation of Aboriginal people .................................. 69
Figure 6.1: Establishing site specific Aboriginal standpoint ..................................... 94
Figure 7.1: Site analysis through situated agentic action ........................................ 125
Figure 8.1: Site-specific Aboriginal community and school engagement .................. 158
Figure 8.2: Community and school engagement at the cultural interface ............... 159
Figure 10.1: Multilayered, dynamic and organic intersections at cultural interface . 221
Figure 10.2: Engagement at the cultural interface .................................................. 223
Figure 10.3: Competing and overlapping relational elements within the cultural interface ............................................................................................................ 224
List of Tables

Table 4.1: Research school sites and participants ................................................................. 51
Table 6.1: Thematic investigation of Agency and Resistance .................................................. 95
Table 6.2: Community's manifesto of "Dos and Don'ts" ...................................................... 102
Table 6.3: Thematic summary of findings ............................................................................ 122
Table 7.1: Aggregated site-specific Aboriginal standpoint positions .................................... 153
## List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACARA</td>
<td>Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACER</td>
<td>Australian Council for Educational Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACLO</td>
<td>Aboriginal Education Liaison Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AECG</td>
<td>Aboriginal Education Consultative Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AEO</td>
<td>Aboriginal Education Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AERT</td>
<td>Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIATSIS</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BoS</td>
<td>NSW Board of Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAA</td>
<td>Department of Aboriginal Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEC</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DET</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IYLP</td>
<td>Indigenous Youth Leadership Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAPLAN</td>
<td>National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEAF</td>
<td>National Ethics Approval Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCRGSP</td>
<td>Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SERAP</td>
<td>State Education Research Approval Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Socio-economic Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VAEAI</td>
<td>Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

Aboriginal Student education achievement in New South Wales languishes at the same levels it has for decades and is seen as one of the greatest challenges for educational policy and practice. One element of this problem relates to the significant social and cultural disconnect between Aboriginal students, their communities and teachers. Teachers have too often been appointed to schools without the requisite professional knowledge that would allow them to make authentic learning and cultural connections to these students.

The purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of the nature and dynamics of community and school engagement in four sites with high proportions of Aboriginal students. It investigates the potential for positive interactions between Aboriginal people and schools and teachers’ capacity to develop authentic pedagogic practices that is responsive to their Aboriginal students’ needs and aspirations. It further investigates how these Aboriginal communities articulate their interactions with schools and teachers and how they in turn they are presented within school and teacher discourse.

The thesis unpacks Aboriginal community standpoint and the initiation of purposeful collaboration at the cultural interface. The research questions the nature of these relationships and in particular how Aboriginal stakeholders have supported teachers to build their knowledge about Aboriginal students and their community.

This research uses a critical Indigenous ethnographic methodology through interviews with Aboriginal community members, teachers and principals in four regional, rural and remote locations in NSW.

Furthermore, it was seen that in each school site, there was varying evidence of deep and authentic engagement between Aboriginal people and a number of teachers. It was seen that in these instances, there was a shift in some teachers’ professional knowledge, and teacher engagement. Finally, the research identified that Aboriginal parents and community members have a strong commitment to being party to the development of authentic collaborations with schools. This research argues that teachers need to honour, understand and actively reflect on community history, contexts and aspirations to develop the skills and knowledge to address the particular socio-cultural and educational needs of Aboriginal students.