Cultural Immersion: Developing a Community of Practice of Teachers and Aboriginal Community Members

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A lack of teacher awareness of the cultural and historical background of Aboriginal students has long been recognised as a major causative factor in the failure of Australian schools to fully engage Aboriginal students and deliver equitable educational outcomes for them. Using Wenger's communities of practice framework, this paper analyses the effectiveness of the Connecting to Country (CTC) program in addressing this issue in New South Wales (NSW) schools whereby Aboriginal community members design and deliver professional learning for teachers. Qualitative and quantitative data from 14 case studies suggest that the CTC program has had a dramatic impact on the attitudes of teachers to Aboriginal students, on their ability to establish relationships with the local Aboriginal community and on their willingness to adapt curriculum and pedagogy to better meet the needs of their students. As Aboriginal community members and teachers developed communities of practice, new approaches to Aboriginal student pedagogies were imagined through a sense of joint enterprise, mutuality and shared repertoire, empowering all participants in the CTC journey. Implications from this research highlight the importance of teacher professional learning delivered by Aboriginal people, Aboriginal community engagement in local schools and addressing deficit discourses about Aboriginal students and their families.

■ **Keywords:** Aboriginal community, Aboriginal education, cultural immersion, communities of practice, teacher professional learning, relationships

The continuing gap between the educational outcomes of Indigenous Australian students and their non-Indigenous peers is well documented in a range of government reports and research (see, for instance, Australian Council for Educational Research, 2013; Buckskin et al., 2008; Cobbold, 2013; New South Wales Ombudsman, 2011; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2011). Compounding the effects of these disparate educational outcomes are mainstream policies and educational discourses that tend to position Aboriginal people as deficit, inferior and deviant often resulting in the application of paternalistic, assimilationist and/or compensatory pedagogies to 'solve the Aboriginal problem' (Hart, Whatman, McLaughlin & Sharmer-Brymer, 2012; Hooley, 2009; McConaghy, 2000; Nakata, 2011; Vass, 2012). 'Closing the Gap' in these and other key indicators has occupied governments for a number of years, but in many cases, improvements are hampered by short-term initiatives and the complexity of addressing key underlying causes impacting on Aboriginal outcomes.

The seminal report, the Review of Aboriginal Education conducted by the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) & NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) in 2004 found that by and large, Aboriginal students and their families continue to be positioned within these deficit discourses and suggest that regressive colonial attitudes towards Indigenous people are also reflected in educational practice at local levels. As well, a persistent lack of cultural understanding by teachers and educational authorities as a key contributing factor to limited educational opportunities and success for Aboriginal students (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2012) was also identified in the report.

Supporting these claims is the 'Systematic Implications of Pedagogy and Achievement in NSW public schools' (Griffiths, Amosa, Ladwig & Gore, 2007) research study

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conducted by the University of Newcastle and the NSW DET from 2003 to 2007. This study produced substantial evidence linking low teacher expectations, poor pedagogical practices and low quality assessment tasks for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and disadvantaged students to poor academic results. Significantly, the researchers found that professional learning focusing on the creation of a quality learning environment built on high teacher expectations and inclusive pedagogy closes the equity gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. These findings support the NSW AECG claim that teachers need professional learning on how to create quality learning environments where culturally responsive pedagogies are embedded to create the conditions for improved attendance, retention and academic outcomes for students (Burgess & Berwick, 2009).

Therefore, teacher professional learning that develops deep knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal students, families and local communities is identified in the research as an important area to address. Cultural programs that connect teachers and schools with local Aboriginal culture, opportunities to engage with Aboriginal community members in the educational process and develop strategies to affirm Aboriginal student identity through culturally responsive pedagogies (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2012) are crucial aspects of this learning.

In response to this and ongoing local Aboriginal concerns about the quality of education their children receive, the NSW AECG designed a cultural immersion professional learning program for teachers called 'Being Culturally Aware Becoming Culturally Inclusive: A Pathway to Cultural Competence' (Williams, 2010) which this paper describes and analyses as it is implemented across NSW in targeted schools. This innovative program repositions control for teacher professional learning from the education system to local Aboriginal communities through their local AECGs and as such becomes a unique grass roots approach to addressing educational disparities for Aboriginal students.

This paper examines the potential of this program to make a significant breakthrough in addressing these disparities by incorporating intensive cultural immersion experience into professional learning programs to assist teachers design and apply social learning systems as well as engage in more effective communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, 2000) within an Aboriginal education context. The potential to achieve sustainable improvements in Aboriginal students' educational outcomes will be explored in this context.

Context

Based on outcomes from the Report of the Review into Aboriginal Education (NSW AECG & NSW DET, 2004), the NSW AECG insisted that until the issue of teacher cultural competency was adequately addressed, programs

focussing on attendance, retention and educational outcomes would have minimal success. Consequently, a joint venture between the NSW AECG and the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC), consisting of a three-day program provided by the local AECG and a two-day follow up program by the DEC collectively known as the CTC program, was designed to provide professional learning for local school staff. From 2010, principals, early career teachers and newly appointed teachers in 143 NSW departmental schools which were targeted for their significant Aboriginal enrolments, participated in local CTC programs (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2013). These schools are located mainly in rural and isolated areas in NSW with a low socioeconomic status and poor access to employment and educational opportunities. The 14 schools involved in this research study were chosen by the NSW AECG in consultation with the local communities and schools and included seven high schools, six primary schools and one central school across five DEC regions including regional, rural and isolated areas.

The first part of the CTC program, the NSW AECG cultural immersion program is a framework that each local AECG adapts to their specific circumstances to develop and implement a localised three-day experience for approximately five teachers and the principal from each local school. Activities vary for each site but generally include visits to significant cultural sites, talks by Elders, visits to local Aboriginal community organisations, kinship activities and interaction with Aboriginal parents and students. A crucial element of this experience is building relationships between the teachers and Aboriginal community members and often activities focus on creating informal and spontaneous opportunities to build these relationships (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2013). The local AECG provides this on a largely volunteer basis with funding provided for venues, food, transport and guest speakers.

A review of this program was conducted in 2011–2012 (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2013) using a mixed method approach (Creswell, 2009) to obtain and analyse qualitative and quantitative data from a wide range of sources including:

- 357 individual anonymous participant evaluations of the local AECG cultural immersion programs from all CTC programs conducted before and during this study;
- interviews with 54 participating teachers including six principals from 14 participating schools in five DEC regions;
- interviews with 27 parents/community members; and
- focus group workshops with 99 Aboriginal students aged from 10 to 16 in 14 schools.

Most of the data analysis presented in this paper is drawn from teacher evaluations and interviews as the priority of the cultural immersion program is improving

teacher cultural competence as a key step towards improving education for Aboriginal students. However, some parent, community and student interview material is used where it contributes to the theoretical framing of the research findings.

Analysis of the data suggested that while there was a somewhat muted response to the second component of the program, the three-day AECG cultural immersion component had a dramatic, sometimes transformational impact on the vast majority of participants. As a community controlled program, this is an original and innovative approach to teacher professional learning and is thus the focus of this paper.

In both individual interviews and anonymous evaluations, teachers overwhelmingly reported that the cultural immersion component of the CTC had improved their knowledge and understanding of local Aboriginal people, histories and cultures and enhanced their confidence in incorporating Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum. Further, participants reported developing new skills in communicating with Aboriginal people and gaining new awareness of the benefits of doing this for the education of Aboriginal students. This is supported by statistical indicators such as:

- 98.3% reported increased knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal people, history and culture, particularly at the local level;

- 90.5% reported adopting new approaches to teaching Aboriginal history and culture;

- 81.1% reported changing their approach to teaching Aboriginal students;

- 83.8% reported feeling more confident and willing to build relationships with Aboriginal families; and

- 94.6% reported that they would recommend the experience to other teachers.

Significantly, evidence from the research study revealed that prior to participating in the CTC program, many teacher participants had limited somewhat superficial contact with the Aboriginal community particularly outside the formal school setting and felt out of their comfort zone and even fear and suspicion when they did have contact with the Aboriginal community. This uneasiness in the crosscultural setting is typical of rural towns (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2015) and was as much the experience of teachers who had been raised in the local community or been a resident for a long time as it was with younger teachers who saw themselves as only temporary and transient members of the community. This trepidation about Aboriginal people soon dissipated as the cultural immersion program progressed. The inclusiveness and warmth of this experience was reported by many teachers as having a remarkable impact in building relationships and crosscultural understanding with Aboriginal community members including Aboriginal staff members.

A Wengerian Analysis of Success

Wenger's conceptual framework of social learning systems and communities of practice (1998, 2000) is useful for analysing the success of the cultural immersion program. Given the political and sociocultural history of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationships, developing communities of practice that engaged all participants, created a sense of shared purpose and aligned this with a range of practices to improve Aboriginal students school experiences, was challenging in the least.

Wenger's (2000, p. 226) framework posits learning as a social process based on an individual's social competence and personal experience. The basic building blocks of social learning systems; engagement, imagination and alignment are three distinct modes of belonging crucial to the operation of communities of practice where the learning takes place. For a community of practice to operate successfully there needs to be a sense of joint enterprise, mutuality and a shared repertoire all of which define competence in this context (Wenger, 2000, p. 229). The development of trust, building relationships and developing new perceptions of the 'Other' community was crucial to the project of imagining a community of practice that all members could actively engage with. This was largely facilitated by sharing stories that revealed personal journeys and contributed to the reported transformative nature of the cultural immersion workshops.

Wenger's (2000) first mode of belonging; engagement, suggests that 'ways in which we engage with each other and with the world profoundly shapes our experience of who we are' (p. 227) and this is pivotal to belonging in a social learning system. Engagement of the mainly non-Aboriginal teachers in the cultural immersion workshops provided an opportunity to present new understandings of the Aboriginal community within which their school is located and shape their responses to it. Despite the history of uneasiness and sometimes tension between the school and the Aboriginal community, doubts were soon dissipated as the cultural immersion experience unfolded as one teacher noted:

'It was a very inclusive program. I felt befriended and I think every Australian should attend something like this — it was so effective in building bridges. And I loved being with my Aboriginal colleagues in an informal setting where everyone was on the same level and working together'.

Clearly, this atmosphere was crucial to engaging all in the process of learning about local Aboriginal histories, cultures and issues as well as alleviating misgivings about attending professional learning run by the local Aboriginal community. The creation of a sense of belonging influenced Wenger's other two modes, imagination and alignment.

Imagination involves constructing and reflecting on images of ourselves and the world in order to situate ourselves in a familiar 'place' and the third mode, alignment

emphasises supporting mutually agreed upon interpretations and processes to be productive beyond engagement (Wenger, 2000, p. 227–8). Given the very different worlds of presenters (local Aboriginal people) and participants (teachers), the challenge of imagination and alignment was to find familiar ground on which to build relationships and develop trust. As one of the Aboriginal community presenter noted; 'some of the local community no doubt came along with a sense of trepidation . . . (and) the experience of feeling valued by the teachers was real affirmation for them.' Crucially, in order to achieve a sense of an alignment of purpose, presenters and participants needed to open themselves up to new responses to these experiences, as one early career teacher expressed:

'I had a very hard time settling in and adjusting to a small community like this . . . but the cultural immersion was fantastic . . . it touched a lot of emotions. Mootwingee [national park] on the first day was unreal . . . the sites and the stories and the way they were presented in a really engaging manner . . . then the next two days in Broken Hill hearing the life-stories of people . . . it just came back to realising that we're all people.'

This teacher comment demonstrates how common ground and a sense of purpose was found in understanding the significance of place, the stories embedded in these sites and the acknowledgment of a shared emotional journey. Of particular importance in this development of trust and new ways of seeing the Aboriginal community, was the sharing of stories, a skill that is particularly widespread in Aboriginal communities (Benham, 2007, p. 515; Carey & Russell, 2011, p. 33). As one teacher notes, 'telling stories was definitely quite profound for a lot of us in helping us realise just how raw that emotion still is for those people and how it has affected their life, so it made it very real'. Engagement in this process built trust and brokered relationships beyond the superficial and facilitated a stronger sense of belonging to a community of practice.

A community of practice in Wenger's (2000, p. 230) framework consists of a joint enterprise of learning and leadership, mutuality in productive interaction and a shared repertoire of concepts, language and tools in order to achieve common goals. The common goal that each community (teachers and Aboriginal families) bought to this new community of practice was the desire to improve Aboriginal education, despite invariably holding conflicting or contrasting views about how to achieve this. However, rather than debating the merits or otherwise of each position, the Aboriginal community lead a joint venture focussed on getting to know each other, building relationships and developing trust to develop social learning systems and open up new ways of knowing, being and doing (Yunkaporta, 2009). This became evident in comments like the following from one of the teachers:

'The excursion to Mootwingee was a real shared experience . . . It was something to build a relationship on and

it helped me make real connections . . . it was a platform for me to have a shared story, walking around together, chatting about life, home and kids. It was like a family putting on a demonstration of their strength . . . a happy party'.

This comment reveals the three elements of a community of practice; a joint enterprise is likened to a family demonstrating their strength, mutuality is enacted through connections and relationships and a shared story becomes the groundwork for developing a shared repertoire. Through this shared repertoire of personal stories and collective journeys, reciprocity and social capital (Wenger, 2000, p. 230) is fostered and developed between members of the group. This is clearly evident in the following teacher's comment:

'[I got in touch with] . . . the Lands Council down there, I made an appointment and went and had a long chat with her [Aboriginal employee] and told her that I was in the early stages of getting this girls program together and found out that she has got a women's program running. So I thought there was probably some way that we could tie in the girls' program and the women's program so I'd have those community contacts and the school then gets to be working within their own community on a wider scale.'

Analysis using Wenger's modes of belonging and communities of practice revealed that by making connections and building trust relationships, perceptions of the 'Other' community were transformed. Through the shared purpose of improving Aboriginal education in schools for students, teachers and families, relationships were brokered and empowerment, and in some cases transformation occurred, as an Aboriginal parent noted; 'because the people who were involved got a positive response from the teachers and there was a friendly atmosphere and the teachers wanted to hear what we had to say it was breaking the barriers for us.' In particular, the empowerment of teachers had a significant impact on pedagogy including the way in which they interacted with students and their families. This teacher demonstrates how new skills she developed through the cultural immersion program has improved her relationships with students and their families:

'[B]etween the three of them [contacts made through the cultural immersion program] . . . I'm able to use the network in this school, you know . . . the AEOs [Aboriginal Education Officers], and now I have an understanding of . . . [how they] . . . connect to these certain families, . . . they've given me information on how to deal with that kid and the family. Instead of just yelling at him and telling him to go to detention for a week or be suspended or whatever, so it's just . . . opening it up to other possibilities I suppose with kids.'

There were also indicators that the cultural immersion had an immediate impact on the pedagogy of the participants both in terms of the curriculum content they thought they should teach, their recognition of Aboriginal English as a distinct dialect of Australian English and

the classroom management techniques they thought most appropriate for Aboriginal students. The following comment from one of the participants highlights the process of developing his pedagogical approaches through social learning systems built on engagement, imagination and alignment.

'I think as soon as you start talking to the kids about this area and their history and their nation and their country they're like ... they automatically switch-on, automatically want to be a part of it and I think that this is what I took from Connecting to Country ... much better than the past ... previously, I had judged the Aboriginal kids for how they speak because it wasn't the same as I speak ... this was a light-bulb moment for me.'

The impact and importance of teachers developing curriculum and pedagogical approaches to better suit the needs of their students can be seen in the following comment made by a student:

'Well, when I go here I actually get to learn about my culture and everything because my Poppy was Aboriginal and he was like one of the few Aboriginals in our family ... I don't even get to learn anything at home about my culture ... and since my pop's dead, he died when I was three, so I don't get to see anything or learn anything about it ... No, not even mum, 'cause he didn't really teach mum stuff.'

A further benefit of facilitating learning as a social process within flexible communities of shared practice in the cultural immersion program, was the enhancement of individual identities (Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2010, p. 723) leading to increased confidence, a sense of significantly connecting to their students' lives and an increasing vivacity for teaching in their school. The following comment by a participating teacher highlights the personal impact of the CTC program:

'[W]e were all looking at issues together ... no one side was dominant ... it helped us see we were all facing this difficulty together and we shared information as truthfully as possible ... There is definitely now a feeling of more acceptance. It reinforced my sense of who I was and what I am.'

Wenger (1998) posits that identity and learning are inseparable and this is clearly the experience of many participants in the cultural immersion program. He further suggests that a 'healthy identity' demonstrates the following three qualities (2002, p. 92):

'*Connectedness.* A strong identity involves deep connections with others through shred histories and experiences, reciprocity, affection, and mutual commitments.

Expansiveness. A healthy identity will not be exclusively locally defined. It will involve multi-membership and cross multiple boundaries.

Effectiveness. Identity is a vehicle for participating in the social world, but it can also lead to non-participation. A healthy identity is socially empowering rather than marginalising.'

For many, participation in the cultural immersion workshops in a climate of often tense and complex relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the town, required a willingness to cross boundaries into potentially uncomfortable communities of practice that may in fact destabilise identities. However, the experience of connecting to a community of practice that expands beyond the school walls and that potentially makes a difference by stimulating more effective approaches to teaching and learning in an Aboriginal context, contributed to identity affirmation and confidence in the classroom.

Implications

Implications from this study highlight the importance of teacher professional learning delivered by Aboriginal people, Aboriginal community engagement in local schools and addressing deficit discourses about Aboriginal students and their families (Bishop & Berryman, 2010, p. 175).

Clearly, there is a palpable need for all teachers to participate in an Aboriginal initiated cultural immersion experience as a significant opportunity to develop culturally responsive relationships and pedagogical approaches (Bishop & Berryman, 2010, p. 176). This will potentially benefit all students as the process of understanding student culture and family background becomes embedded into daily teaching practice leading to more inclusive learning environments. Teachers have the opportunity to build communities of practice in their classroom and through their own experiences of learning as a social process in the cultural immersion workshops (Timostsuk & Ugaste, 2010, p. 1568), are able to transform good learning into good teaching. Teachers can in effect, bring cultural immersion into the classroom by modelling and developing culturally and socially rich learning experiences for their students. An understanding of local knowledge is crucial as this teacher points out:

'I think it's important to have local knowledge, you know having those insights of what is important to the local community, the significance of land features and the river and all of those physical things, ... that comes through with the kids, you know they talk about not being able to eat the mullet out of the river and those things that I didn't know about.'

The cultural immersion program also broadens the funds of knowledge about Aboriginal peoples histories, cultures and issues mandated in the Aboriginal Education Policy (NSW DET, 2009, p. 5) including the importance of localised and contextualised expressions of these. The incorporation of funds of knowledge into pedagogical practice strengthens school, family and community relationships in culturally diverse contexts, an approach that has been applied in various parts of the world (Joves, Siques, & Esteban-Guitat, 2015, p. 68). Significantly, through the cultural immersion program, local Aboriginal people articulate and structure professional learning

experiences that they believe teachers need, empowering them as key players in the education of their children — opportunities not available to them in the past (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2013). Through self-determining opportunities such as these, Aboriginal people construct positive and proactive images of themselves and their communities, aligning themselves with the teaching role and educative processes at the systemic level (Wenger, 2000, p. 228). This potentially embeds the crucial role of Aboriginal parents and community members into the structure and culture of the school (Burgess, 2014, p. 211), fulfilling state policy requirements of 'built in' rather than 'bolted on' (Yunkaporta, 2009, p. 4) approaches to Aboriginal education.

A further implication emerging from this study is the importance of teachers becoming change agents in their schools. In most cases, only a small number of staff from each school attended the cultural immersion workshops and many reported feeling like isolated enclaves (Bishop & Berryman, 2010, p. 177) in their school with little opportunity to make any of the real changes they felt were necessary to improve Aboriginal student outcomes or the school relationship with the community. Consequently, ongoing and significant support for these teachers to develop and cultivate effective and sustainable communities of practice at the school level needs to be mobilised in order to develop mutually supportive relationships based on a shared repertoire of communal resources to develop competence (Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2010, p. 723). As Wenger (2000, p. 230) suggests:

> 'The three dimensions work together. Without the learning energy of those who take initiative, the community becomes stagnant. Without strong relationships of belonging, it is torn apart. And without the ability to reflect, it becomes hostage to its own history.'

The NSW AECG acknowledge the need for ongoing support for teachers through a cultural mentoring program to follow up from workshops so as to grow teachers' cultural knowledge, further develop relationships with the community and capitalize on the momentum generated by the program. However, a lack of financial and human resources made this task untenable. This shortcoming needs to be addressed for the full potential of the program to be realised.

This study clearly identifies the benefits for schools in forming communities of practice with local Aboriginal community members, many of who are closely connected to the students they teach. These benefits include breaking down traditional sociocultural and contextual barriers that typically exist in many of these locations. This provides pathways to articulate a joint enterprise with a shared repertoire to describe and enact productive relationships (Burgess, 2014, p. 232). This occurs through the cultural immersion program because Aboriginal people are empowered to invite non-Aboriginal people into their community and culture and the rewards flow across

a number of boundaries. The adoption by teachers of culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogies, such as bringing the community into the school and taking students out into the community, engages students and their families in the education process, a necessary step along the path to improving outcomes.

Through this engagement of community members as cultural knowledge-brokers (Stewart, 2005, p. 101) in the social processes of learning, deficit perceptions of Aboriginal people started to dissolve as teachers began to understand and respond to the cultural immersion experience. Greater understanding of local culture, families and the sociocultural, historical and political factors that impact on Aboriginal peoples lives, particularly as personal relationships evolved, enlightened teachers about the daily lives of their students. A key benefit from this was that teachers began to reflect on images of themselves, their students and their own positioning within this context in order to imagine a different approach to teaching their students. This had largely positive effects on professional and personal identities that were concurrently challenged, enhanced and transformed as cultural competence developed through experience. As a result, teachers became more comfortable in developing relationships based on the trust that many of Aboriginal students desire and need for success (Bishop & Berryman, 2010, p. 175).

Finally, prioritising teacher cultural competence as a crucial pathway towards improving Aboriginal student outcomes is essential in the project of 'closing the gap'. This approach should be privileged over more common and easily quantifiable short-term outcomes that do not necessarily translate into long-term improvements in the education levels or wellbeing of Aboriginal students and are largely unsustainable. Accreditation approaches that reportedly measure teacher competence do not necessarily acknowledge or account for culturally responsive pedagogical approaches for diverse student learning needs but rather focus on what teachers know and can do in a more general sense (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2012). Acknowledging skills such as relationship building, engagement with Aboriginal parents and the local community, and acknowledging the role of local cultural knowledge in the school is not explicit in current accreditation systems. Consequently, skills such as these are not given the attention or priority needed to make real and sustainable changes to Aboriginal education or Aboriginal student outcomes.

Conclusion

Applying Wenger's (2000) three modes of belonging in communities of practice illuminate how disparate and conflicting communities can find common ground when these modes are mobilised in a social learning environment. As these communities of practice imagine new ways of being, doing and knowing, their purposes become

aligned and they engage with new and emerging communities of practice.

It is too early to determine whether any of these outcomes from the cultural immersion program will prove to be sustainable over the long term. Nor is it possible yet to say what the direct impact of the program will be on the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students in the schools targeted by the program. It is significant to note that this program is a mandatory component in teacher professional learning for the highly publicised Connected Communities Strategy (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2015) designed to improve Aboriginal education and school community engagement in 11 rural and isolated communities across NSW.

However, it is possible to say that the participants in the cultural immersion component of the CTC program, themselves all professionally trained teachers, were overwhelming in their support of and endorsement for the cultural immersion program which reflects Wenger's (1998, 2000) theory that learning is most effective when it occurs as part of a social process and that this process is facilitated by the recognition and use of a range of communities of practice that extend well beyond those conventionally accessed by teachers and schools.

It would clearly be helpful to teachers if the reasons for the success of the cultural immersion programs were explicitly developed as a model for their own classroom practice. Certainly the sense of belonging felt by presenters and participants alike builds resilience and agency (Burgess, 2014, p. 57) beyond cultural competence towards affecting real change for Aboriginal students.

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