

## **Affiliated Schools Research Program Final Report**

### **Building Cultural Integrity with ‘Country as Teacher’: Investigating teacher engagement with pedagogies of Indigenous knowledge and being (CaT1)**

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# 1. Achievement Statement

## BUILDING CULTURAL INTEGRITY WITH 'COUNTRY AS TEACHER': INVESTIGATING TEACHER ENGAGEMENT WITH PEDAGOGIES OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND BEING.

2021 – 2022

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Centre for Sustainable Communities

### WHY THIS PROJECT?



Teaching and learning have been happening in Australia for tens of thousands of years. For most of this time Country has been recognised as primary knowledge holder and teacher helping to build strong connections between people and land. This old education system is increasingly being recognised as an important source for learning and healing, providing an alternative set of knowledges and practices that may be instrumental in repairing the social and ecological damage being experienced in contemporary Australia

*This project focused on the transformative potential of bringing Australian Indigenous people's ways of knowing, being and doing into the mainstream school environment, investigating and evaluating the efficacy of an approach that focuses on professional learning, curriculum and pedagogy on 'Country-as-Teacher' for all.*

### 4 SCHOOLS 26 TEACHERS

- **Phase 1:** Assessment of impacts from Pilot Project
- **Phase 2:** Teachers build personal 'relating with Country' with 6L's
- **Phase 3:** Development and implementation of curriculum

### Key Research Question ? ?

*To what extent and in what ways can the Country-as-Teacher approach (professional, curricula and pedagogical learning) transform cultural integrity within school communities?*

### Our Country-as-Teacher Approach

To enact Country-as-Teacher in schools teachers must themselves build a practice of learning through a process of 'Relating with Country'.

To help teachers cultivate this practice we offered stories from the Old People about how we are connected to Country both physically as well as intuitively, affectively, kinesthetically and spiritually. To learn from Country is accepting our innate connectedness, and intentionally cultivating a practice of relating with Country utilising these diverse ways of knowing, being and doing to directly experience reciprocal communicating and learning from Country and Earthkin.

To this end Damu Paul Gordon has offered the 6 Ls as a pedagogical process to enable Country-as-Teacher, offering Lore (stories of Country) before asking teachers to engage in a weekly hour practise of sitting in Country over a term: looking and listening, and learning.

### 6L's a Country-as-Teacher pedagogy

1. Lore
2. Love
3. Look
4. Listen
5. Learn
6. Lead



### Protocols for building collaborative approach:

1. Sit in a circle
2. Acknowledgement Country
3. Check-in
4. Collective sense making

## Data Collection

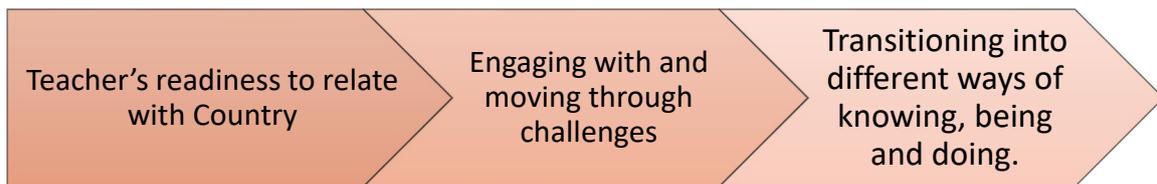
- Recording Collective sense making yarns after weekly RWC practise
- Survey of 10 teachers
- 13 Semi-structured interviews
- Artefacts of student work
- Collective sense making yarn of implementation phase

## Key Findings

### Phase 1: Assessment of Impacts from Pilot Project

- Participants indicated a sense of relief as non-Indigenous teachers that they were able to facilitate Country as Teacher for children in their class

### Phase 2: Relating with Country



### Phase 3: Development and implementation of curriculum

*Teachers:* Overall shift in perceptions and motivations

- Teachers who undertook CaT pedagogy with students, felt they gained or claimed 'permission' in some way, and for some, also finding the courage to attempt something different or outside usually accepted teaching and learning practice.

*Students:* High levels of curiosity and growing ethic of care

- All participant teachers expressed various degrees of surprise and appreciation for the high levels of student engagement in relating with Country experiences (P-11). Early childhood teachers noted the high levels of curiosity and growing ethic of care as units progressed.

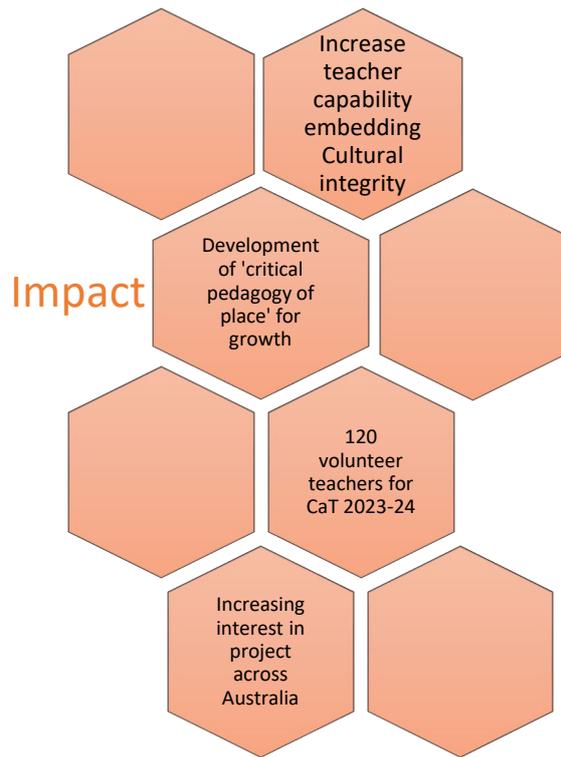
## Key outputs

Spillman, D, & Wilson, B, Nixon, M &McKinnon, K. (2022). Reinvigorating Country as teacher in Australian schooling: Beginning with school teacher's direct experiences, 'relating with Country'. *Curriculum Perspectives*.

Spillman,D. Wilson, B. Nixon, M.& McKinnon, K., (submitted for review 14/12/22). 'New localism' in Australian schools: Country as teacher as a critical pedagogy of place. *Curriculum Perspectives*.

Wilson, B. & Spillman, D. (2022) I am Country, Country is me. *The Conversation*.  
<https://theconversation.com/i-am-country-and-country-is-me-indigenous-ways-of-teaching-could-be-beneficial-for-all-children-187424>

Highly successful CaT Symposium, 8 Dec, 2022 with 60 participants



## 2. Executive Summary

*Project aims & context:* The Country-as-Teacher research project (CaT1) aimed to employ Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing to enact Country-centric curriculum and pedagogies in four ACT schools. For the vast majority of time humans have inhabited this place we now call Australia, Country<sup>1</sup> has been recognised as primary knowledge holder and teacher (Callaghan & Gordon, 2022; Karulkiyalu Country, Gordon, Spillman & Wilson, 2020). From birth children began learning about their place and their connectedness, through looking at, listening to and feeling Country and Earthkin<sup>2</sup>. Largely facilitated by Grandparents and Old People young people cultivated a daily practice of reciprocal ‘relating with Country’. This knowledge system and its cultural practices ensured social and ecological harmony and balance for millennia. Faced with our current social and ecological challenges there is an emerging and strengthening call, from both educators and Indigenous Old People, for these knowledge systems and cultural practices to be locally reinvigorated in Australian education.

As the title of our research suggests, this project trialled a specific approach to *cultural integrity* with ACT teachers, involving substantial professional learning, followed by curriculum development and pedagogical enactment. Our primary research question was: *To what extent and in what ways can the ‘Country-as-Teacher’ approach (professional, curricula and pedagogical learning) transform cultural integrity within school communities?* In this project we were interested in the extent and nature of teacher’s transformative experiences.

*Project approach:* Twenty-six teachers from four ACT schools volunteered to participate following two-hour, whole staff professional learning workshops to introduce our Country-as-Teacher approach. CaT1 unfolded through three phases: Phase 1 (Oct-Nov, 2020) involved the critical analysis of an earlier ‘Teachers as Researchers’ pilot project with twelve teachers in two schools. Phases 2 and 3 involved an initial professional learning workshop, coaching and mentoring through face-to face, phone and email communication, teacher enactment, and evaluation. Phase 2 (term 1, 2021) focused on teacher’s cultivation of a personal practice of ‘relating with Country’ to enable direct experience of Country-as-Teacher. Phase 3 (terms 2 & 3, 2021) focused firstly on creating or re-designing a unit of work to include Country-as-teacher pedagogies (term 2) and then on enacting and evaluating the unit with students (term 3).

Focus group yarning circles and semi-structured interviews were the primary methods employed for accessing teacher’s reflections and perceptions. Curriculum documents and student work samples supplemented these where appropriate. Thematic analysis was undertaken independently then collaboratively by research team members, and then finding and conclusions scrutinised with Advisory Group members.

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<sup>1</sup> Country is a landscape ‘large enough to support a group of people and small enough to be intimately known in every detail’ (Rose, 2011, p. 17). It incorporates everything within, upon, and above the ground, including rocks, plants, waterways and other geographical features, animals, fire, weather, seasons and the cosmos, our ‘Earthkin’ in recognition of our connectedness and obligations. Aboriginal knowledge systems recognise Country as animate, lively, and requiring relational reciprocity through knowledge sharing, gratitude and care (Bawaka Country et al, 2016; Hughes & Barlo, 2021; Karulkiyalu Country, Gordon, Spillman & Wilson 2020; McKnight, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> To designate non-human beings in Country some authors use ‘other-than-human’ or ‘more-than-human’. Following Plumwood (2003) who used the term ‘Earth-others’ our preference is Earthkin, better representing our ‘oneness’ and connectedness, rather than the separation and objectification implied by ‘other’.

### *Key findings*

*Teacher's relating with Country practice:* The majority of teachers reported direct Country-as-teacher experiences associated with significant transformative learning through their relating with Country practice. These transformative learnings involved both *self* (eg. deepening self-awareness, enhanced wellness, re-prioritisation) and *Country / Earthkin* (eg. communicating with and learning about Earthkin). The majority of teachers also initially experienced and overcame a variety of challenges, from the personal ('getting out of my head'), to the behavioural ('letting go' of habitual 'task orientation' and the 'need to control' outcomes), and contextual (overcoming the need to 'find the right place' before relating could happen).

### *Designing, enacting and evaluating Country-as-Teacher (CaT) curriculum and pedagogy:*

Many teachers report experiencing burnout and anxiety about 'doing the wrong thing' in the Indigenous education space. Thus it is notable that all teachers who completed Phase 3 (enacting a CaT unit with students) reported increased confidence to engage in this approach to cultural integrity. Teachers felt they 'claimed' or 'gained permission' to continue this work in class-time, largely due to both the motivation they gained through their own experiences relating with Country and their perceptions of strong student engagement and responsiveness to their CaT unit. Several teachers consciously reinterpreted their perspectives on systemic imperatives regarding the Australian Curriculum, and reprioritised their CaT work with students. These endeavours disrupted the tendency to emphasise anthropocentrism, rationalism and atomism, dominant in mainstream Australian Curriculum and thus enacted a 'critical pedagogy of place' (McInerney et al, 2011).

### *Conclusion and impacts*

- This formative CaT research identified significant positive impacts on teacher's *cultural integrity*, through transformative learning associated with both their personal experiences relating with Country and high levels of student engagement with and learning from their CaT units. This research reinforces our belief, instilled by our Old People, that relating with Country and subsequent direct Country-as-Teacher experiences and learning is possible for all teachers and students in Australian schools.
- Several teachers enacted a 'critical pedagogy of place' through their reprioritisation of Country-as-Teacher curriculum and pedagogy over or alongside, systemic imperatives involving the Australian curriculum. This was a transformative enactment and represents a critical finding of this research. Critical pedagogy of place offers a strong practical theory for both teacher education and in-service professional learning; one that sits alongside our Indigenous frameworks and pedagogies, working over-time to re-balance teaching and learning in Australian schools.
- Through journal publications, conference presentations, ITE units, and possibility most importantly word-of-mouth, school executive and teacher's desire to know about and enact Country-as-Teacher curriculum and pedagogies is growing. Twenty-six teachers from four ACT schools volunteered for CaT1. In the next iteration (CaT2) which focuses on whole-of-school or whole-of-cohort approaches, over one hundred and twenty teachers and executive in six ACT schools have nominated. Inquiries have also been made from regions and schools in QLD, NSW and Vi

## 3. Detailed Report

### 3.1 Aims & Context

#### 3.1.1 Project Aim

Drawing on Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, this project trialled a specific approach to *cultural integrity*, involving professional learning, curriculum and pedagogy. The 'Country-as-Teacher' program aimed to enact Country-centric curriculum and pedagogies through school-based teaching and learning. The program implemented and evaluated a professional learning approach for teachers, focusing initially on their cultivation of a personal practice of (reciprocal) 'relating with Country', supported with intensive mentoring through an extended program of professional learning, pedagogical development and curriculum design. The purpose of the program was to engage teachers, and their students, in reciprocal relating with Country and in so doing begin to enhance their capabilities to know, understand, and care for the places they inhabit, through direct experiences of Country-as-Teacher. This project was implemented and evaluated in four ACT schools. It aimed to explore how the program created transformative opportunities and impacts for participating teachers, students, and the school community.

#### 3.1.2 Context and background

Teaching and learning has been happening in Australia for tens of thousands of years. For the vast majority of this time Country has been recognised as primary knowledge holder and teacher (Callaghan & Gordon, 2022; Karulkiyalu Country, Gordon, Spillman & Wilson, 2020; McKnight, 2016). Yet mainstream schooling in Australia is currently enacted through a curriculum framework and pedagogies that reify Eurocentric epistemic power, while existing efforts to incorporate Indigenous perspectives may well be working to erase Indigenous knowledges (Lowe et al, 2021). Previously, we have critiqued the current approach to schooling as working to perpetuate 'unaware anthropocentrism, rampant individualism and unfettered capitalism' (Karulkiyalu Country et al, 2020). In our forthcoming publication from this research and following Suzuki (1997) and McKnight (2016) we also propose the reification of rationalism and atomism through the Australian Curriculum's prioritisation the western scientific method and rational-analytical thinking (Spillman et al, under review). Arguably, this situation is even more prominent now than in previous decades, due to the strong neoliberalist focus on standardisation and the marketisation of education (Lingard, Thompson and Sellar, 2016). At the same time there has been an emerging interest in Indigenous people's ways of knowing, being and doing both within school-based education and the academy. These are increasingly being recognised as an important source for learning and healing, providing an alternative set of knowledges and practices that may be instrumental in repairing the social and ecological damage being experienced in contemporary Australia (Callaghan & Gordon, 2014; Karulkiyalu Country et al, 2020; Milroy & Milroy, 2008; Spillman et al, 2022). This project focused on the transformative potential of bringing Australian Indigenous people's ways of knowing, being and doing into the mainstream school environment, investigating and evaluating the efficacy of an approach that focuses professional learning, curriculum and pedagogy on Country-as-Teacher for all. Here, CaT curriculum and pedagogy operates as a 'critical pedagogy of place' to rebalance these dominant discourses with ones that are Country-centric (locally-oriented), and that focus on connectedness with Country through honouring and balancing a diverse

array of ways of knowing, being and doing. The shift towards a balanced curriculum that incorporates Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing begins to realise our vision of an authentically Australian, both-ways education for all Australian teachers and students.

### 3.1.3 Our Country as teacher approach

In Karulkiyalu Country et al (2020) we offer the *Jumbal (hoop pine) story* which demonstrates ancient Indigenous knowing that we humans are composed of earth and water: we literally come from the earth. Scientific knowledge provides biochemical evidence for this (Suzuki, 1997). Our Old People have known for millennia that we are not only connected to Country and Earthkin physically, also intuitively, affectively, kinesthetically and spiritually. We also offer the ancient *Googar (goanna) story* which demonstrates the critical importance to social and ecological wellbeing of honouring and balancing diverse ways of knowing, being and doing (Karulkiyalu Country et al, 2020). Accepting our innate connectedness, the work of cultivating a practice of *relating with Country* utilises these diverse ways of knowing, being and doing to directly experience reciprocal communicating and learning from Country and Earthkin. The knowing that comes from this direct experience is transformative. Our belief (that we tested through this research) is that once teachers cultivate a practice of relating with Country, and thus experience Country-as-Teacher, it shifts their perspective regarding what children need from their education, providing motivation and knowledge to design and facilitate such experiences for their students. To this end we have offered Damu Paul Gordon's 6 Ls as a pedagogical process to enable Country-as-Teacher experiences (Spillman et al, 2022; Karulkiyalu Country et al, 2021).

The 6Ls is a sequential process of lore, love, look, listen, learn, lead, with the first five acting in a cyclical fashion over and over, before 'lead' can be enacted. *Lore* includes all the stories for Country—about places and how they were created, particular species, lifecycles, seasons, fire, all Earthkin in Country. The *Jumbal* story offered in Karulkiyalu Country et al. (2020) about how we are all made of earth and water, as discussed above, is *lore*. Knowing and accepting this story provokes a 'feeling' response which is *love* in the 6Ls. It might be curiosity or gratitude, perhaps even love itself. This affective response motivates us to go into Country and *look* and *listen* to *learn* more about the Earthkin of focus. What we *learn* deepens our knowledge of the *lore*, and the cycle begins again. Eventually when we have repeated the cycle many times, we will be able and more motivated to *lead* others by facilitating the process for them. Through pedagogies like the 6Ls, we can cultivate a practice of relating with Country, to enact Country-as-Teacher.

### 3.1.4 Key Research Question(s)

The project pursued the following key question:

*To what extent and in what ways can the 'Country-as-Teacher' approach (professional, curricula and pedagogical learning) transform cultural integrity within school communities?*

In order to gain a firm understanding of the transformative potential of Country-as-Teacher, and its potential for the broader school environment, the research was structured around the following sub-questions that shaped the investigation into impacts at the level of teacher professional learning, student learning, community learning, and the school environment.

**Teacher professional learning:**

- To what extent and in what ways are teachers able to transform their worldview and learning frames to include Country-as-Teacher?
- In what ways have teachers been able to transform their curricula and pedagogical approaches to include Country-as-Teacher pedagogies?

**Student learning**

- How have students responded to Country-as-Teacher curricula and pedagogies?
- How has student learning demonstrated the emergence of dispositions and capabilities to know, connect with and care for their place?

**Community learning:**

- Have the in-class experiences of students created flow-on effects to their families or the wider school community?
- What potential exists for creating greater impacts and/or involvement of families and community beyond the classroom?

**Wider school environment:**

- How has the Country-as-Teacher approach impacted on the participating schools as a whole?
- Is an organic scaling out of the approach through peer-to-peer learning and mentoring effective, and how well can it take into account the structures of reciprocal relations and mutual obligation particular to the Indigenous Knowledges activated in the Country-as-Teacher approach?

Learning and achievement against each of these sets of sub-questions will be discussed in 'Key Findings' below.

### 3.2 Approach and Methods – Professional Learning and Practice & Data Collection and Analysis

As planned the CaT1 research project was undertaken through three chronological phases.

*Phase 1, Oct-Nov 2020: Assessment of impacts from pilot project:* Work undertaken with ten volunteer teachers in 2020, as part of a 'Teachers as Researcher's pilot project, was evaluated in November that year. Eight participants from Giralang Primary School and Kaleen Primary School were interviewed regarding their reflections and learnings from this formative work. Interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed. This evidence provided critical information for the preparation of the CaT1 professional learning approach.

*Phase 2, Jan-March, 2021: Completing Recruitment and Professional learning for 'relating with Country' practice:* Whilst Giralang and Kaleen Primary Schools agreed to continue their participation in the CaT research work with two additional teachers coming on board, two new schools were recruited – Melrose HS and Lake Tuggeranong College. This was to ensure the inclusion of secondary and college teachers in the research. Initially then introductory two-hour CaT workshops were conducted with whole school staff from both these schools in Jan, 2021. From these an additional fourteen teachers volunteered to participate in the research, constituting a total of twenty-six teachers from P-12, seventeen females and nine males.

All twenty-six participant teachers then engaged in a further two-hour workshop early in 2021, in either a primary (two schools) or secondary (two schools) cohort. Following the protocols of Acknowledging Country and a yarning circle check-in, we discussed Country-as-Teacher pedagogies in further detail, and how to initiate and cultivate the associated personal practice of relating with Country, using the 6Ls as an exemplar. Potential opportunities and challenges were highlighted and discussed. Teachers began their weekly practice over the ensuing weeks, keeping a record of experiences and reflections (e.g. journal, audio-text, drawings etc). All participating teachers were required to commit to spending one hour each week in the place they selected, to cultivate their relating with Country practice. Teachers were supported with regular check-ins within school-based cohorts, email and mobile phone contact with the chief investigators and research assistant.

*Data collection and analysis - Focus Group yarning circles:* Following a term of weekly practice, teachers gathered in school-based cohorts. After an Acknowledgment of Country and checking-in protocols, three yarning circle processes were chronologically enacted. Firstly, each participant individually provided uninterrupted reflections of their experiences on and with Country. Secondly, participants undertook a *collective sense making yarn* (Gorringe & Spillman, 2008). This is a collaborative process enabling research participants to 'make-sense' of their own research data through identifying patterns of similarity and differences in their reflective stories. This yarn helped build a collaborative, collectivist epistemology, consistent with the tail of the Googar story. Finally, we asked participants to write on sticky notes the sensations they experienced during time on Country, placing them on the appropriate spot on a large outline of a human body in the centre of the circle. This activity provided space for participants to further express their experiences of Country, particularly those experiences that were difficult to verbalise. We took an audio recording and kept extensive notes throughout the session to capture the *feeling* of the room, noting non-verbal gestures such as body language, facial expressions and tone of voice. We paired these observations with the transcripts of the recordings assisting with analysis.

Two project researchers independently coded the transcripts. These codings along with teacher's collective sense-making were considered and discussed by the research team, before finally agreeing on the main emerging themes discussed in 'Key Findings' below.

*Phase 3: April – Dec, 2021: Development and implementation of curriculum:* In April, 2021 two professional learning workshops were conducted, focusing on curriculum design. Facilitated by Senior Custodian for Karulkiyalu Country, Paul Gordon, whose knowledge guides our work, one coaching workshop was conducted for high school participants (Lake Tuggeranong College and Melrose High School) and the other for primary participants (Giralang and Kaleen). These sessions were aimed at helping participants to more deeply consider and understand how they might build on their own experiences relating with Country, using the 6Ls to incorporate relating with Country practice into a unit of work. Three exemplars of what a unit of work could look like based upon the 6Ls were also provided to participants. By the end of Term 2, participating teachers had submitted a proposed unit outline to CI Spillman for feedback and guidance before implementation. All participants received written feedback with six teachers also desiring curriculum design conversations via Teams. These were undertaken by CI Spillman.

**Impacts of Covid-19:** All teachers planned to enact their CaT unit of work sometime in Term 3, 2021. Whilst some began early in the term, the ACT went into a Covid-19 lockdown that lasted from August to October, 2021 (most of Term 3). When schools did reopen, ongoing restrictions limited the research teams access to schools and the school community. Subsequently the components of the project that involved working directly with students through in-class observations, and exploring the flow on impacts of the Country-as-Teacher program with the school community were not carried out.

During the ACT lockdown about half of the group of participating teachers decided to modify their units for remote online mode. Others decide to wait until lockdown was over. Subsequently the research team applied for an extension to provide additional time to adjust the research plan and collect data about the implementation phase. A six-month extension was granted.

**Data collection:** At the end of Term 4, 2021, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were undertaken on a voluntary basis with thirteen teachers who had implemented their modified unit of work, to various degrees and in various ways. In these interviews participant teachers provided a narrative of their experiences with students through the modified unit of work. They outlined their unit of work, the modifications that had occurred due to Covid, student's engagement and learning, and their own perceptions and learning. Some teachers also provided artefacts such as examples of students work, with several indicated they wished to continue the Country-as-Teacher work into Term 1, 2022.

In March 2022, two research team members began independently coding interview transcripts for thematic analysis. In early June, 2022, ten teachers representing the four participating schools undertook a full-day of reflective yarns about their Country-as-Teacher experiences at Birrigai Outdoor School, ACT. In one session, a yarning circle focus group was again convened and recorded. Without interruption, each participant shared their narrative of enacting their unit of work, what they did, student engagement and learning, and finally their reflections and learning. Once every participant had contributed the group once again engaged in a 'collective sense making yarn' (Gorringe & Spillman, 2008). This helped build a collaborative collectivist knowledge base of our shared experiences, on which we can build and extend our approach. While one research team member facilitated this yarning circle, two colleagues observed, taking extensive notes to capture the *feeling* of the room, noting non-verbal gestures such as body language, facial expressions and tonality.

The same two researcher team members who thematically coded participant interviews, coded these transcripts whilst also considering observation notes, with a specific additional focus on the extent and ways in which this work enacted a 'critical pedagogy of place'. These codings along with teacher's collective sense-making were considered and discussed by the research team, before finally agreeing on two main themes emerging from the data identified and discussed below in 'Key Findings'.

### 3.3 Key Findings and Outcomes

#### Phase 1, Oct-Nov 2020: Assessment of impacts from pilot project

There was a clear and shared feeling among several participants that the TaR project enabled a more concrete, hands-on understanding of cultural integrity, that participants were grateful for. There was a strong appreciation for the collaborative, cooperative approach to this work and learning. Several participants indicated a sense of relief as non-Indigenous teachers that they were able to facilitate Country-as-Teacher experiences for children in their classes. The teachers also pointed out that the Country-as-Teacher approach extends upon and deepens the primary approach of the cross-curricular priority in the Australian curriculum.

#### Phase 2, Jan-March, 2021: Completing Recruitment and Professional learning for 'relating with Country'

**Teacher professional learning:** Teachers experiences and learnings through this professional learning phase of the research have been published, with the main emerging themes including the overarching theme of 'teacher's readiness to relate with Country – opening up to diverse ways of knowing, being and doing', along with 'engaging with and moving through challenges', 'transitioning into different ways of knowing, being and doing', and 'repetition in place' (Spillman, Wilson, Nixon, McKInnon, 2022).

*Teacher's readiness to relate with Country – opening up to diverse ways of knowing, being and doing:* The research team were impressed and buoyed with participants rich sensory descriptions of their relating with Country experiences and the wide variety of positive affective responses, variously expressed as 'awe, wonder, beauty, amazing feeling, inspiring, enjoyment, curiosity', and 'being palpably held by the earth'. The variety and depth of these responses indicated a high level of participant teacher motivation to engage these new learning experiences.

*Engaging with and moving through challenges:* In talking about experiences of initiating their relating with Country practice, participants identified a number of challenges that they needed to move beyond in order to begin relating with Country. Echoing findings from previous studies (Harmin et al, 2017; McKnight, 2016) about the necessity of 'unlearning' entrenched habits of task orientation, constant thinking and the need to know and control, participants in this study grappled to reframe their challenges, However, once participants moved through the initial challenges, feelings of wellness, closeness and familiarity were common.

*Transitioning into different ways of knowing, being and doing:* Many of the participants moved through an 'unlearning' phase to an identifiable breakthrough or threshold moment, opening up the possibility of relating with Country. Three participant teachers talked about 'letting go' as the marker and instigator for this transition. Another discussed 'surrendering to the moment'. There were various affective description of this experience as a 'relaxed state' where one could really 'breathe'. Others talked about 'much needed heart stuff', 'emotional balm', calmness, a sense of smallness, and connectedness. One participant recognised this as 'receiving from Country'. For many of the participants this was a clear transformative moment.

*Repetition in place:* Repeated sessions in the same place enabled deeper relating and learning. Two participants provided commentary outlining how they noticed more with each visit, and were more able to experience Country-as-Teacher. These two were able to articulate a great deal of information about the lore of specific Earthkin, gained through close and persistent *looking* and *listening*. Their affective activation and motivation to care for these places and Earthkin was also demonstrably strong. The reflections shared by participants generally underline the importance of returning to the same place during their *relating with Country* practice and the growing connection they felt with each returning journey.

Overall, the stories of our participants indicated that it was possible for all of them, to various extents, to cultivate a practice of *relating with Country* and directly experience *Country-as-Teacher*. In contrast to the anxiety that many non-Indigenous teachers feel when attempting to engage with Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing (Burgess et al, 2022), our work suggests that this learning is accessible regardless of Indigeneity, and is therefore potentially available to all Australian teacher and their students. Given the implicit connection that all people have with the places we inhabit (Suzuki, 1997; Karulkiyalu Country et al, 2020) it is not surprising that all participants demonstrated the capacity, with support, to reconnect with place.

Phase 3: April – Dec, 2021: Development and implementation of curriculum

Whilst all participant teachers planned or modified a unit of work in Term 2, 2021, to be taught in Term 3, a Covid-19 lockdown in the ACT for most of that term severely hampered this enactment. Some participant teachers began their unit face-to-face early in Term 3, 2021 and then modified and continued online. Others were overwhelmed with the situation, the uncertainty, and the increased workloads to transition students to remote online learning. Thirteen of the original twenty-six teachers undertook a unit of work in some form and volunteered to discuss their experiences with the CaT research team.

**Teacher professional learning:** Teacher burnout, anxiety regarding ‘incorporating Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum’, and mistrust of bureaucracies are all well noted in the literature (Baker & Allely, 2022; Buchanan, 2021; Burgess et al, 2022). However, all teachers who undertook CaT pedagogy with students, felt they gained or claimed ‘permission’ in some way, and for some, also finding the courage to attempt something different or outside usually accepted teaching and learning practice, even when it did not directly engage the Australian curriculum. The CaT research team’s conclusion is that this was largely due to *teacher’s shifting perceptions and motivations*. For many, the coupling of the positive impact of their personal experiences ‘relating with Country’, and the high levels of student engagement and responsiveness to relating with Country experiences, worked to galvanise their commitment to continue their CaT curriculum and pedagogy with their classes, to varying extents and in varying ways. In their own words, some primary teachers went ‘rogue’ transitioning to a completely Country-centric, inquiry-based curriculum for the entire term. Others incorporated CaT pedagogy centrally into an existing unit of work, most often in secondary classes.

The CaT research team have concluded that in these various ways teachers were able to reinterpret their perceptions of systemic imperatives and revalue them in relation to student needs. Through their enactment of CaT curriculum and pedagogy they subverted or ‘spoke back’ to the dominant Eurocentric discourses reified by the ‘Australian’ curriculum –

anthropocentrism, rationalism and atomism. In doing so the enacted a 'critical pedagogy of place' (McInerney et al, 2010). These findings are explored in a new research paper titled, 'New localism' in Australian schools: Country as teacher as a critical pedagogy of place' submitted to *Curriculum Perspectives* in December 2022.

**Student learning:** Due to the extended covid lockdown in Term 3, 2021, the planned classroom observations were not undertaken. Data on student engagement and learning is completely reliant on participating teacher's commentary.

Following their personal experiences of cultivating a practice of relating with Country, the majority of participant teachers indicated they simply modified what they were asked to do (for their own practice), in ways appropriate for their students, some also referring to the 6Ls exemplars. All participant teachers expressed various degrees of surprise and appreciation for the high levels of student engagement in relating with Country experiences (P-11). In particular, Early Childhood teachers noted the high levels of curiosity and growing ethic of care as units progressed. Primary teachers edified the importance of regular yarning circles for students to share and discuss relating with Country experiences, the benefits of inquiry-based approaches and the emergence of ever-deepening understandings of the connectedness of Earthkin in local environments. Secondary teachers noted the greater engagement of usually disengaged students, and anecdotal improvements in several students mental and emotional wellness due to relating with Country practice.

**Community learning:** Due to the extended covid lockdown in Term 3, 2021, the planned focus group yarning circles with family members did not occur. Several teachers related positive conversations and anecdotes with family members.

**Wider school environment:** At Giralang PS where there was a progressive increase in the number of teachers engaged in CaT pedagogy across the TARs (2020) and CaT projects (2021-2), all research team members noticed a broader awareness of and engagement with the CaT work, both with school executive and teachers. Further, participant teacher's stories and feedback support the value of collaborative cooperative approaches to CaT curriculum design, enactment and evaluation. This has clear ramifications for future work and roll-out of the CaT approach. Due to specific circumstances, including covid lockdown, the peer-to-peer mentoring approach was not trialled in this project, and will be taken up in the next iteration of the research.

**Resources and outputs:** The project produced a number of key outputs and resources including publications, a final Symposium, invited and conference presentations. Supported by the Centre for Sustainable Communities a short video outlining out CaT work is in production. The primary messages in these outputs are indicated in our Key Research Findings. Our first research journal article titled, 'Reinvigorating Country as teacher in Australian schooling: Beginning with school teacher's direct experiences, 'relating with Country' (Spillman et al, 2022), has been published in *Curriculum Perspectives*, with our second submitted. An invited article in *The Conversation* in July this year and a press release from the Minister for Education in 2021 both flag the success of and interest in our CaT work and approach. A final CaT Symposium was hosted at the Ann Harding Centre, UC on 8 Dec, 2022. Sixty-five invited guests from UC, ACT ED and ACT schools listened to and yarned with cultural allies from Karulkiyalu Country (central northern, NSW) Bawaka Country (Arnhem Land), Yuin Country (South Coast, NSW), and listened to ACT teachers sharing their

stories of participation in the CaT1 project. Feedback from the day was strongly positive. Here is one such excerpt from an ACT secondary teacher.

I want to say what wonderful learnings yesterday at the Country-as-Teacher Symposium. Listening to Damu Paul Gordon and his profound knowledge of Country, it just made so much sense to me. I am looking forward to reflecting on what he told us. Then to be followed by the Bawaka Collective work and Anthony McKnight, just wonderful. Each guest speaker had clear messages, thank you. When we spoke late about the Country-as-Teacher research participants, I left out how powerful it was to listen to the journeys with students of all levels. The day was well organised and it was just wonderful to take the day and listen deeply. I will be doing a lot of reflecting on Country over the summer break.

Appendix 2 provides further details of publications, events, conferences and invited presentations.

### 3.4 Impact

The positive, ongoing impact of our CaT work is supported by the following evidence.

- While twenty-six teachers from four schools volunteered to participate in CaT1, 2021-2, well over one hundred and twenty teachers from six ACT schools have volunteered to participate in CaT2, 2023-4. Rather than being a school executive decision to participate in CaT2, each teacher has made their own decision, flagging a strong and growing desire to engage, representing a grassroots 'growing-out' of our approach, rather than just a strategic systemic imperative.
- There has been a steady increase in requests and inquiries about our CaT approach both within and outside the ACT, including two education regions in QLD, one in Victoria, and several schools in NSW, along with the six ACT schools signed-up for 2023-4.
- The increasing interest and growing out of our CaT approach flags a broad acceptance that CaT curriculum and pedagogy is for all teachers and students in Australian schools, conferring strong support for the notion and enactment of an authentically Australian, both-ways education for all Australian students.
- Our CaT approach has resulted in a clear and positive impact on teacher's personal understanding and capabilities towards 'cultural integrity' through the CaT professional learning approach. This represents a positive alternative to the well document fear many non-Indigenous teachers experience when confronted with the prospect of embedding Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum.
- Articulation of the ways teacher enactment of CaT curriculum and pedagogies with students operates as a 'critical pedagogy of place', offers a strong educational platform and position for ongoing dissemination, growth and curriculum reform.

### 3.5 Engagement, Dissemination and Sustainability

Funding for the next iteration of our CaT research (CaT2) has been provisionally provided for 2023-4. Drawing on the successes and key findings from CaT1, this second iteration will involve six schools, P-10 in whole-of-school or whole-of-cohort approaches to optimise the collaborative, cooperative aspects of curriculum design, enactment and evaluation. With increases in requests and inquiries from both within and beyond ACT ED, and multiple conversations currently being planned or initiated, the viability of a cross-jurisdictional

research project in the future is increasing in likelihood and potential. This might take the form of an ARC Linkage grant, for example.

### 3.6 Wider Implications

Through their enactment of CaT curriculum and pedagogy with students, participating teachers have offered a glimpse of the ways such an approach might operate as a 'critical pedagogy of place.' Here, through their own direct experiences of relating with Country, their shifting perceptions of systemic imperatives and their value, and experiences of strong student engagement with CaT pedagogies, participant teachers 'gained or claimed permission' to continue the enactment of CaT curriculum and pedagogies. As this CaT approach disrupts the anthropocentric, atomistic and rational prioritization of Eurocentric curriculum such as the 'Australian' Curriculum, through a Country-centric focus on connectedness and the importance of honouring and balancing a diverse array of ways of knowing, being and doing, CaT curriculum and pedagogies operate as a 'critical pedagogy of place'. Broader uptake of a CaT curriculum and pedagogy through the 'growing-out' of our approach, represents a move towards a more authentic, 'both-ways' Australian curriculum for all students.

### 3.7 Conclusion and Reflections

This CaT1 research project has offered some important evidence to support critical underpinning beliefs regarding this work and its growth. These include:

1. The cultivation of a 'relating with Country' practice is possible for and available to all teachers in Australian schools.
2. Direct personal experience of relating with Country and thus Country-as-Teacher is a necessary platform and catalyst for teachers to design and facilitate authentic experiences for students.
3. These first two points (above) mean an initial, extended CaT professional learning approach is essential to all school-based CaT teaching and learning approaches.
4. CaT curriculum and pedagogy operate as a 'critical pedagogy of place' and can significantly contribute to the re-balancing of teaching and learning in Australian schools
5. To enhance the quality of curriculum provision and to overcome teacher anxiety and burnout, collaborative, cooperative approaches to curriculum design, enactment and evaluation are desirable.

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## **APPENDIX 1: CaT Symposium Agenda**

### ***Morning session Keynote Presenters: 9:00am – 11:00am***

- Richie Allan, Introduction and welcome to Country
- Damu Paul Gordon, Senior Knowledge holder for Karulkiyalu Country
- Sarah Wright, Lara Daley and Sandie Suchet-Pearson on behalf of the Bawaka Country Collective
- Anthony McKnight, Wollongong University

### ***Morning tea: 11:00am – 11:30am***

### ***Middle sessions Country as Teacher research project showcase: 11:30-1:30pm***

- Carly Duncanson and Melinda Knight (Giralang Primary Schools)
- Lisa Ison (Birrigai Outdoor School, Giralang Primary Schools)
- Georgie Green (Melrose High Schools)
- Andrew Kahn (Lake Tuggeranong College)
- David Spillman and Ben Wilson: Overview of the CaT1 research project

### ***Lunch: 1:30pm - 2:00pm***

### ***Afternoon session: 2:00 – 3:00pm***

- Yarning circle discussion with Keynote speakers
- Thanks and closure

## APPENDIX 2: Publications, events, conferences and invited presentations

### Publications

Spillman, D, & Wilson, B, Nixon, M & McKinnon, K. (2022). Reinenergizing Country as teacher in Australian schooling: Beginning with school teacher's direct experiences, 'relating with Country'. *Curriculum Perspectives*. [https://link.springer.com/epdf/10.1007/s41297-022-00176-6?sharing\\_token=-RXA1TGcxCjjEhhFO0fRu\\_e4RwlQNchNByi7wbcMAY4tYCHnF8UPaJmFJsK4WSaQaGsdr37byLTuGlibKGu6dJVrY07BDzMGFu\\_rb8rkSuTJnMVP3SWt9yjT\\_w0cktV7bUcRnGB\\_OdUmXN8yUvFyMh7BByUcc4mSOgVPa2qJpBk=](https://link.springer.com/epdf/10.1007/s41297-022-00176-6?sharing_token=-RXA1TGcxCjjEhhFO0fRu_e4RwlQNchNByi7wbcMAY4tYCHnF8UPaJmFJsK4WSaQaGsdr37byLTuGlibKGu6dJVrY07BDzMGFu_rb8rkSuTJnMVP3SWt9yjT_w0cktV7bUcRnGB_OdUmXN8yUvFyMh7BByUcc4mSOgVPa2qJpBk=)

Spillman, D, Wilson, B, Nixon, M. & McKinnon, K., (Forthcoming). 'New localism' in Australian schools: Country as teacher as a critical pedagogy of place. *Curriculum Perspectives*. (submitted)

Wilson, B. & Spillman, D. (2022) I am Country, Country is me. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/i-am-country-and-country-is-me-indigenous-ways-of-teaching-could-be-beneficial-for-all-children-187424>

Acknowledgment for our contribution to the Affiliated Schools Research Program in a press release by the Minister for Education in 2021

[https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/open\\_government/inform/act\\_government\\_media\\_releases/yvette-berry-mla-media-releases/2021/country-as-teacher-research-through-affiliated-schools](https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/open_government/inform/act_government_media_releases/yvette-berry-mla-media-releases/2021/country-as-teacher-research-through-affiliated-schools)

### Events, Conferences & Invited Presentations

- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| 8 Dec, 2022  | CaT Symposium. Ann Harding Centre, UC. Designing, organising and convening symposium and presentation, 'Building cultural integrity with 'Country as teacher': Investigating teacher's engagement with pedagogies of Indigenous knowing, being and doing.'              |
| 29 Nov, 2022 | Indigenous Higher Education Conference, Sydney. Invited presentation, 'Teaching for Country: Exploring Indigenous ways of knowing in tertiary and school-based education contexts.'   |
| 23 Nov, 2022 | SDG4 Seminar: From Education for Emergencies to the Emergence of Education, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Invited 2 hr workshop, 'Country as teacher: Recreating an authentically Australian both-ways education.'  |
| 20 Oct, 2022 | Affiliated Schools Seminar Series: Celebrating the Partnership in 2022. Online presentation: 'Reinenergizing Country as teacher pedagogies in ACT schools: Teacher's direct experiences of 'relating with Country', and impacts on teaching and learning for students.' |
| July, 2022   | International Geographer's Conference. Hosted by University of New England 'Country as Teacher' presentation.   |
| 2 June, 2022 | ACT Education Directorate 2022 Leadership Conference - Invitation to open the 2022 ACT ED Leaders Conference with a TED style yarn on <i>Country as a Central Educational Ethic</i> (See Attachment A)  |
| 9 Nov, 2021  | CERN Conference: Invited presentation: 'Country as Teacher and Teaching for Country: Living together well and equitably.'   |