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Learning to be Literate in Aboriginal Communities:

The Significance of Text

by

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B.A., M.A., M.Ed.

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Sydney

Faculty of Education and Social Work

April 2014
AUTHOR’S DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

I. this thesis comprises only my original work towards the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract

In Australia the model of reading outlined in many syllabus documents and the *Australian National Curriculum: English* acknowledges that reading is a socio-cultural practice and that both the contexts of culture and situation define the meanings individual students will make when approaching a given text. The difficulty of any given text therefore varies for individual students, depending not only on their skills but their understandings about the cultural context and the situation in which they encounter the text. Many students might find school a “natural setting” in which to learn, and may therefore be acquiring knowledge at school because their understandings about language and education predispose them to learning in such an environment. Many Aboriginal children however do not find their understandings of language and culture reflected in the school environment. The purpose of this multi-site case study was to better understand the significance of authentic local texts in the teaching of reading in four Aboriginal communities. The project that formed the basis of this case study was the development of the *One Mob* books community writers’ kit, aimed at creating local books in these four communities and involving teachers, community workers and members of the local community.

The role of story for Aboriginal children and the importance of the local community in becoming literate were central features of the research findings. Under achievement in literacy was identified as a barrier to educational success in each context. Sharing local stories and language provided the Aboriginal communities with a positive way to interact with the school community, to engage their own and other children in their history and culture, and to support their children’s literacy learning.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the Aboriginal people who participated in this project. They have yet again demonstrated the endless patience of their people by taking the time to share their stories in the hope of educating the educators about what is good for Aboriginal children. I would also like to thank Margaret Cossey for her vision in recognizing that authentic Aboriginal voices should be heard in all our schools and for her persistence over many years in finding one way to make that happen.

Thank you also to Professor Robyn Ewing and Dr Tony Loughland for all their support, advice and encouragement. My gratitude alone can never equal the time they have given me but indeed I am truly grateful.

Finally thank you to Mary for sharing her stories with me and to Kay who taught me how to listen.
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Learning to be Literate in Aboriginal Communities:

The Significance of Text

The right of all Australian students to become effective readers has been a very prominent topic in the Australian media over at least the last two decades and has been exhaustively discussed. However in many school communities that include Aboriginal children who have historically low levels of educational achievement, there seems to be uncertainty about how to approach the teaching of reading. This may be because there is a focus on the teaching of reading as a part of early childhood development that reflects the values and mores of the dominant culture. The expectation that reading will just develop after a student has mastered the alphabet, graphophonics and some basic sight words is seriously challenged by students from disadvantaged or minority groups. Reading is not a “natural” process, which just occurs as if by osmosis (Cambourne, 1995; Halliday, 1985; Harris, 1982b; Krashen, 1992; Williams, 1999). Students’ problems with reading are often seen as poor skill development and the perception, based on a deficit model, is always on the deficiency of the learner. It was in this context that a project to create and produce local stories for Aboriginal children was developed. The project set out to address these issues in a way that included the Aboriginal community and embraced the language and culture of the home.
This case study sought to define and clarify the significance of authentic local texts which were created through this project for Aboriginal children. This project was developed over several years and I became involved during its earliest stages. My own teaching career was spent in areas of social and economic disadvantage and it was while I was working in one such school, with a large number of Aboriginal students, that I first met Pat Smith, who was to become the project leader. We met because she visited the school at Lima in Sydney where I was working. This was the beginning of Pat's work with communities and it was there that some of the first books were written by Aboriginal children and community members. Pat was a Reading Recovery teacher and for a short while she was also employed at the same school as a casual Reading Recovery teacher. It was from this school community that the concept of One Mob books became a reality through publishing some of the stories that grew out of the community along with others Pat had collected. I had been involved with some of the Aboriginal people who published books with Pat in this first series and I also taught some of the students who wrote the books.

Later I was instrumental in introducing Pat to some community members in Lima long before the One Mob Community Writers’ Project was conceived. After I had left the school and became a literacy consultant in another disadvantaged area of Sydney I had another chance meeting with Pat. This led her to invite me to participate in writing the teachers’ guide for the first series of One Mob books which she was preparing to publish. In a voluntary capacity I went on to co-write all three teachers’ guides for the three series of

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1 I am writing in Sydney in the state of New South Wales and in this part of Australia, Aboriginal people have stated publicly that they wish to be referred to as “Aboriginal” not “Indigenous” people so I have chosen to respect their request.

2 All people and schools have been given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.
books that were produced over the following years. As a non-Aboriginal teacher my involvement with the development of the books and teachers’ resources was always as a volunteer but I was supported by my employers because they believed in the educational value of the work. My own views about education and the teaching of reading were obviously aligned with Pat’s as we are both non-Aboriginal teachers who realized that only when the voices from Aboriginal communities were heard in schools (Bishop, 2003) would the teachers of Aboriginal students begin to understand their students’ culture. As my involvement included both the personal and the cultural (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) I was in this sense part of One Mob books from its earliest conception.

The One Mob book project had at this stage expanded to also include the development of a kit or resource which would support local communities to create and produce their own local books. Aboriginal “communities” today, especially urban communities, are often the result of state interventions and may not always represent a local connection to country or one particular Aboriginal language or cultural tradition. However the dispossession and removal of Aboriginal people has also resulted in new Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal ways of defining their own identities which may not fit well with non-Aboriginal definitions. Aboriginal Australia could never have been represented as a static monoculture so the contemporary relationship of Aboriginal cultural and language groups with particular geographical sites needs to be understood with reference to the social and historical context in which they have developed (Dodson, 1996; Foley, 2008; Merlan, 2007). This case study took place at four sites Dua, Rua, Tolu and Va. All four sites were identified as having Aboriginal students who were under achieving in literacy. They were

3 In the course of this research I also refer to the books already published by One Mob books by their titles but otherwise the company, the people and all the sites have been given pseudonyms.
also defined by both their social and economic disadvantage and the relatively large number of Aboriginal students at the site.

The theoretical orientation of this case study was socio-cultural and interpretive and used crystallization (Richardson, 1994) to examine the data which was collected. The multi-method approach which was used focused on analyzing data by coding, and over time refining categories as it was collected. As the focus of the case study was on a project being developed in Aboriginal communities it was also essential to acknowledge the power structures and the aspects of culture related to power and control (Bishop, 2003; Smith, 1999). I describe my approach as “respectful listening” which reflects the stance appropriate to a non-Aboriginal researcher who recognizes as Bishop (2003) suggests that the answers do not lie with the marginalizing culture but with those who have been marginalized.

In the following chapter, Chapter One, I introduce some central concepts related to the cultural understandings required as children learn to read. I also outline the current educational context and how the development and telling of local stories could contribute to the education of Aboriginal children. The literature which explores this context and its historical development is explored in Chapters Two and Three. In Chapter Four the collection and analysis of data, the methodological framework and the methods employed are presented. In Chapter Five I present the findings which are analysed and discussed in Chapters Six and Seven. The implications regarding the literacy education of Aboriginal students and a summary of the research are provided in Chapter Eight.
Chapter One: Learning to Read -- A Cultural Journey

Teach Us

I am a murri who can’t talk lingo

lingo

Now murri go no culture

Nothing

he is hard up.

Share your culture in white society

Now murri got nothing

Lost the lingo

lingo

...

Yea, I may be lost in a white world

but we are about to take over

Aussies world.

So

teach us.

(Fogarty, 1990)
Fogarty’s plea to Australian educators to ‘teach us’ is extremely poignant as it highlights the tragic waste of talent involved in the continued failure of our education systems to support all Aboriginal students to achieve their full potential. Language, culture and education are inextricably linked (Bernstein, 1990; Halliday, 1985; Vygotsky, 1986; Williams, 1999) and by acknowledging or ignoring this, educators either include or exclude students from the educational process. Lionel Fogarty’s poem encapsulates the issues in contemporary Australian Aboriginal education as his plea to ‘Teach us’ is accompanied by an equally heartfelt statement about the loss that Aboriginal people feel as a result of their removal and separation from country and culture. His use of both Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English (SAE) reflects his mastery of the genre as he manages to bring two cultural worlds together with his choice of words.

Lionel Fogarty is a Murri man, an Aboriginal man from Cherbourg in Queensland who has experienced dramatic changes in his lifetime, from living on a mission, where he was not even included in the census, to living in a world in which all governments have apologised to his people for their past treatment. Lionel Fogarty is a political activist and his choice of weapon is the word. He chooses his words carefully and uses the language of his people as well the language of their oppressors. His belief in the power of words and how language and education can lead to change is at the heart of this research as his vision has inspired me and many other non-Aboriginal teachers in our attempts to support Aboriginal students in mainstream schools.

The issues of culture and language and their relationship to education are the subject of this case study. This study has a specific focus on one aspect of the education provided for Aboriginal children: the texts that are used in the teaching of reading. When choosing
texts for the teaching of reading choices must be made about the subject matter and the language used in the text. These issues are central to this study as it is based on a project which produced local books in Aboriginal communities. The participants in this study were all engaged in the *One Mob Community Writers’ Project*. This study therefore unfolds as it began, by listening to the voices of Aboriginal people as they talk about how they see the issues of language and culture and their relationship to the education of their children.

As there are many Aboriginal languages and cultural groups, protocols differ in detail from place to place so I have chosen to acknowledge the wishes of the local Aboriginal people rather than any other authority. I have provided pseudonyms for all the participants and places in this ethnographic study but as the relationship to country is at the heart of culture and story I acknowledge the wishes of the people in this place from which I write. I will therefore refer to all Australian Aboriginal peoples in this account as ‘Aboriginal’ as there were no Torres Strait Island people participating at these sites.

**Learning Through Stories**

It was many decades ago that I first heard Lionel Fogarty read his poetry on this country to a packed lecture theatre at the University of Sydney. He held his audience with his words; the only sound was his voice as he read. It was so quiet that at one stage he ran his hands through his hair and asked, “Are you mob bored yet?” The audience responded with laughter but the power of his words and presence still held the room. However it was many years earlier, when I was a child, that Eve’s words had first held my imagination in that same way.

Eve was a family friend who had grown up in the bush but now lived in the city. She came to visit my family from time to time. She told me that when she was a child of about
twelve years of age her mother had died in a fire. Eve had then gone to live with her father in the ‘main house’ on the same property. She told me that she worked in her father’s house where she cooked and cleaned for the shearsers and farm workers on the property and every night slept under the sink in that same kitchen where she worked. I remember that this story both shocked and saddened me and I wondered how a father could treat his own daughter so badly. I didn’t really understand her story; I just thought it was sad and unjust that she was treated so cruelly, with no mother to protect her. This remarkable woman overcame this less than desirable start in life using the limited opportunities that were offered to her. She managed to develop a love of ballet, to travel widely and still maintain a loving, caring attitude to those around her. She lavished both affection and Darrell Lea chocolates on me and my sister . . . and told us her story. By the time I was a teenager I clearly knew about the plight of the Aboriginal people, her people.

When Eve visited our family she always brought gifts but as I grew older she also brought me newspaper cuttings about Aboriginal civil rights issues and about activists like the Aboriginal poet, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, in whose footsteps Lionel Fogarty walks. She talked to me. She told me how on her mother’s death her light skinned brother was allowed to run the property and that her dark skin was the reason her father designated the role of domestic servant to her. It was many years before I understood enough to try to reconstruct the context in which her story had unfolded and to reflect on the nuances of the relationship between her parents and their children and the situation into which she was born.

I do not know the facts about Eve’s family but I do know that she was adamant she would never marry and just as adamant that she would not be responsible for bringing a child into the world to suffer in the same way that she had. Sadly she died long before the
apology, before Mabo, even before the recognition of her people in the census. What she did leave were her words, her story; words from many years ago, from another era which spurred me into trying to learn about and understand the context in which her life unfolded and therefore develop an understanding of the obstacles and victories in the lives of many of her people as well as their cultural treasures. Her story also helped me to understand how the power and beauty of stories are always dependent not just on those who tell them but also on those who receive them.

In Aboriginal communities the telling or hearing of a story was traditionally a community matter as the traditional context for story telling was one in which the audience’s understandings about the story, both the symbolic and inferred meanings were based on shared cultural understandings governed by the kinship system (Hiatt, 1965; Keen, 1988; Mullins, 2007; Sutton, 1988). The story was told in the features of the land, in artefacts, songs, dances and ceremonies and signified more than the literal interpretation might have indicated. This use of story as signifier, repeated in many cultural practices and developing an enriched meaning over a person’s lifetime, shares a place with the enduring cultural narratives of myth and religion in many non-Aboriginal cultures (Martin & Rose, 2008). However it was in the context of a contemporary primary school that Reading Recovery trained teacher, Pat Smith, identified a need for stories that reflected the lives of the young Aboriginal students she was teaching.

Her initial attempts to provide contemporary stories for her Aboriginal students reflected her understanding of how reading develops but also the importance of respecting and recognising the understandings about the world that a child brings to a text. Pat was
working individually with young students who were considered to be in need of support to
develop their ability to read.

Reading Recovery was originally developed in New Zealand by Dame Marie Clay
over many years. The approach provides meticulous training for teachers to support students
to develop as emergent readers (Clay, 1991). During an interview in 2006 Pat explained her
understandings about the teaching of reading in the light of Dame Marie Clay’s work (1991)
and why she wanted the stories her students were reading to reflect their lives:

Marie Clay says ‘you can only read what you know, what you know about’…

If I put a bit of quantum physics down in front of you, you’d revert to sounding
out letters …not reading for meaning, you’d try to decode. And so it works
with little kids learning to read, like it’s so screaming obvious that if they
aren’t reading about stuff they’ve got the concept of…about their own
experiences…they haven’t got a mindset for what they’re reading. So of course
they’re not going to read for comprehension they’re just going to decode
words, that’s a waste of time . . . (Interview, Pat Smith, 22:11:06)

As a non-Aboriginal woman Pat clearly recognised the need for stories that reflected
the lives of Aboriginal students and how the use of these materials in schools could support
young students engage in the reading process and support non-Aboriginal teachers to begin
to understand their young students’ culture.

Loss of voice for an individual or a group is related to loss of social and economic
power. Aboriginal communities in Australia are defined by their social and economic
disadvantage and alienation from the dominant culture (Connell, 1994; Fredericks, 2013;
Freire, 1985; Vinson, 2007). It is therefore not surprising to find that there has been an absence of authentic Aboriginal voices in Australian classrooms and that this silence is reflected in the stories that are presented to young readers in mainstream schools. Aboriginal communities have been, and are still being, assaulted by policies which have oppressed and disadvantaged them in every way (Reeve, 2012; Schwab, 2012). It is inspiring to know that they have still been able to maintain and pass on their culture as demonstrated by the strong Aboriginal voices making themselves heard in the wider Australian society (Eades, 2013; Goodall & Cadzow; 2009; Pearson, 2000; Schmidt, 1990; Shnukal, 1985).

This study documents Pat’s attempts to bring more Aboriginal voices into classrooms. She was inspired to reach out to community members to produce local books that would reflect the lives of the young Aboriginal students in their communities. She believed that it was the right of every Aboriginal child to achieve his or her potential and that it was the responsibility of every educator to support that individual child. She also believed that by engaging young students in the reading process and listening to the voices of their Elders, communities and families, bridges between the community and the school could be built and crossed. Through One Mob books, the not-for-profit publishing company she founded in 2002, Pat worked in several communities and produced two series of Aboriginal stories and yarns. It was when she was ready to produce the third series that she decided to develop a kit or resource which communities could use to develop their own books. The community writers’ kit or resource would provide the type of support Pat had, up until then, personally provided.

During the years in which this project developed (1997-2007) I was working as a teacher and literacy consultant for public education and, by the end of the project, at a
university. I was involved throughout as a volunteer, helping to develop the teachers’ guides which accompanied the first two series of books. As Pat and One Mob books began to develop the community writers’ resource, one of my colleagues at the university was approached and asked to undertake an evaluation of the process and I was included as a research assistant to support the evaluation of the Kit or Resource. The case study which I undertook was on the development of the kit which sadly never came to fruition so I was not able to examine how communities were able to independently produce and publish their own resources which was Pat’s goal in the project.

Therefore my involvement with this project and in the development and use of local books spanned many years and linked me with the participants in a range of contexts over that time. One Mob books gave me access to all the materials developed during this project. Even though the project did not realise its vision, I believe it was critical to undertake an analysis of Pat’s work in the communities who developed the third series of books. The focus of this study is to examine the communities’ involvement in the production of local books. The aim was to produce a rich picture of the participants’ experiences, values, opinions and concerns about how best to educate their children, while supporting and confirming their Aboriginal identity and culture. Pat commented: “they’re the most studied, exploited, explored people on the planet,” (Interview, Pat Smith, 22:11:06). They are also very rarely respectfully approached with the idea of listening to their views about the education of their children (Tatz, 2009a). The examination of their views on education had a special focus on how local stories could both confirm identity and engage young people.
Why Stories Matter

A human life is the most complex narrative of all; it has many layers of events which embrace outside behavior and actions, the inner stream of the mind, the underworld of the unconscious, the soul, fantasy, dream and imagination. There is no account of a life which can ever mirror or tell all this. When telling her story all a person can offer is a sample of this.

(Beattie, 2009, p. 13)

It is very important that the stories of Aboriginal people are heard in our schools, that the complex narratives of their lives are not only shared with their own and all Australian children, but understood and respected by their teachers. Stories matter in the teaching of reading as it is in the process of reading that the skills and understandings needed to develop into a sophisticated reader are exercised and developed. It is the frequency and breadth of reading which supports this development (Krashen, 1992) so it is important to read often and widely if all aspects of the reading process are to be developed. It is equally important to engage readers with texts which use language in the best possible way, quality texts which will help to develop vocabulary and provide excellent models for writing. However for emergent readers or for those in the later years who are struggling to read, written texts which are close to familiar spoken language (Kawakami & Dudoit, 2000; Kral, 2009; Luke, 1993) will support the reading process as prediction is supported and fluency is therefore easier to achieve. Success in decoding provides a strong platform for comprehension and engagement and helps to dissolve feelings of inadequacy and failure and the resulting disengagement with reading (Mansour & Martin, 2009). It is this aspect of the reading process that Pat was focused on in her project.
The school is now the main site for the primary education of Aboriginal children, so books and literacy have been privileged over local oral cultural traditions (Smith, 1999). At the same time Aboriginal students, as a group, have also been assessed and found to be under achieving in reading (Lokan, 2001) and although it has been recognised that there are social and economic barriers to educational success (Connell, 1994; Freire, 1985) there is still a focus on the failure of individuals rather than the education systems in which they participate. Some students are predisposed to learning in the environment of the school because they have been prepared for it by their primary socialisation (Bernstein, 1990; Brice Heath, 1982), however others will find school a more challenging setting in which to learn because the language of the school is not the language of their home.

There are socially constructed barriers which prevent disadvantaged groups, including Aboriginal people, from participating equally in society and especially in educational institutions (Bernstein, 1990; Connell, 1994; Freire, 1985). The important factor however is not the language spoken by the child at home but rather the socio-cultural language resources the student has for using language in the context of the school (Bernstein, 1990; Eades, 2013; Freebody, 2007). Individual students are assessed and graded alongside other Australian children using The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), which is an annual assessment for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. There has also been a recognition of the failure of Australian education systems to achieve success for Aboriginal students (Howard, 2000; Keating, 2000; Rudd, 2011). All levels of government have acknowledged this failure but the responses have been largely unsuccessful (Tatz, 2009a). Since the time of the invasion of Australia, Aboriginal people have had to struggle to be heard and the unwillingness to listen to Aboriginal communities
is, I believe, one of the main contributing factors to the disjunction between Aboriginal homes and schools (Goodall & Cadzow, 2009; Martin & Rose, 2008; Tatz, 2009a; van Toorn, 2006). This ethnographic study provides the opportunity to listen to some Aboriginal people’s views on literacy and learning and to hear what they think about improving the education of their children. It also explores why stories matter.

**The Current Context**

Contrary to popular conceptions more than half of all Aboriginal people live in New South Wales or Queensland and around one third of those live in cities, or in regional areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). It is therefore clear that the problems of living in a remote Australian community do not affect the majority of Aboriginal students. As Fredericks (2013) states, most Aboriginal people do not live in remote areas in fact the majority live in urban areas.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live in cities and towns are often thought of as ‘less Indigenous’ than those who live ‘in the bush’, as though they are ‘fake’ Aboriginal people – while ‘real’ Aboriginal people live ‘on communities’ and ‘real’ Torres Strait Islander people live ‘on islands’. Yet more than 70 percent of Australia’s Aboriginal peoples live in urban locations (ABS, 2007) and urban living is just as much part of a reality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as living in remote discrete communities. (Federicks, 2013, p. 4)

I would suggest that the conceptions Fredericks refers to come from a lack of respect for Aboriginal people and their cultures (Freebody, 2007; Tatz, 2009a) and that this has led to the exclusion and silencing of Aboriginal voices. Fredericks (2013) is concerned with
“symbols of space and place” (p. 4) and I think she rightly suggests that they can “either marginalise and oppress urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, or demonstrate that they are included and engaged” (p. 5). From the earliest days of colonialisation, policies were developed (van Toorn, 2006) that resulted in the damage or destruction of Aboriginal cultures and communities. As a result Aboriginal communities have been physically displaced from traditional lands and have also experienced the removal of children from their families and the extinction of their languages (Schmidt, 1990).

This has resulted in social and economic disadvantage (Connell, 2007; Goodall & Cadzow, 2009) and the loss or damage of oral traditions as a result of the loss of land and language. Aboriginal people however have also found new ways of maintaining their culture, including the annexation of English as an Aboriginal language (Eades, 2013). However the persistence of a disjunction between the language of the home and school (Bernstein, 1990; Williams, 1999) is clearly related to the failure of education systems to meet the needs of Aboriginal communities. It is therefore vital to recognise the importance of the community in the development of literacy, as it is the key to understanding educational disadvantage and how it may be overcome. The identity of Aboriginal students and how this is confirmed or challenged by the school is central to an understanding of how this accumulation of disadvantage and discrimination plays out in the lives of individuals.

There has been a continued discrepancy between the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and a correlation between engagement in reading and literacy achievement has also been noted (Lokan, 2001). Having their own lives and language reflected in the texts which are privileged in the school context positively confirms Aboriginal identities (Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006). It is therefore more likely
that students will become engaged in the reading process if they see that their community, their culture and their language are valued and also reflected in some of the books they encounter at school (Clay, 1991).

Aboriginal peoples’ relationships to the land, the kinship system, and land rights may not be issues that non-Aboriginal people see as their concern or indeed as the concern of Aboriginal people who live in cities far removed from their ancestors’ traditional lands. However there are many contemporary interpretations of community and identity as Aboriginal people have reformed communities and maintained kinship systems in surprising and innovative ways (Goodall & Cadzow, 2009). This study did not include any remote communities. It examines several Aboriginal communities in cities and one in a regional area. As previously noted, Aboriginal communities in cities are a common contemporary phenomenon and in these communities Aboriginal identity has been established in new ways (Fredericks, 2013).

Therefore the issues of literacy and educational success are only one aspect of this story. The subject matter and the language in which the stories are told are also important because they reflect and confirm culture and identity. Eve’s story is one from long ago, from another century, but it is still of great importance for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike. Stories like hers provide us with a way to make a personal, emotional link to our history and culture. It is therefore obvious how important this may be for an Aboriginal child in contemporary Australia but I believe it is also important for every Australian as it allows us to define our own identity. We develop an understanding of who we are when we understand our history.
Teacher Professional Learning

It is well researched and agreed (Aubusson, Ewing, & Hoban, 2009; Hayes et al., 2006) that the skills and education of the teacher are of vital importance in supporting students in learning to read and develop literacy. However even the most devoted teacher cannot hope to develop a close understanding of all the cultures reflected in their classrooms. Many schools in our largest cities have almost all their students learning English as an Additional Language (EAL). The first languages and cultures of their students can be almost as numerous as the number of children in the class. In New South Wales, for instance, Aboriginal children who speak a dialect of English, a Creole, pidgin or a traditional language do not receive any support from an English as an Additional Language /Dialect (EAL/D) teacher, as they do in some other states. It is therefore of great importance to at least provide the teacher with authentic reading materials which speak with an authoritative voice using Aboriginal English to tell stories from Aboriginal culture.

Reading and Telling “Our Stories”

But in the future, and right here and now, I want people to pick up my thing, to understand someone who got over the difficulty of English and got over the difficulty of divided and conquered language, that is present today in dialects, in different syntax, within my own Aboriginal poetic upbringing. An old man by the name of Bob Landis was the greatest poet in Cherbourg, poetry used to just flow out of his mouth, out of his heart and out of his mind, a great influence to me.
What I want to do now, is, I want to get my message out. I want to reach out to people. And if they could just see me and hear my voice.

Australian poet Lionel Fogarty in conversation with Philip Mead (Mead, 1997)

In this interview Lionel Fogarty recognises both the barriers many Aboriginal people face in using English to express themselves and also the strengths and richness that connection to culture provides. His desire to write poetry and Eve’s desire to share her story indicate that both were driven to share their stories outside their own cultural and geographical communities. From the earliest days of the colony and the first contact of Europeans with Aboriginal people two things have often been remarked on: the curiosity of Aboriginal people and their generosity. Even in the first days of the colony Aboriginal people shared food and water, gave directions and initiated communication with the white invaders (Goodall & Cadzow, 2009; Reynolds, 2013; Tench, 2012) even when it was clear that they did not want the invaders to stay on their lands. Lionel Fogarty was known as an activist before he was known as a poet and he uses his poetry to speak about issues that concern him. Similarly, when Eve told her story to a child many decades ago it was a personal attempt to educate and to appeal for justice.

Despite the results of damaging, racist policies, the vitality of Aboriginal culture is obvious to anyone who has witnessed a performance of dance, music or song or seen the vibrant canvasses developed by one of the many ‘untrained’ Aboriginal artists, not to mention the award winning writers such as Alexis Wright, Kim Scott, Bruce Pascoe, Anita Heiss and many more. How much contemporary Aboriginal culture owes to unidentified traditions is debatable but suffice it to say that “the yarn” is as prevalent in Aboriginal
cultures as it has ever been. Eades (2013) contends that storytelling is a collaborative, social practice:

That is, even if I am telling friends about an event at which they were not present, I develop my story of that event partially in response to the ways in which they respond to my story. This may be for example in the details which I emphasise, or how I emphasise them, which may be shaped by my unconscious response to their reactions – for example, of surprise, or shock, or disbelief. Or it may be more linguistically overt, for example I may remember details of the event in response to specific questions asked by others. (p. 16)

Eades is particularly concerned with the re-telling of stories by Aboriginal people in court and how the recontextualising of stories through questions that probe for an accurate retelling of an event often ignore the silences, vocabulary choices and other contextual aspects which are of significant importance in Aboriginal culture. The fact that these issues are contemporary shows that Aboriginal culture and language still have a strong presence even amongst urban dwelling, English speaking Aboriginal people.

As Eades suggests, an understanding of the audience and their expected response is important in developing a story and some of these elements are recognisable to Aboriginal people across Australia. Any Aboriginal story will have some resonance in other Aboriginal communities no matter the geographical or language differences. Furthermore, the dislocation of Aboriginal people from their lands has meant that many contemporary Aboriginal communities are made up of Aboriginal people from many different language
and cultural groups. Australia always has been multilingual and multicultural (Eades, 2013; Schmidt, 1990).

Very few people will be able to attain Lionel Fogarty’s level of eloquence and success as a poet. Rather, it is Eve’s story that is the one told over and over in the home or community. It is a personal story of the kind that is often shared by our Elders to speak to young hearts and minds and teach lessons about life and the history of the family and community. This oral communication and storytelling is alive and well in Aboriginal communities and has helped communities to survive intact, some even as a city grew around them (Goodall & Cadzow, 2009). The stories told by Aboriginal communities reflect their lives and their cultural heritage so it is to be expected that they will differ from place to place. However all Aboriginal people have been historically defined and contained by the same types of laws and policies across Australia. This has resulted in Aboriginal communities and people defining themselves and developing a national identity in opposition to these policies. In this way, oppressive policies and practices that were meant to silence dissent have lead to the use of humour and wry commentary about contemporary life (Kleinert, 2009; Stanner, 1982; Tench, 2012).

Structure of the Thesis

In the two following chapters I explore the literature that provides a context for this study. I examine the relationships which Aboriginal people still have with each other, the land and the laws that have provided a framework for their culture over millennia. I also look at their responses to the introduction of English to their already extensive number of languages. Understanding how Aboriginal people responded to their dispossession and
marginalisation over the last two centuries provides a context for the examination of the current education system and the relationship of contemporary Aboriginal people to it.

The methods I employed and the methodological framework that I used to provide a structure for data collection and analysis is explored in Chapter Four. In the following chapter, Chapter Five, I present the data collected during the book development sessions at the four sites Dua, Rua, Tolu and Va and the interviews that were undertaken with some of the participants. In Chapters Six and Seven I then explore the themes that arose from the data and in Chapter Eight I discuss the implications for education systems in regards to the education of Aboriginal students and I summarise the findings of the research.

**Conclusion**

There are many pedagogical implications for the teaching of reading in marginalised communities that will not be addressed in this study. What is developed is a rich picture of one important aspect of education from the perspective of those who have been marginalised by the education system itself. Kincheloe & Steinberg (2008) suggest that this is a way to truly explore a subject from the viewpoint of the subjugated and marginalised:

The way to see from a perspective differing from that of the positivist guardians involves exploring an institution such as Western education from the vantage point of those who have been marginalised by it. In such a process, subjugated and indigenous knowledges once again emerge allowing teachers to gain the cognitive power of empathy – a power that enables them to take pictures of reality from different vantage points. The
intersection of these diverse vantage points allows for a form of analysis that moves beyond the isolate decontextualised and fragmented analysis of positivist reductionism. (p. 139)

The focus of this study is on the valuable cultural heritage which Aboriginal students share; a heritage that I believe can provide a focus for the engagement of all students, but especially for Aboriginal students. Difference does not equate to deficit and this is certainly so in the case of Aboriginal students. It is important to do more than just acknowledge the culture and languages that Aboriginal children bring to school. Rather, the school context needs to be able to reflect and incorporate important aspects of Aboriginal students’ lives and languages whether they are Creoles, traditional Aboriginal languages or varieties of English. Vygotsky’s notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) rests on the understanding that all learning takes place through language (Vygotsky, 1986). To use Lionel Fogarty’s words we have a responsibility to support students to get over “the difficulty of English” and to be able to use their own mother tongue as well as Standard Australian English (SAE) to achieve their own educational goals. The focus of this research is on a project which aimed to address this situation by the development of local texts. The research examines the development of these texts, their subject matter, the language used in the texts and the reasons that individual community members believe that these local texts are important in the education of their children. In the words of one of the participants, Kay Mairey:

Personally I’d really like to thank and just acknowledge . . .

the great contribution Pat has brought on board to doing this project . . .
she gave us the confidence . . . she instilled in us the belief that we could actually come up with things and do things . . . there was no judgment, there was no boundaries, it was up to us to take things on and she guided us . . .

Our people need people like Pat, who respect us and respect our culture . . . you can’t put a price on what Pat’s done . . . and how she’s done it.

(Interview, Rua)

In the following chapter I explore the issues and events that shaped the contemporary context in which this study was conducted. These events and issues were the result of colonisation and policies which denied Aboriginal rights and challenged their identities. To understand the context in which this study took place it is necessary to explore how that context was shaped. For this reason I examine the literature that describes and explains the development of current Aboriginal identities including their relationship to this land and how laws have both protected and destroyed this relationship. Central to this discussion is story: story before the book and story in the contemporary world linking past generations to this one.
Chapter Two: Literature Review – “Our Story”: The Book, the Land and the Law

A nation chants, BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY.

The bells peal everywhere.

Church bells calling the faithful to the tabernacle where the gates of heaven will open, but not for the wicked. Calling innocent little black girls from a distant community where the white dove bearing an olive branch never lands. Little girls who come back home after church on Sunday, who look around themselves at the human fallout and announce matter-of-factly, ARMAGGEDDON BEGINS HERE


There is nothing I could, or would wish to add to the comments of this award winning Aboriginal author but there is much to be gained from listening carefully to her “story” and to the collective stories of all Aboriginal people. This is especially true in education where engagement and self-direction are important aspects of the learning process (Hayes et al., 2006; Martin, 2006; Martin, Marsh, McInerney, Green, & Dowson, 2007; Munns, Martin, & Craven, 2008). While this is the “story we already know”, a less well known story concerns the Aboriginal experience of literacy and literature as part of the British invasion and how this has impacted on contemporary Aboriginal culture and educational practices (Wigglesworth & Simpson, 2008; Scollon & Scollon, 2001; van Toorn, 2006; Walsh & Yallop, 1993).
In this chapter I will first consider the importance of story in the development and maintenance of culture and how the land and the law always have been and still are important concepts in Aboriginal culture. Identity, the ties of kinship and how “our mob” is defined in the modern world, where ties to land and kinship have evolved, will also be explored with reference to contemporary Aboriginal authors. The cultural importance of story, which preceded the British invasion and the literacy practices it brought, has been maintained and continues in a modern context (McLeod, Verdon, & Bennetts Kneebone, 2014; Siu-Runyan, 2012; Yunupingu, 1990). I will explore this context and the cultural and literary practices of contemporary Aboriginal people.

If we are to really know “the story”, contemporary Aboriginal voices need to be heard in educational contexts, especially as the development of literacy involves the development of a voice which is culturally defined (McKeough, Bird, Tourigny, Romaine, Graham, Ottmann, & Jeary, 2008). I will explore both educational institutions and some theories about reading pedagogy employed by the dominant culture in Australia (Freebody, 2007; Lokan, 2001; Wells, 2009). The experiences of Australian Aboriginal people are easily recognisable as similar to those of other oppressed minority cultures and this experience of a loss of voice and a “culture of silence” (Connell, 1994; Freire, 1985; Smith, 1999) will also be examined.

**Before the Book: The Story, the Land and the Law**

Before the invasion, before the book, what were Aboriginal voices communicating, what stories were they telling? To answer these questions it is necessary to look at the way Aboriginal stories were and are told and also their purpose and audience. Although
traditional Aboriginal societies are usually considered to be oral cultures, Aboriginal people are now known worldwide for their visual arts. It is through the symbolism and the concepts demonstrated in their visual arts that the role of story in Aboriginal culture can start to be understood. Accepting the conceptual nature of Aboriginal art (Sutton, 1988) is a starting point for examining the stories that have been handed down orally and through song and dance. In his analysis of non-Aboriginal responses to Aboriginal art, Peter Sutton (1988) argues that some of the main obstacles to understanding for the non-Aboriginal viewer are the conceptual nature of Aboriginal art as well as the media which were traditionally used.

A more subtle cultural barrier rests on differences between attitudes to the material life of the art objects themselves. Most portable Aboriginal art, in the classical tradition at least, was made for short-term purposes; after it was used, it was left to decay in the elements or was intentionally destroyed, often as part of a ceremony. In fact, things made by people were seldom kept for long periods, by the standards of most other cultures. The transience of the medium was not felt to be inconsistent with the sacred quality often attributed to the object itself. (p. 38)

Aboriginal art, in its traditional forms is complex because it embeds religious, social and ceremonial meanings and is produced within a society in which power and knowledge are restricted to particular individuals by both their birth and their relationships through the kinship system.

The right to tell or hear a story is based on the relationships within the community and those in turn relate to the individual’s relationship to their country. The important role of story can best be understood if Aboriginal art is understood as conceptual and the artist seen
as signifying rather than copying or representing his or her world. For this reason, as Sutton (1988) suggests, “In Aboriginal eyes, it was the design that mattered most, not the object that it decorated” (p. 38). So, for example, the transition made by the desert artists moving from the medium of the body and ground to the school doors at Yuendumu or canvas can be seen as an easy one (Sutton, 1988). It may also be hard for non-Aboriginal people to understand the differences in their views about the value of art and the concepts of originality, ownership and individuality compared to those which inform Aboriginal views (Merlan, 2000).

Michael Nelson Jakamarra, a well-known Warlpiri artist, explains his complex world, where the inspiration for artistic works lies not just with the individual but also within the kinship system:

You gotta canvas, and brush ready. Well, first you gotta ask your father and kurdungurlu. [They’ll say] ‘You do that Dreamin’ there, which is belonging to your grandfather and father.’ They’ll give you a clue; they’ll show you a drawing on the ground first. You’ve got it in your brain now. You know it because you’ve seen your father [in a ceremony], with that painting on his body and one on the ground. You’ll see it, then you’ll know it. (Sutton, 1988, p. 102)

The complex relationship between the “kirda” who have rights to certain parts of the land and “kurdungurlu” who are the guardians for the land (Sutton, 1988) are demonstrated in all aspects of Warlpiri ceremonial life including the very new concept of painting on canvas. While all Aboriginal people may not live on their traditional lands and speak their original languages the kinship system, with its rights and responsibilities, is still strong in
Aboriginal communities across Australia and it is this system in which the individual artist creates (Goodall & Cadzow, 2009; Harris, 1990; Morgan, 1992; Sutton, 1988).

Aboriginal artists both traditional and contemporary are challenging non-Aboriginal concepts about art by continuing to produce their work their way, which often means collaboratively and in accordance with the values of their communities (Gilbert, 1992). Traditional “Aboriginal art” is conceptual; it is a semiotic system which conveys complex religious and cultural knowledge at several levels, depending on the knowledge of the viewer. Johnny Mundrugmundrug’s song/poem, like Aboriginal visual art, is part of a cultural heritage which precedes “the book”.

In his poem, Johnny Mundrugmundrug personifies the morning star and then conflates the story of the morning star with the ceremony and the religious artefact, the feathered string around the pole, which will be used in ceremony (Dixon & Duwell, 1990, p. 100). As with a visual representation on canvas or in the artefacts, the string and the pole, the intended audience is expected to know the ceremony, which moiety the Morning Star represents, and the many dreaming stories, ceremonies, dances and clan lands that are associated with it. It is also inferred that the audience will, according to their place in the kinship system and their seniority, have understandings about the subject matter symbolised in the story, and furthermore that these understandings will vary within an audience, if it is public and composed of both men, women and children and perhaps outsiders. The traditional audience will also know their rights and responsibilities regarding the stories, land and ceremonies. The songs and ceremonies, like the images, belong to the local community and everyone within the community knows, at their own level of knowledge,
how they relate to their own country and story (Gibson, 2008; Martin & Rose, 2008; Swain, 1988).

The stories are shared, agreed upon and related to the local community and the telling or hearing of a story is a community matter. In her discussion with the Ngarinyin Elder, Mowaljarlai, Hannah Bell (2009), questioned him about the gender of the sun and moon. He did not explain why the moon was male in his culture, other than by agreeing with her that the moon relates strongly to women. She realised that he assumed she had knowledge of the many stories which together explain the reason for the moon’s masculine gender and in the process she came to better understand how knowledge is developed and understood in Aboriginal cultures.

The language for abstract conceptualisation and intellectual discussion is virtually non-existent in Ngarinyin. Knowledge is acquired by observation and participation, reinforced in story, dance, song and painting. (Bell, 2009, p. 88)

It is because the stories, ceremonies, dances and the country itself are seen conceptually through Aboriginal eyes that there is no need for other words to explain the significance. The story as told in the features of the land, in artefacts, songs, dances and ceremonies signifies more than the literal interpretation indicates. This use of story as signifier, repeated in many cultural practices and developing an enriched meaning over a person’s lifetime, is at odds with the contemporary commonsense understanding of the purpose of story, but does share a place with the enduring cultural narratives of myth and religion in many non-Aboriginal cultures (von Brandenstein, 1978).
So before the book there were stories and they were rich, complex and meaningful, lasting a lifetime and able to be understood at deeper levels as understanding and responsibility developed. It may also be argued that the notion of oral and literate cultures is itself problematic (Smith, 1999; van Toorn, 2006), especially when oral cultures are seen to precede written cultures or to be eradicated by them. Van Toorn (2006) states:

On the one hand, non-Aboriginal people have failed to perceive the extent of Aboriginal cultural loss and understand its dire ramifications. On the other, it is sometimes the case that losses are actually adaptations or transformation of traditional Aboriginal practices – transformations that are not recognised as such by non-Aboriginal people, who underestimate the normal dynamism and exposure to otherness that so-called ‘traditional’ cultures are accustomed to. (p. 11)

A wonderful example of this “dynamism” is demonstrated by the Hermannsburg artist, Albert Namatjira, who used western media and symbolism to express his own Aboriginal cultural heritage. In his lifetime, Namatjira was portrayed as an individual whose experiences and training by a non-Aboriginal artist, had helped him to produce such art works. However it is clear from his strong adherence to Aboriginal culture, tradition and place that Namatjira’s work helped to define modern Aboriginal art for “its capacity to adapt, to borrow, and to innovate” (Sutton, 1988, p. 202).

There are many other examples of innovation which have been dismissed by non-Aboriginal people because of the widely held view that Aboriginal people were incapable of change and adaption. The Toas produced in the Lake Eyre region in the early years of the 20th century (Morphy, 2012), “refer in their symbolism and mythology to the main water
sources of the region” (Sutton, 1988, p. 198) but were believed for many years to have been traditional artefacts that had been missed by earlier researchers. It was inconceivable, at that time, to the curator of the South Australian museum that the local people would be able to innovate. The artefacts were included as utilitarian objects in the museum’s collection.

Sutton (1988) suggests that due to this entrenched attitude towards Aboriginal culture: “The opportunity to portray a graphic example of Aboriginal artistic innovation sixty years before the Papunya school of Western Desert painters emerged had passed without discussion.” (p. 198)

**Reading the story**

To understand Aboriginal stories the non-Aboriginal reader must at least attempt to understand the perspective of the people who produce them (Zeegers, 2006). Dennis Foley (2008), an Aboriginal academic, describes the relationship of Aboriginal people to the land and how that relationship underlies all aspects of their culture.

The physical world is the base that is land, the creation. The land is the mother, we are of the land, we do not own the land, the land owns us. The land is our food, our culture, our spirit and our identity. The physical world encapsulates the land, the sky and all living organisms. The human world involves the knowledge, approaches to people, family, rules of behaviour, ceremonies, and their capacity to change. The sacred world is not based entirely in the metaphysical, as some would believe. Its foundation is in healing (both the spiritual and physical well being of all creatures), the lore (the retention and re-enforcement of oral history), care of country, the laws and their maintenance. (p. 118)
A lack of understanding about this world and its stories is well illustrated by Martin & Rose (2008) in their comparison and analysis of a traditional Piltati story, from the Mann Ranges, to the Typhon myth from Europe around the Mediterranean. Both are serial narratives but the European story of the defeat of the monster Typhon by the god Zeus and the relationship of the story to the landscape is accepted and as they state, European myths are “studied for their archetypal insights into human nature” (p. 73). In contrast to the European myth in which Zeus slays the monster which now creates the fire in Mt Aetna, the Piltati myth is concluded by the female protagonists being swallowed by their husbands who have been transformed into wanampi, giant serpents. This resolution of course carries no meaning for the uninitiated, that is children and non-Aboriginal people but as Martin & Rose (2008) explain:

For the Pitjantjatjara it signifies the transformation of the women into members of their husbands’ estate group at marriage, so that their children will also be members. (p. 71)

This is of great importance because it is believed that the wanampi still reside in the area and recognise and help their descendants who are the custodians and landowners of the area (Martin & Rose, 2008, p. 71).

From this one “simple” story the complex, layered and important role of story in traditional Aboriginal culture is very well exemplified. Unfortunately so is the ignorance and lack of understanding of the non-Aboriginal community where “dreaming stories” are treated as what Martin & Rose (2008) refer to as “just so” stories (p. 74), a genre invented by Kipling which reflected an imperialist view of colonialised peoples as child-like and incapable of complex thought (Christie, 1995; Smith, 1999). This is a view which underpins
most of the social policies which relate to Aboriginal people even up to the recent 2007 Intervention of the Australian Federal Government (Australian Human Rights Commission Social Justice Report, 2007).

The importance of “abstract principles of social and natural order that such stories encode” are “only meaningful in relation to the whole system of social principles encoded in the culture’s mythological system, and its associated religious songs and ceremonies” (Martin & Rose, 2008, p. 74). Echoing the Aboriginal world view offered by Foley (2008), Martin, & Rose (2008) also suggest that:

Every landform in the entire Australian continent was once associated with such a sacred story, interconnected in complex networks of ‘Dreaming tracks’ or ‘songlines’, where the ancestor beings travelled over the country in creation times. (p. 74)

Many Australians are happy to accept this view of how Australia once was but, as with the curator of the South Australian Museum 100 years ago, there is an unwillingness to believe that urban Aboriginal people can innovate, borrow and adapt and still be “authentically” Aboriginal and this threatens the very identity of contemporary Aboriginal people (Fredericks, 2013; Goodall & Cadzow, 2009; Wheatley, 2013).

Contemporary Aboriginal voices – telling their stories their way.

Identifying Aboriginality and Aboriginal voice has been the concern of governments from the beginning of colonisation, if not always in their interest at least as a means of communicating effectively with Aboriginal people. In the earliest days of the colony Captain Phillip kidnapped two Aboriginal men, one of whom was Bennelong, in the hope of learning
their language and teaching them English (Tench, 2012). However mistakes have also been made from the very beginning of colonisation. Watkin Tench, as a member of the First Fleet, recorded that the early colonists actually taught local Aboriginal people new Aboriginal words because they were unaware of the number of languages spoken in Australia (Troy, 1993). Since that time, as the result of policies like assimilation, many Aboriginal people have been separated from their land, clan group and language, leading to the foregrounding of other ways of marking identity. It is because many Aboriginal people and their families have experienced loss of land and language and therefore in the most significant ways, loss of voice, that this loss is in itself something which unifies and identifies Aboriginal people across Australia.

Non-Aboriginal Australia has always controlled the legal definition of what it means to be Aboriginal and that definition has changed over time in response to government policies and priorities, but for Aboriginal people the definition of their own people has always been based on local knowledge and recognition; a process with its roots in the kinship system (Dodson, 1994; Goodall & Cadzow, 2009; Martin & Rose, 2008). This is well demonstrated by the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, which now requires Aboriginal people to produce a “Certificate of Aboriginality” before being accepted as a person eligible for any assistance provided for Aboriginal people. The definition is the Australian Federal Government’s which defines an Aboriginal as a person who:

- is of Aboriginal descent;
- identifies as an Aboriginal person; and,
- is accepted by the Aboriginal community in which they live.
All of these things must apply. A person’s physical appearance or the way they live, are not requirements (Anti-Discrimination board of New South Wales, n.d.).

This definition is very different from earlier definitions which were largely based on skin colour or even earlier definitions that accepted the metaphysical concept of race as one which had a scientific base (Broome, 2002; Charlton, 2001). In this view, Aboriginal people were considered to be unable to adapt or even survive in the modern world. (Parbury, 2005)

This view is thoroughly discredited by the fact that currently more than half of all contemporary Aboriginal people live in New South Wales or Queensland and around one third of those people live in cities, or in regional areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). So Aboriginal people have both adapted and survived and to listen to modern Aboriginal voices means to listen to voices which echo the concerns and interests of contemporary Australians. An Aboriginal voice is no less authentic if it is heard in a city, on a radio or television or through a book or other digital media. It is the question of the authenticity of Aboriginal voices which must be addressed. Ngarinyin Elder, Mowaljarlai, said:

We have not benefitted from our relationship with whitefellas in the last forty years. We have lost our land, our dignity, our law and culture. You got the land, all the economic benefits and most employment – looking after us. We are dying young from hopelessness. My people are becoming spiritually empty, like yours. Both of us got this problem now. (Bell, 2009, p. 22)

This Elder is describing what is happening to his people who live in a remote area and who still speak an Aboriginal language and he is reflecting on some common problems that he sees are shared across Australian society, even though the causes of the changes to
his people’s lives have in this case resulted in hopelessness. His voice is undoubtedly authentic but it is only one voice.

The Aboriginal voice is, as it always was, not one voice but many and these voices come from many cultures and speak many languages, including English, which Aboriginal people have spoken, read and written since the earliest days of interaction with English speakers (Troy, 1993; van Toorn, 2006). We should expect that Aboriginal voices will sometimes resonate with non-Aboriginal people, that an Aboriginal perspective may be one that is mediated by education and interaction with modern media and with the myriad cultures reflected in contemporary Australian society (Batty, 2005; Michaels, 1991) and yet is still uniquely Aboriginal. To understand the spiritual emptiness Mowaljarlai describes it is necessary to understand the differences but also to appreciate what unifies the Aboriginal peoples across the Australian continent.

This can be exemplified by one contemporary urban woman’s view of what it means to be an Aboriginal person. Troy Mumbulla, of the Yuin people from the South Coast of NSW was born and grew up in the Western suburbs of Sydney, attended the University of Sydney and is now the principal of a public school in Sydney. She explains why her voice and the voices of others like her are still authentic Aboriginal voices.

It’s whatever is inside you, whatever experiences you’ve had as a kid, whatever influences you’ve had on your life and as they say, you can take the girl out of the Aboriginal country but you can’t take the Aboriginality out of the girl! I also believe even those children who had fairly light coloured skin, who were taken away from their parents and adopted, who didn’t even know they were Aboriginal, still felt something within
themselves that told them something wasn’t quite right about their upbringing. I think they have every right to call themselves Aboriginal if they choose to identify as that later on in life, it’s definitely a choice, a cultural choice. (Love & Rushton, 2000, p 33)

Troy’s idea of what it means to be Aboriginal resonates in Aboriginal communities (Foley, 2000) and with the Federal government’s current definition of Aboriginality it is to some extent a choice. This shift in government policy also reflects the successful struggles of Aboriginal peoples to claim back their land and their dignity. As the Gurindji leader, Vincent Lingiari said: “The issue on which we are protesting is neither purely economic nor political but moral . . . on August 22, 1966 the Gurindji tribe decided to cease to live like dogs.” (Parbury, 2005, p. 116) For contemporary Aboriginal people their land and their relationship to it is still an essential element in defining their identity.

However, for Aboriginal people identity is also defined by their place as a member of a cultural group attached to their lands, either legally or through cultural practices, including education in the non-Aboriginal sense. For instance, Troy Mumbulla knew her extended Aboriginal family and where they were from but it was through reading as an adult that she was able to identify herself as a member of the Yuin nation. These cultural practices may range from the visual arts, to dance, story, “yarning” (Mills, Sunderland, & Davis-Warra, 2013) and reading and writing.

Identity has also developed in response to government policy (Eickelkamp, 2010; Goodall & Cadzow, 2009; Parbury, 2005). Aboriginal people now identify as Aboriginal, symbolised by the Aboriginal flag, a pan Australian understanding of Indigeneity. This national identity has resulted from government policies which removed people from their
traditional lands, languages and cultures. However as Sansom (1982) contends, while contemporary Aboriginal identity is constructed as a reaction to conquest it is still limited and constricted by the same cultural similarities. Social cohesion in Aboriginal communities is still built around a service economy of exchange within the local, identified group (Mullins, 2007). However, contemporary Aboriginal voices do not belong in the past “but they have drawn on the past to make a new future” (Goodall & Cadzow, 2009, p. 4). That past includes the indignities and injustices of the last two hundred years as well as the millennia that preceded them.

The Land

Relationship to the land

Aboriginal Australia is not a heterogenous society as there are several hundred, perhaps six hundred and fifty major language groups/nations pre-invasion (Flood 1995; Broome 1994; Elder 1998; Willey 1979). The descendants of these nations, although outwardly showing similarities are in fact ethnically diverse. They cannot be grouped together under an Aboriginal blanket of western generalisation. (Foley, 2008, p. 117)

What it means to be an Aboriginal person is most easily defined by what the musician Paul Kelly (1992) calls the “special treatment” Aboriginal people have received since first contact. To be Aboriginal means that within living memory you have lived in your own country as a non-citizen without the power to move, marry, vote or attend school without the permission of an overseer – some benign, some less so. To define Aboriginal life is to define the life of a group whose “special treatment” continues to this day. Only
Aboriginal people are singled out in this country as a problem group, all the social and economic burdens they carry are attributed to them; the blame has been shifted onto them.

Arguably, the concerting of Aboriginal positions is most likely in confrontational dialogue with “outside” agents and organizations. For example, government (and often, the general populace), often take unifying views of Aborigines as a “problem” in terms of economic, health, social and political issues, creating circumstances that effectively require and sometimes produce unity of response. (Merlan, 2007, p. 138)

It is therefore very important to remember that Aboriginal society has always been culturally and linguistically diverse and responses to the invasion have also been just as diverse in trying to maintain their links to country (Mansell, 2011).

While some Aboriginal people were coping with invasion over two hundred years ago, a little more than 50 years ago, and well within living memory, people in the Western desert were brought in to settlements for the first time. Some of these people had never seen or spoken to a white person, or seen a truck or car. The reasons why they were left to live in the desert and also why they were eventually taken out relate, of course, to the interests of the rest of Australia, not to theirs. In the case of Yuwali, who was born in 1947, she met her first white person at the age of 17 in 1964. In the middle of the same decade that saw many other young Australians fly or sail around the world to broaden their experiences, Yuwali ran through the desert in fear of the truck and the white men who were chasing her (Davenport, Johnson, & Yuwali, 2005).
To European eyes, the Western Desert is ‘the harshest physical environment on earth ever inhabited by man before the Industrial Revolution’. The Martu, like all those in the desert, long ago perfected the means of prospering there.

As a child, Yuwali walked with her family and learned her country, taught by her grandparents. She learned all of the water sources, when they would have water, the routes between them and the country around them. Each water source has a name and a story, each line of waterholes is part of a larger Dreaming story. (Davenport, Johnson, & Yuwali, 2005, p. 9)

From just this small glimpse of Yuwali’s life it is obvious that the cultural, social and economic life of her people was built on the foundation of their relationship to their land. Their stories as well as their food, water and shelter came from the features of the land and Yuwali’s preparation for adulthood meant learning the features of her land – a cultural and scientific understanding of the weather, flora and fauna. However this relationship should not be seen as something static and belonging to the past. The modern world had entered Yuwali’s world even before her first encounter with white men. She had seen planes overhead, without understanding what they were, but sadly this partial knowledge of white men included a fear of poisoning at their hands. Dingo bates had been dropped into her homelands, and on first encounter this resulted in Yuwali’s people refusing food for several days.

However we are a young nation in an ancient land and when we look back over the last 50, let alone 200 years, it is clear that all the problems Aboriginal people have suffered and are suffering relate to the theft of, and their removal from, their land (Berndt & Berndt,
1988; Dodson, 1996; Rowse, 2002; Sutton, 2010). Every encounter with the invaders led to dispossession, illness, the loss of language and the fracturing of traditional cultures. In this sense the story of the Western desert people is the story of Australia. Removal from their land was never in the interest of the Aboriginal people concerned (Bell, 2009; Eades, 2013; van Toorn, 2006). In most cases, Aboriginal people fought for their land and their way of life (Reynolds, 2013; Riseman, 2012). Yuwali’s people chose to avoid the people who had unlawfully entered their lands without observing the protocols or obtaining the permission that was a normal part of Aboriginal culture (Goodall & Cadzow, 2009; Tench, 2012).

Whatever form the resistance took and whatever attempts (Reynolds, 2013) were made to stay on their land, then and now Aboriginal culture was built on a close relationship with particular areas of land for which individuals had responsibilities as physical and cultural guardians.

Defining “our mob”

If dispossession from their land has been the defining theme in the history of modern Aboriginal Australia, how are contemporary Aboriginal people able to define themselves as belonging to certain areas or clan groups? Strangely, it has sometimes been the land itself that has protected them over the centuries, as in the case of the Georges River in Sydney, the Bediagal lands, the home of the warrior Pemulwuy (Goodall & Cadzow, 2009). The river continued to provide a source of food and shelter and allowed Aboriginal people to remain living on its edges even as the city developed around them.

As urban Aboriginal people, they have continued to be ignored both by many historians and by the planners of the ‘modern’ twentieth and twenty-first century city. Only with the massive industrialisation and urbanisation of 1960s were Aboriginal people
suddenly noticed, although they had been there all along. Even then, city Aborigines have been collectively defined as uprooted and displaced rural populations, only “Aboriginal” to the extent that they defined themselves by their old rural homelands.

. . . living in the centre of the growing city, Aboriginal people survived the expectations that they would disappear. They have explored different strategies to rebuild communities from the fragments of early groups and the incoming travelers from across the eastern states. This has been the transformative process of resilience in conditions of stress, trauma and change: drawing on the past to create new futures. (Goodall & Cadzow, 2009, pp. 278-279)

Some urban Aboriginal people are able to trace their ancestry back to lands that are now part of Australia’s largest city, and on which they have maintained their presence up to today. However more often families were moved from their land to missions or reserves where they remain today (Cummings, 1990) or families moved to the city from country areas looking for work, while maintaining their familial links with country areas through extended family networks.

There are no longer any Aboriginal peoples living completely out of contact from the rest of Australia, no matter how remote their communities, but the importance of land has remained a central issue for Aboriginal communities all over Australia (Morphy, 2010) including those who live in cities and regional areas sometimes far away from their traditional lands. Atkinson (2008) quotes William Cooper, a leader of the Yorta Yorta people who asked:
How much compensation have we had? How much of our land has been paid for? Not one iota! Again, we state that we are the original owners of the country. We have been ejected and despoiled of our god-given right and our inheritance has been forcibly taken from us (William Cooper, Yorta Yorta 1939, quoted in Hemming 1994:17).

(p. 280)

William Cooper was speaking over 50 years before the High Court recognised the existence of Native Title in the Mabo case in 1992 (Dodson, 1996). The concept of Terra Nullius was replaced by a legal recognition of the rights of Aboriginal people to their land (Dodson, 1996). However Wayne Atkinson (2008), a member of the Yorta Yorta Council of Elders, who is leading a land rights claim, suggests that the injustices of the past are still present in a legal system “which already carries an historic bias and inequality towards Indigenous people by the exclusion of their oral testimony by the courts” (p. 274). The law now recognises the rights of Aboriginal people but the onus is on them to show their ongoing relationship to land from which they were usually forcibly removed, and to demonstrate their rights as custodians through cultural connections to the land that have been eroded by displacement and the loss of language (Beckett, 2012; Eades, 2013; Harris, 2013; Howitt, 1998; Sansom, 2006; Schmidt, 1990; Shnukal, 1985).

The relationship to the land may have altered from the one that Yuwali recently experienced but there is a powerful relationship with the land that defines the identity of Aboriginal peoples all over Australia. The “special treatment” Aboriginal people have received has always been in some way related to greed for their land and it is therefore an important recognition of their rights and heritage as
well as a symbol of justice, when the law supports the historical relationship of any community with their land.

**The importance of kinship**

The kinship system provides the blueprint for all social relationships, giving each person a clear, detailed sense of their relationship to each other person, their obligations and responsibilities, their legitimate expectations, their mode of behavior in the presence of each other person, and the people whose direct presence they must avoid. The system allows strangers to be placed instantly into a relationship with every member of a group, once the stranger’s section is known. (Davenport, Johnson, & Yuwali, 2005, pp. 149-150)

Alongside the continuing sense of injustice shared by all Aboriginal communities at the loss of their land there are some other aspects of traditional Aboriginal societies which were shared and have helped to shape contemporary Aboriginal identities. Traditional societies were small and based on the kinship ties of a people that Broome (2002) suggests “saw the land religiously, as an intimate part of themselves and all life” as opposed to “the Europeans who saw it economically, as a commodity to be taken, exploited, bought and sold” (p. 40).

The kinship system is still demonstrated in the closeness and sharing in Aboriginal communities and still reflected in contemporary communities who use terms like “tidda” (sister) for all young females not just their own sisters. Similarly older women or men from any community are often called “Aunt” and “Uncle” as a sign of respect and closeness (Hiatt, 1965; Malcolm, 1982; Ober, 2009). There is always a responsibility related to the right to be a member of the group and in one sense the now widespread use of the term
“Koori” can be seen as a political response from Aboriginal communities. Along with the development of the Aboriginal flag, this was a political response, in one part of Australia, to Aboriginals being grouped as one people, which indicated a lack of understanding of the cultural and language diversity of Aboriginal communities. The response by Aboriginals to that lack of differentiation was to assert a new political identity as a group by rallying under a flag that symbolised all Aboriginal communities (Parbury, 2005, p. 119).

This reflects the traditional importance of the kinship system which provided very clear guidelines for behavior between both family members and outsiders (Broome, 2002). The display of the Aboriginal flag is a political statement that differentiates Aboriginal communities from the rest of Australian society and defines them as a collective community in a way that they have designed. The framework provided by the kinship system was especially important when people lived their lives in very intimate circumstances with a small group of closely related individuals. It also provided the framework for the responsibility for land as well as personal relationships and responsibilities including marriage. Even in contemporary Aboriginal families and communities the relationship to the land and the response to removal from it in one sense informs Aboriginal identities.

Contemporary Aboriginal people still recognise Elders within their communities and the rights of particular Elders to speak for their communities or to demonstrate a particular group’s connections to their land. However since the invasion the kinship system has been systematically threatened by policies which had as their basis the theft of Aboriginal land.

Not enough is known about how their daily lives and their culture were affected, but there are some clues. The deaths had created great gaps in their kinship system, left children without close guardians, made marriage
partners difficult to find, and ceremonies hard to carry out. No doubt important Elders with irreplaceable sacred knowledge had died. Probably access to many sacred sites was closed off as many Aborigines were pushed from their traditional haunts. Those who could speak English and who associated with Europeans perhaps gained new and traditionally undeserved power which was resented by former power holders . . . The disruptions were obviously countless and complex, and now largely unknowable.

(Broome, 2002, p. 66)

Most remarkably the kinship system still survives and in some ways its survival is the result of the poverty and discrimination which have identified Aboriginal people as a group in modern Australia. In more recent times the poor state of Aboriginal housing, their low status and low wages (ABS, 2011; Vinson, 2007) meant that the old kinship obligations which were built around family loyalty provided the support and security that the wider society was denying Aboriginal people. Aboriginal families are larger than the average Australian family (ABS, 2011) and the extended family is still an important part of contemporary Aboriginal communities.

The continuity of the kinship system within the culture is expressed today in funeral customs which echo past practices. In traditional cultures death was accompanied by many rituals staged over a period of time (Hiatt, 1965). These could include the burning of the deceased person’s possessions, a taboo on speaking the person’s name and elaborate rituals related to the burial itself, depending on the cultural group. Some of these traditions are still present as even on television programs there are warnings that the names or faces of the
dead may be shown, as it is still part of contemporary Aboriginal culture to observe some of these traditions.

Some Aboriginal communities may practice introduced religions like Islam or Christianity (Rose, 1988), but it is still very important to attend the funeral of someone from the extended family or the local area. This social, communal treatment of death echoes the old culture as traditional Aboriginal beliefs saw the spirit of the dead returning to the land (Lambert-Pennington, 2007). These deeply held feelings are still expressed and attending a funeral, or even a re-burial of stolen remains as described by Lambert-Pennington, is a social event in that it is a shared sorrow and a celebration of life and still very important for Aboriginal people, including children, to participate in as a continuance of the culture (Edwards, 2013).

Another aspect of the kinship system which reflects these traditional ties is the concept of “shame” which very clearly demonstrates the strength of the kinship system in its contemporary form. This aspect of the culture is much commented on in educational contexts as the normal western practice is to ask and answer questions within a group or class. For children from many, but not all, cultural backgrounds getting an answer “right” is rewarded by praise from the teacher and a satisfied feeling on the part of the student. However Aboriginal children are strongly acculturated to supporting and sharing with others and many find the focus on the individual in this type of teaching to be anathema to them.

The classroom interaction places many Aboriginal pupils in a situation in which their cultural identity is constantly challenged. In order to successfully participate, the children have to abandon the rules of language behavior by which they define themselves as Yolngu, Warumumngu or
Warlpiri or Alyawarr; they are expected to perform publicly and individually in a manner which conflicts with the moral code by which they live. (Moses & Wigglesworth, 2008, p. 151)

The key to understanding why Aboriginal children share this same experience, even in urban settings, is not just related to the choice of language used in the interaction but the rules around verbal interaction that relate to the kinship system. These cultural rules include who can request or give information, from whom and about what subject (Eades, 2013).

Non-Aboriginal people are often described by Aboriginal people as ‘talking too much’ and, concomitantly, as being ‘pushy’, ‘nosy’ and ‘rude’ (personal communication with final year Aboriginal teacher trainees at Batchelor College; see also Christie and Harris, 1985; Eades, 2013). Aboriginal children as well as adults are not encouraged to behave in a similar manner, and those that are seen to do so – talking a lot, asking and answering lots of questions – often invite derision (Moses & Wigglesworth, 2008, p. 142).

Even with the breakdown of some aspects of the traditional kinship systems, Aboriginal communities still recognise the rights of Elders and individuals to both reserve or share information (Eades, 2013). There is still a strong understanding and respect accorded to the person who has the right to speak rather than the person who has access to information.
**Land rights and identity**

Others may have defined and named Aboriginal people as a group but in contemporary Australia Aboriginal people themselves are still asserting their rights and their own cultural understandings of who they are (Everett, 2009; Smith, 2007).

Anthropologist Basil Sansom (1982) argues that, paradoxically, localism is what social orders across the continent have in common “particularistic manifestations, consociate experience and a conception of a closed set of others who are truly and really one’s Countrymen.” This small-scale quality of Aboriginal life constitutes the continental “Aboriginal commonality” and “contains the countervailing forces that would need to be overcome if a pan-Aboriginal ethnogenesis were to be achieved” (Sansom 1982:135). (Merlan, 2007, p. 138).

The concept of Indigeneity or Aboriginality has developed in direct relation to outside forces. Since invasion the names given to Aboriginal people or organisations set up to “protect” or support them have reflected the social organisation and policies of the time. The terms “native” and “aborigine” have given way to “Aboriginal” in response to policy changes and political activism (Merlan, 2007). The assimilationist policies that focused on skin colour or physical appearance have given way to a definition of Aboriginality defined by an individual’s recognition by a community (Foley, 2000; French, 2011; McCorquodale, 1997).

The question is how do individuals within those many Aboriginal communities see themselves. The answers are complex and reflect the diversity of Aboriginal communities but injustice, especially in relationship to land, the kinship system and its expression in
concepts like “shame” and the localism identified by Sansom are shared by many communities across Australia. To understand the needs of individual Aboriginal students in specific educational contexts it is important to keep a focus on the local identity of a community. Rather than trying to define what being Aboriginal means it is more realistic to focus on what being Aboriginal means for these people, in this place at this time.

The usual postcolonial paradox remains, that Aboriginal belonging becomes recognisable by governments only after Aboriginal expropriation.

Aboriginal and non Aboriginal Australians continue to work through the symbolic and practical meanings of relations to land in ways that are shaped by the globalised historical and contemporary situation of Australia, and not simply interpretable as expression of Aboriginal interests and aims.

(Merlan, 2007, pp. 143-144)

The Law

**Two laws one country**

As Hiatt (2007) states in his study of the Warlpiri, the traditional laws and values of Aboriginal people were of a moral lexicon very similar to those that most contemporary Australians would espouse.

A model of a good person emerges: generous and hospitable, ready to share, not greedy, acquisitive, or stingy; unaggressive, not a trouble maker, but ready to defend self or kin when attacked; willing to help others and work
for a common cause; modest and not bossy; law-abiding and respectful of the marital rights of others; honest, not a liar or thief. (Hiatt, 2007, p. 27)

Since the then Prime Minister’s 2008 apology to the Stolen Generations, their families and descendants, many Australians may rightly consider that there is now a nationwide acknowledgement that regrettable wrongs have been committed against Aboriginal people since the invasion. However, at the same time that the apology took place there was also an intervention in the Northern Territory which was instigated by an earlier Federal Government but continued, with some amendments, under the Federal governments elected since then. The purpose of the intervention was to respond to the Northern Territory report “Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: Little children are sacred” (Northern Territory Government, 2007) which focused on the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse.

In 2007 Tom Calma, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner and Acting Race Discrimination Commissioner, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission referred to the intervention in his speech for the 2007 Don Dunstan Oration, in Adelaide, South Australia. In that speech he said:

To the extent that the NT measures put this issue on the table, and commit to addressing these issues within our communities – the measures are to be welcomed. However, we have also emphasised that the legislation and the action taken under it must seek to achieve its objectives consistent with fundamental human rights, and in particular the right to racial equality . . . There can never be a justification for racial discrimination. It is a
peremptory norm of international law, meaning that it is a principle that cannot be violated under any circumstances. (Calma, 2007)

Much has been written about traditional Aboriginal law, or lore, and the impact that the imposition of British law has had on relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. However it is obvious that this impact is not just an historical clash between two different value systems (Hiatt, 2007; Merlan, 2007; Sansom, 1982) but the implementation of one system over another to serve the purposes of the dominant group, going even to the extreme situation in which human rights are ignored. It is this interaction and the use of the law to sanction immoral acts which still define the contemporary situation. For instance, the problems that are being experienced by Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory: health, child abuse, substance abuse, education and housing are issues of concern to all Australians. However the experiences of people living in remote communities do not reflect those in the wider Australian community and Tom Calma has supported positive action to end the inequitable situation but still questions the overriding of human rights to achieve this end. There are no significant differences between the moral values espoused by most Australians and those inherent in traditional Aboriginal communities so in one sense it seems strange that the problems which all sectors of Australian society are experiencing should be considered to be so concentrated in remote communities that an intervention of this kind is deemed to be necessary.

The basis of traditional Aboriginal societies is clearly seen as a complex set of rules and values governing social relationships and related to responsibility for the land it is easy to see how the invasion led to its breakdown.
Throughout the continent, land was parceled out in a roughly even fashion among descent groups. Annexation through conquest was rare if not non-existent, and no one was landless. (Hiatt, 2007, p. 27)

Hiatt suggests that this situation was purposefully maintained and that it was the result of:

... a pervasive and powerful ethos in which generosity and sharing were deemed to be good, and greed, aggression, self-importance, and domination regarded as bad. (Hiatt, 2007, p. 27)

However the breakdown of social cohesion in remote communities must be seen as the result of inequitable and limited access to basic services in health, education, employment and housing which has resulted in poverty, hopelessness and the breakdown of social relations (Bell, 2009; Bond, 2010). The problems are not exaggerated nor contested but the fact that the intervention, rather than focus on the wider society’s lack of provision, has instead targeted one group only, based on their ethnicity. This singling out of Aboriginal communities for “special treatment” is very familiar in the context of traditional relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. The shameful fact is that the law has been and is being used to justify treatment that, as Tom Calma has pointed out, contravenes international laws relating to human rights. This is surely a matter of concern for all Australians.

Aboriginal adults and children are still over represented in the criminal justice system (Biddle, 2011; Reeve, 2012), which indicates that the law, as in the Northern Territory Intervention (Australian Government, 2008), is not applied to Aboriginal people in the same way it is applied to others. The law has also been used to support all those policies
that prompted the Prime Minister’s apology. The police have also been used to implement laws which were morally corrupt and harmful to Aboriginal people. These complex relationships between the law, the police and Aboriginal communities still continue today (Goodall, 1990; Langton, 1992), and in the case of the Northern Territory Intervention the armed forces were also involved. The values, customs and laws of Aboriginal Australians have never been given the same respect as the laws which have been imposed on them. In terms of the application of Australian law and incarceration and despite recent attempts to accommodate the needs of Aboriginal communities like Justice Circles (Allison, Cunneen, Loban, Luke, & Munro, 2012; Ciftci & Howard-Wagner, 2012), there continues to be too many examples of the use of the law to justify unfair and immoral treatment of Aboriginal people (McCorquodale, 1997; Pilbrow, 2013).

**Reconciliation**

In contrast, Aboriginal Australians have tried, since first contact, to promote better relations between their communities and the rest of Australia.

Aboriginal peoples have long practised this type of leadership by engaging outsiders in efforts to establish relationships of equality and respect. Perhaps the most notable documented instance is the 1957 Arnhem Land Adjustment Movement. On that occasion senior Yolngu leaders revealed sacred objects in public in an attempt to institute an exchange with White Australia. (Brigg & Tonnaer, 2008, p. 3)

While Aboriginal people did not have written laws it is clear that there were social values and norms which were expressed in the obligations and responsibilities related to the kinship system and the land (Hiatt, 2007; Merlan; 2007; Rose, James, & Watson, 2003).
Aboriginal communities and individuals have continued since the invasion to use their own cultural and moral values to try and build connections to the invaders. These attempts by Aboriginal leaders to reconcile Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities commenced early in the beginning of the colonial period. For instance in 1796 Bennelong dictated a letter to Governor Phillip, with whom he had had a close relationship, even though Phillip had initially kidnapped and detainted him. In the letter Bennelong uses his own cultural knowledge and some understanding of Phillip’s to express both his positive feelings for Phillip and his wife and to make requests for goods. Bennelong, by placing Phillip within the kinship system and addressing him as “father”, was attempting to find a way to peacefully coexist with the invaders, by developing a relationship from which both could benefit.

In Bennelong’s culture, as in Aboriginal communities today, kinship terms such as father, mother, auntie, uncle, son and daughter are used not only to identify people related ‘by blood’, but also to bring strangers into ‘the domain of sanctioned human relationships’. Specific codes of behavior, including the giving and receiving of gifts, are required in every kinship relationship. By classifying Governor Phillip as his father, Bennelong was endeavouring to make clear the mutual rights and reciprocal obligations that should pertain between them. Their father-son relationship enabled both Bennelong and Phillip to know exactly where they stood and how they should behave, not only in relation to each other, but towards their respective family members and other associates. (van Toorn, 2006, p. 60)
It is possible that Bennelong may have organised a ritual spearing of Phillip by Willemering as “pay-back” for his imprisonment (van Toorn, 2006, p. 60) and that Phillip ignored it or chose not to act as he also benefitted from a father-son relationship with Bennelong and it gave him some measure of control over Bennelong’s clan group. It is clear however that Bennelong was attempting to develop some form of reciprocity with Phillip to make it possible to continue to live alongside the invaders and that the spearing of Phillip was necessary to clear the way for this relationship to develop. Phillip may not have understood what Bennelong was attempting to do in terms of the obligations defined by the relationship but he did participate.

However in many other contexts since, Aboriginal attempts at reconciliation have been ignored or accepted but not reciprocated when not in the interest of the other party. There are a myriad of well-documented cases over the last 200 years in which Aboriginal people entered into a contract of some kind whether written, symbolic or through the exchange of goods and services only to be tricked or betrayed (van Toorn, 2006). It is remarkable then that Aboriginal Elders still pursue reconciliation, but indeed they do. From the earliest contact Aboriginal people have pursued education and literacy as a means of communicating with the non-Aboriginal community in order to both protect and share their own culture and values.

**Aboriginal cultural practices in the modern world**

There is an ongoing debate over the causes of children’s differential achievement and access. It is popularly attributed to mass media and popular culture, purported decay in morality and family structure, and deficit socialisation among client groups. For now, suffice to say that there is a century-long history across English-speaking countries of trying to
defer ‘blame’ for differing educational access and outcomes to ‘fault’ in children and parents. Who gets what kinds of literacy, and thereby who is positioned to be able to demonstrate competence with texts in which contexts, is in part the product of schooling. Further, problems children encounter with primary school literacy are linked closely to failure in other aspects of schooling and to unequal credential outcomes (Luke, 1993).

Social cohesion in urban and remote Aboriginal communities is built around the kinship system. Living in a community that has social roles defined by kinship ties and which values consensus in the group above individual rights has implications in child rearing practices and the development of language. Some of the language practices in remote communities have been studied by Hamilton (1981) and noted by Wigglesworth and Simpson (2008) in their study of the language learning of pre-school children. These included the behavior of mothers, when travelling and carrying their infants and toddlers, of pointing things out (Bruner, 1981), a behaviour which was not undertaken when sitting at home. However even in remote communities some emergent literacy practices are very familiar. Krall & Ellis (2008) in their work in the Ngaanyatjarra lands, recount a book reading with an emergent reader:

She found the *Three Little Pigs* with text in simple, large font and close sentences marked with graphics. We read it together, and she immediately engaged by cross-referencing her textual and real-life experiences. She asked me: “Who did this book?” as her grandmother has written a published Ngaanyatjarra version of the *Three Little Pigs* and it’s a favourite. (p. 166)

These behaviours exemplify some of the social and cultural differences between small, closely linked communities in which power and control are defined by the kinship
system, as is the sharing of knowledge. The “pointing out” behavior of the mothers when walking with their children is significant as this is the way in which children traditionally learned about their country, its resources and stories. The information was shared while walking the land, looking and listening, gathering food or travelling for ceremony. The development of a child’s language is related to the social context in which it is learned (Halliday, 1985; Painter, 1999; Williams, 1999) and the development of an orientation towards an elaborated or restricted code is developed in the early years of a child’s socialisation (Bernstein, 1990; Brice-Heath, 1982; Painter, 1999; Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Williams, 1999). Adults play an important role in the socialisation and education of children but in some families this role does not reflect the pedagogic practices in modern schooling.

Adults in Aboriginal communities encourage education both in traditional culture, and in modern educational contexts, however the development of an orientation towards an elaborated code is a significant issue which relates to educational success. As Williams (1999) points out in his study of early literacy education and joint book reading, a local pedagogic discourse which reflects that of the school may be completely absent in some families or it may dominate “the family, with a close fit, as it were, between the privileging text and family practice. This effectively gives the condition for two sites of access of discourse (Williams, 1999, p. 113). The families in Williams’ study were English-speaking and yet he was able to identify huge differences between the participants’ practices.

In some Aboriginal communities the children and their parents are speaking one or more languages or creoles but not Standard Australian English (SAE). Disbray (2008) noted in her study of storytelling styles in Tennant Creek that, “In one story the grandmother (GM5) gave the human protagonists kin terms, and in two other stories the mothers named
them after family members (M1 and M7 at time 1). These were further strategies to engage the child in the story” (p. 75). Some of the differences noted in story telling styles include differences in both the structure and features like repetition, rephrasing and elaboration, and in the use of first language words and features (Disbray, 2008; Martin & Rose, 2008; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Narrative is an important genre in the early socialisation of all children so it is essential to recognise how storytelling and story reading are vital in the maintenance of culture and the development of both language and literacy.

**Summary**

Before the book there were stories, stories that provided all the scientific and cultural knowledge needed to live in harmony with the land and with the people who belonged to it. Stories provided an understanding of the complex kinship rights and responsibilities that provided individuals with a place in their society and confirmed their identity in relationship to their clan group and land. Stories and storytelling continue to inform identity in Aboriginal communities but in schools the voices of the Elders have not always been heard or honoured. In the following chapter I examine the literature that relates to the education of Aboriginal students in mainstream schools. I examine both the teaching of reading and the importance of text selection in engaging both emergent and struggling readers. I also observe the impact that the oppression and loss of voice have had on Aboriginal communities and how this impacts on engagement with learning at school.
Chapter Three: Literature Review – The Significance of Text: Identity and Engagement

In this chapter I examine the literature relating to the teaching of reading and the discourse of the school and how this impacts on many Aboriginal children. I also examine the importance of text selection and the use of authentic texts in engaging students from Aboriginal communities. The importance of authentic texts is explored by examining both the contemporary and historical positioning of Aboriginal culture and language in Australian schools.

Teaching Reading: Reproducing or Subverting the Dominant Culture?

The teaching of reading

The lack of research on Aboriginal literacy practices has supported the development of a deficit view that defines Aboriginal Australian cultures as non-literate cultures. This has not been the case for at least two hundred years and it may be argued has never been the case (Freebody, 2007; van Toorn, 2006). It is interesting then that despite Australia-wide agreement that the educational needs of Aboriginal students are not being met, those needs continue to be defined by the dominant culture as a deficit rather than a difference.

In his report on literacy education, Peter Freebody (2007) points to the lack of acknowledgement of the language and literacy practices of Aboriginal Australians. He also notes that the teaching of Aboriginal languages is generally seen as valuable only in respect to the development of English.
In terms of our interests in this review, almost none of the research done on literacy education has been conducted using written or otherwise inscribed forms of Aboriginal Australian languages, of which there are estimated to have been about 240 at the time of European settlement (Schmidt, 1990). Studies of their patterns of sound-symbol correspondences, grammatical formations, genre repertoires, and the cultural functions of spoken, iconic and pictorial texts in these language groups, where they have occurred, have typically been the pursuits of cultural and linguistic anthropologists and have left little trace on Australian theoretical or empirical explorations of literacy or the teaching and learning of reading and writing. (Freebody, 2007, p. 1)

There are very few Aboriginal Australian languages which are still considered to be strong, and the continuing debate around the use of home language in schooling has not resulted in strong support for the teaching of Aboriginal languages across Australia. For instance, the Northern Territory government has several times, since the beginning of bilingual programs in 1973, attempted to move away from the teaching of Aboriginal languages, while in other states attempts have been made to revive languages which were considered weak or dying decades ago when Schmidt’s report (1990) was published.

There are many issues other than respect for the preservation of the languages, which have resulted in this situation. For instance, the lack of suitable teachers, poorly funded programs and the urgency of providing Aboriginal students with equitable access to education through the development of English as an additional language or dialect (The Northern Territory Department of Education, Collins Review, 1999).
Current debate in Australia about the development of literacy and the teaching of reading (e.g., Castles & Coltheart, 2004; Alton-Lee, 2003; Bamblett, 2013; Cambourne, 2005; Mullin & Oliver, 2010; Williams, 2000) often focuses on either the development of the individual or the pedagogy related to teaching reading and as a result texts are often regarded as neutral in the process. However, Baker & Freebody (1987) note the disadvantaging processes that are part of the early literacy education of Aboriginal children. They suggest that the books used to teach reading in the early years:

. . . appear to invite concurrence by child readers with the particular cultural images of childhood they contain. Young readers whose identities as children differ from the images embedded in the texts, may have particular difficulties in relating to these books. For all children there may exist the practical problems of knowing how to treat these images while taking part in reading instruction based on them, in such a way as to appear to be concurring with the school-endorsed portraits in the texts. (p. 57)

A socio-cultural model of reading is outlined in many syllabus and support documents in Australia such as: National English Curriculum Framing Paper (2008); English – A Curriculum Profile for Australian Schools (1994); ESL Scales (1994); English K-10 Syllabus (2012); and The Australian Curriculum: English F-10 (2012). These documents acknowledge that reading is a socio-cultural practice and that both the contexts of culture and situation (Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Clay, 1991a; Cloran, Butt, & Williams, 1996; Christie, 2005; Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Kramsch, 2011) define the meanings that individual students will make when approaching a given text. The difficulty of any given text therefore varies for individual students, depending not only on their skills but their understandings about the cultural context and the situation in which they encounter
the text. As Clay (1991) argues, “A difficult text is a text which is difficult for a particular child. An easy text is easy because a particular child can read it” (p. 201).

Every reader brings prior knowledge and understanding to a text and for teachers of students with low literacy levels, explicit literacy support must be based on a clear understanding of the reading process, including how individual students approach a text (Meek, 1988; Meek, 1990; Michaels, 1986; Palinscar & Brown, 1984; Rose, 2010). The importance of the text in the teaching of reading is demonstrated by Meek (1988):

The reading experts, for all their understanding about ‘the reading process’, treat all text as the neutral substance on which the process works, as if the reader did the same things with a poem, a timetable, a warning notice . . .

The reading process has always to be described in terms of texts and contexts as well as in terms of what we think readers actually do. (pp. 5 – 6)

The importance of authentic text cannot be overstated

Texts can be identified by the different audiences and purposes for which they are composed, and the structures and grammatical features which realise these choices. It is therefore of great importance to recognise that different types of texts make different demands on the reader and that these demands vary, especially in relation to the oral language development of the reader as well as their background knowledge of the subject matter of the text.

For teachers to support students effectively they need to take note of not only the goals of the individual learner but also the educational goals of the community as a whole as well as the support available to students in their communities (Exley, 2007a; Hill & Diamond, 2013; Malin & Maidment, 2003). The obvious implication for the classroom is
that programs must be differentiated to meet the social, cultural and academic needs of individual learners (Galloway, 2003; Gibbons, 2006; Hammond & Gibbons, 2001; Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006) and the texts which are used in educational settings must not be treated as a neutral aspect of the learning process (Baker & Freebody, 1987; Harrison, 2007). This approach is also in contrast to one which has as its focus the individual learner’s reading ability, the development of which is often seen as a linear progression. Measuring this ability is often reduced to benchmarking or measuring the child’s progress through the use of a series of contrived, vocabulary controlled texts, leveled by a publisher, to “test” or “teach” reading “skills”.

Psychologists with behaviourist understandings about learning, (Castles & Coltheart, 2004; Hempenstall, 1997; Reynolds & Wheldall, 2007) do not focus on social interaction but rather on the individual student’s ability. When applied to learning to read this results in a focus on the ability to decode text, which is rendered culturally neutral. Vygotsky’s (1986) notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is defined by Wells (1998) as being context dependent and developed through interaction with others in a joint activity. He foregrounds the importance of the quality of interaction and the practices which are part of it as much as the ability of the learner.

This social constructivist approach has a focus on social interaction in the classroom as the basis for learning, a very different approach to the psychological behaviourist approaches to the teaching of reading. For instance, the social constructivist approach values the talk around the text and acknowledges the necessity for the teacher or adult to provide a detailed orientation to the text before a student attempts to independently read a text. This is because reading is recognised as a process which includes the development of knowledge and skills around sounds, letters and words but is focused on
making meaning through the reader’s engagement and participation with the text (Clay, 1991; Ewing, 2013; Fox, 2013; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Freebody, 2005; Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Williams, 1999).

A social constructivist view of reading is challenged by the assessment requirements of the Federal and State governments and the enduring publication and prevalence of readers or materials contrived solely to teach reading to emergent readers in educational settings. The widespread use of these leveled reading materials is reminiscent of the spread of the cane toad in Australia. Initially brought into Australia to solve a problem, they became a problem by threatening the survival of indigenous species of small animals and birds and spreading widely across the country. This analogy stretches to the usefulness of this type of reading material. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.” Unsworth & Williams (1990) demonstrated that such texts make no sense beyond the sentence level.

For any gains made in teaching young children to decode using meaningless and boring reading materials, the cost is the creation of non-readers whose only well-developed reading strategy is to sound out unknown words, a strategy which has a very low rate of success due to the structure and historical development of English (Freebody, 2007; Koop & Rose, 2008). The ability to participate, use and analyse text is discarded in favour of an approach to text which replaces interaction and meaning making with a focus on the skills related to decoding at the level of the word rather than the text (Derewianka, 2011; Humphrey, Droga, & Feez, 2012). This skills-based approach to reading also completely overlooks the complex meanings that texts make and how these meanings relate to the cultural norms and values that the author and readers negotiate in each reading.
Engagement in the reading process

The importance of engaging young readers is unequivocal (Ewing, 2010; Exley, 2007b; Freebody, 2007; Hayes et al., 2006; Krashen, 1992; Lokan, 2001) as it is clearly a major factor in supporting learners who will continue to develop their reading during and beyond their school years. As Lokan (2001) has noted, in The *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) *Report 2000*, there is a correlation between engagement in reading and literacy achievement:

The engagement with reading scale was significantly related to reading literacy achievement. With a measure of attitudes, it is usually not possible to disentangle whether positive attitudes lead to better performance, or the other way around, or a mixture of both. Efforts to raise students’ appreciation of books and motivation to spend time reading should surely be of benefit, irrespective of which of them causes the other. (p. xi.)

Engaging young students in reading in the early years of schooling has repercussions for the whole of their education. Conclusions from recent research (*COAG*, 2013; *OECD*, 2012; *OECD*, 2013), show that during the middle years of schooling students with the lowest literacy levels make minimal progress and that this is compounded during the first two years of high school when there is a general decline in reading achievement. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development produces regular reports related to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In the report for 2000 Aboriginal students were under-represented in the highest category of reading proficiency and over-represented in the lowest category (Lokan, 2001).
The continued failure of education systems in Australia to achieve success for Aboriginal students has been recognised by all levels of government and has resulted in a variety of responses. Under achievement in literacy has been recognised as a barrier to educational success but it has not yet been adequately addressed for Aboriginal communities. The situation in which older students fall further and further behind their cohort is described as the “The Matthew Effect” (Lokan, 2001; Stanovich, 1986). This occurs when poor and unmotivated readers spend less time reading as they grow older and therefore compound the problem. It is therefore vital to engage and support emergent readers as a first step towards educational success.

To understand what it means to learn to read as a member of the dominant culture it may be instructive to first examine what it means to learn to read as a member of a disadvantaged minority group (e.g., Bucknall, 1982; Christie, 1990; Compton-Lilly, 2011; Figueroa, 1989; Harris, 1982a; Harris, 1994; Jones Diaz, Arthur, Beecher, & McNaught, 2000). When Aboriginal students were assessed by (PISA) in 2000 the group was over-represented in the lowest category (Lokan, 2001) and so represent a disadvantaged minority group in this sense. It is therefore important to note some of the features of Aboriginal education in Australian communities.

Some practices in remote communities examined by Moses and Yallop (2008) are exemplified in their study of the community at Yakanarra in Western Australia. In their discussion of one student they suggest that the Standard English which she encountered in her classroom was probably incomprehensible to her and that:

Like most Aboriginal children in remote area schools in Australia, the children in this study who have commenced school at Yakanarra have found themselves in the charge of a newly graduated monolingual teacher
who has never had sole responsibility for a class, has never had contact with remote Aboriginal children, and has no training in teaching English to speakers of other languages. (pp. 52-53)

While the total number of students in remote communities is only a small percentage of the total population, indeed even of the Aboriginal population, it is interesting to note that in NSW, the state with the largest Aboriginal population in the nation, there are similar issues. According to the most recent report from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2011 around one third of Aboriginal Australians lived in major cities in the most highly populated states (Reeve, 2012). However from the National Report on Schooling in Australia (MCEETYA, 2008) produced by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) it is clear that in all states and groups Aboriginal students are disadvantaged in comparison to all other students in the nation and that those in remote areas are even more disadvantaged.

The history of Aboriginal education in the last 200 years indicates that educational failure cannot be attributed to the abilities or aptitudes of individual Aboriginal students (Malcolm, 1998) but rather to the wider social and economic context in which most Aboriginal Australians are educated. Richard Flanagan (2008) in his novel Wanting has given these words to his main character, based on a real Tasmanian Aboriginal child, who was taken from her family.

. . . she had seen seagull tracks in the sand . . .

Lady Jane had laughed, and Mathinna realised that what was written in the world mattered not, but what was written on paper mattered immensely. She wanted to write . . . to learn a
little of the white magic of paper and ink. (p. 120)

This fictional account is echoed in the historical record of the same period in NSW. Van Toorn (2006) quotes from the Reverend Watson’s journal, 1839, quoted in Woolmington, pp. 66-67, in his discussion of the Wiradjuri children in his Mission school in Wellington NSW.

The children taught to read at the Mission House are much attached to books, consider it a severe punishment to be deprived of them, and prefer the present of a new one to almost anything else. While they are learning the Alphabet, and to spell, they feel no interest, and the work of instruction is tedious to both the teacher and the pupil; but when they have overcome these preliminary difficulties, and are able to read so as to understand, their attention becomes excited; they begin to feel a pleasure in the employment, and never appear to be wearied with it. The Aboriginal natives are indeed capable of attaining to the knowledge of any thing in which they may be instructed. (p. 35)

Many Aboriginal children experience a school setting without well trained and experienced teachers even though they come from homes and communities who want their children to share in “the white magic of paper and ink” (Flanagan, 2008, p. 120). Perhaps it is the “whiteness” of that alien magic which is at the heart of the failure that many Aboriginal children are forced to experience at school. Privileged children from the dominant culture have their lives, social values and language patterns reflected in the texts they encounter at school and their own interactions with these texts often extend back to their earliest pre-school years. Other children however may find that they are excluded from the texts read and produced in the school (Bishop, 2003; Bodkin-Andrews, Dillon, &
Craven, 2010). This is exemplified by an incident in which a teacher in New Zealand accidentally excluded an Indigenous student “from the ‘we’ of the classroom” (Alton-Lee, 2003, p. 26). This might not have happened if the teacher had been using materials in which the “we” excluded the mainstream and was told from an Indigenous perspective. Similarly the Tolu group’s book about their local area, *Lake Mungo Our Story* is written from their perspective and as a result non-Aboriginal readers are positioned as visitors to the sites they discuss in their book.

**Literature: A cultural heritage**

This relationship of the school to the learners’ community should therefore be explored as it is the context in which the teaching of reading takes place. Defining the practice of reading as socio-cultural provides a useful focus for examining the reading process in detail. For instance the level of difficulty of a text used to teach reading can be seen to be mediated by both the development of oral language and engagement with the text (Cambourne, 1995; Cazden, 2000). Students will struggle to develop automatic processing when reading texts with unfamiliar subject matter, unfamiliar vocabulary and unfamiliar grammatical structures (Acevedo & Rose, 2007; Clay, 1991; Eades, 2013; Mullin & Oliver, 2010). Aboriginal students who are speaking a non-standard variety of English, a creole, an Aboriginal language or more than one of these at home may struggle to quickly develop automatic processing and fluency.

For emergent readers from the dominant culture the subject matter and language patterns in books often strongly link to the oral language patterns of standard forms of English. The teaching of traditional rhymes and poems develop the prosodic patterns that are then echoed in these early picture books. When young children join in shared book
reading (Bruner, 1981; Williams, 1999) they become familiar with the aural cues which prompt the child to join in a repeated refrain (Clay, 1991). This is a first step in the reading process which with some prompting and explicit modeling is usually followed by the child recognising that the words on the page match the words s/he can hear when the book is read. It is obvious that the child’s oral language development is as significant a factor in this process as is their engagement with the subject matter (Cambourne, 2005; Painter, 1999; Sparks & Reese, 2012; Williams, 1999).

It is widely acknowledged (Freebody, 2005; Halliday, 1985; Painter, 1999; Vygotsky, 1986) that very young children are most engaged when they can make connections between their own lives and the text they are reading. This is not to suggest that emergent readers do not enjoy fantasy or fiction but that they must be able to interact with the text by drawing on what they already know about the world and books (Clay, 1991). An obvious example is the classic picture book, *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963) in which Max takes a long voyage and becomes king of the wild things, all from his own bedroom and within a couple of hours. Many young children can relate to naughty Max left alone in his bedroom to think about his “wildness” but there are others who will relate to the fantasy elements but make no connection to a child who has a bedroom of his own. In this text, understanding of the setting, while crucial to a complete understanding of the main themes and the development of the character, will not prevent an emergent reader from enjoying and relating to some aspects of the text.

Unfamiliar subject matter and a disconnection between the home language and the language of the text can prove to be very challenging for a beginning reader attempting to read independently. The rich cultural heritage of Aboriginal children has been maintained by oral traditions and stories which hold meanings that can only be comprehended by
traditional owners and fully initiated adults, while the literal or surface meanings are available to everyone, non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal alike.

Ideas about knowledge and meaning are often taken for granted but, building on the work of Paulo Freire, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) says that naming is powerful:

It is about retaining as much control over meanings as possible. By ‘naming the world’ people name their realities. For communities there are realities which can only be found in the Aboriginal language; the concepts which are self-evident in the Aboriginal language can never be captured by another language. (pp. 157-158)

In this sense, even young emergent readers who use a non-standard variety of English in their every day lives are not seeing their reality reflected in the texts which are most widely available to them as emergent readers.

“The culture of silence” – Oppression

Since the invasion of Australia and the implementation of policies which included the removal of children from their families, this inheritance has been threatened by the extinction of the majority of Aboriginal languages (Schmidt, 1990) and the physical displacement of many people from the traditional lands to which their stories belonged resulting in social and economic disadvantage (Luke, 1996; Pearson, 2000; Reeve, 2012; Vinson, 2007). The alienation and disenfranchisement of many individuals and has mediated the way in which Aboriginal people interact with the dominant cultural groups in our contemporary society (Goodall & Cadzow, 2009; Calma, 2009; Fredericks, 2013).
The alienation of disadvantaged students has been addressed by both Freire (1985) and Connell (1994) who show how poverty can result in what Freire calls “The culture of silence” (p. 73). Freire (1985) defines “The culture of silence” as the product of the relationship between the dominated and the dominating cultures. He maintains that the silence can only be broken when the dependent society is transformed through “radical structural changes” (p. 73). As Connell (1994) points out:

Disadvantage is always produced through mechanisms that also produce advantage . . . The beneficiaries of the current educational order are, broadly speaking, the groups with greater economic and institutional power, greater access to the means of persuasion, and the best representation in government and in professions. (p. 15)

Disadvantaged students are doubly disadvantaged as not only are they unable to access educational resources as easily as some other members of society but they are also forced to bear a personal responsibility for failing to do so. Freire (1985) reinforces the relationship of the dominated and the dominating cultures and how the poor are silenced by the oppressive social conditions under which they live. Connell (1994) and Freire (1985), while not condemning teachers and their personal efforts to support disadvantaged students, do identify education systems as part of the apparatus of the state and therefore the dominant culture which supports systems that work to their own advantage (Connell, 1994).

The social and economic disadvantage which all Australian Aboriginal peoples have experienced since invasion has been accompanied by policies which restricted their access to education. Colin Tatz (2009a) responds to the Hughes (2008) report on Indigenous education in the Northern Territory by focusing on its lack of contextual and
institutional history. While disagreeing with the suggested solutions, he does not disagree with the description of the current situation. What he does point out is that “before 1950 there was no provision whatever” (p. 93) for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. He also argues that the attempts made by the Commonwealth Office of Education (COE) which had responsibility for education, reflected an approach which ignored the artificial constraints placed on Aboriginal people by their confinement on missions and settlements. In short, no differentiation was made between Aboriginal cultures and languages when people were placed in settlements and the artificiality of these groupings was not understood nor acknowledged when planning for education.

He argues that there was only token acknowledgement of Aboriginal culture and that programs were developed in urban settings and just transferred to remote communities.

Some pathetic concessions to reality were made: *Bush Books* told the story of Nari and Jangala, who went up the hill to fetch a pail of water, despite the absence of buckets and water in Central Australia; *T is for Train* and *S is for Sea* were other jewels in the primers for those who would most likely never see either (p. 93).

Many years on, some aspects of this situation have not changed and, while it is acknowledged that there are problems with the education of Aboriginal students, there is still a lack of acknowledgement of Aboriginal perspectives about these problems. As Freebody (2007) notes, “It is now common practice to acknowledge Aboriginal custodianship of Australian land, but there has been almost no acknowledgement of the Aboriginal Australian heritage of language and literacy practices” (p. 1). Tatz (2009a) and Freebody (2007) attribute this lack of acknowledgement to an ongoing attitude to Aboriginal Australians and their culture and language that has as its base at least indifference and a lack of respect, if not outright racist contempt.
LEARNING TO BE LITERATE IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

This attitude to Aboriginal culture is also accompanied by one that views all aspects of the dominant culture as natural and as a reflection of reality. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) cites a talk, *Books Are Dangerous*, given by the Maori writer Patricia Grace at an early childhood convention in 1985. Smith (1999) argues that there are four things that make many books dangerous to Aboriginal readers:

1. They do not reinforce our values, actions, customs, culture and identity;
2. When they tell us only about others they are saying that we do not exist;
3. They may be writing about us but are writing things which are untrue;
4. And (4) they are writing about us but saying negative and insensitive things which tell us that we are not good. (p. 35)

While Patricia Grace was discussing the books found in primary schools, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) extends the argument to include academic writing. The attitude as reflected in Australian settings and demonstrated by the case of the Northern Territory did not even extend to an understanding of the importance to Aboriginal peoples of their own cultures and languages and how their maintenance depended on complex kinship relationships and the responsibilities for country that they implied.

The insensitivity and lack of respect for Aboriginal cultures was matched historically by a more direct strategy which Penny van Toorn (2006) describes:

Schools – and empty promises of schooling – were part and parcel of the long history of separating Aboriginal children from their families. In Australia, these children are known as ‘the Stolen Generations’. (p. 15)

Van Toorn (2006) emphasises that the destruction of culture was not related to the development of literacy itself but other factors. These included the removal of children from their families, the type of institutions they were placed in and the political context
which supported the removal of children and realised the ideology which underpinned the whole enterprise. This ideology may be exemplified by what children were asked to copy in order to practice their penmanship, for instance: “Captain Cook” or “Doing nothing is the hardest of work” (p. 17).

Education as a tool for directly destroying Aboriginal cultures was employed from the earliest days of the colony. In 1814 Governor Macquarie began his annual feasts (van Toorn, 2006) at which he attempted to recruit enrolments and in 1815 he established the Native Institution. The idea was to break the cycle noted by missionaries who saw that their educated recruits were returning to their families when they were ready to marry. They suggested that if girls and boys were educated together they could be encouraged to marry and create an elite educated class who would not follow the old ways of their people. This did not work and eventually the Institution was closed but the use of education as the means of reproducing the dominant culture could not be more clearly demonstrated. The failure of this strategy is clear, as is the enduring qualities of the Aboriginal cultures which have continually adapted to the changes forced on them over the last 200 years (Eades, 2013; Kral, 2009).

The result of policies which took the traditional lands away, removed children from their families and pushed language groups together, was the loss of Aboriginal languages as the use of English as the medium of instruction in the school was enforced (Schmidt, 1990). While Aboriginal people have suffered as a result of these policies they have also responded in ways that testify to the continuing resilience of their cultures. For instance Shnukal (2002) points out that Cape York Creole (CYP) developed as a direct consequence of these policies:
In any event, the imposition of English in Torres Strait and CYP schools had an unintended consequence: many children adopted an English-based Creole as their primary language which, within a generation or two, had gained speakers at the expense of the traditional languages. (p. 8)

Loss of voice.

The oppression suffered by Aboriginal people has not silenced them or resulted in an eradication of their culture (Goodall & Cadzow, 2009; Martin & Rose, 2008; van Toorn, 2006) but it has, since the time of invasion, resulted in a struggle to be heard. This restriction or loss of an individual’s power and voice in a modern society is clearly outlined by Bernstein’s theory of elaborated and restricted codes (Bernstein, 1990), which supports the conclusions drawn by Connell (1994) and Freire (1975) that there are socially constructed barriers which prevent disadvantaged groups from participating equally in society. Bernstein’s theory of codes provides an example of how this disadvantage is realised in the personal literacy development of particular students. He suggests that students whose coding orientation is restricted are not as successful as students whose coding orientation becomes more elaborated as they proceed through the education system.

Following Halliday (1985), Bernstein (1990) identified “four crucial socialising contexts in the family” (p.97): regulative, instructional, inter-personal and imaginative. He asserted that the concept of a code infers the concept of legitimate and illegitimate forms of communication in a particular context.

I proposed that a code was restricted or elaborated to the extent that the meanings in these four contexts were context-dependent or context-independent. (p. 97)
Bernstein (1990) illustrates the use of the code in a study of seven year olds who were asked to sort pictures of food. The children were from what Bernstein (1990) describes as, “white middle-class” and “lower working-class” groups. Without further analysis of his classification it can be seen that one group is less socially and economically advantaged than the other. The children from the middle-class group selected principles for sorting that were neither directly nor specifically related to the material base. In short, the two groups were both able to sort the pictures in more than one way but the socially advantaged group knew that the more abstract principle was the one which was privileged in the context, whereas children from the socially and economically disadvantaged group chose the principle of sorting that was most closely related to their own personal context, demonstrating what Bernstein (1990) describes as a restricted coding orientation.

Another way to understand how oppression at the level of society, or group, translates into the alienation of the individual is to use the concepts of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft (Cahnman, 1976). Rather than focusing on the individual, these concepts contrast the organisation of traditional societies, Gemeinschaft, which are based on close social ties and a shared history with the organisation of modern societies Gesellschaft, that are based on the contractual, instrumental relationships which accompanied industrialisation. The education systems which have developed along with the development of modern societies build on a primary socialisation which either prepares the young child to take their place in a modern society or supports them to connect within the small community which surrounds their own family. Bernstein (1990) has identified and outlined the differences in the social and linguistic resources of students from these groups.

Students from a range of linguistic backgrounds might find school a “natural setting” in which to learn. They may therefore be acquiring knowledge at school because
their primary socialisation has provided them with understandings about language and education which in turn predispose them to learning in such an environment. Bernstein identifies this group of students as those who are oriented towards the use of elaborated codes (Bernstein, 1990). He suggests that the important factor is not the language spoken by the child at home but rather the socio-cultural language resources the student has for using language in the context of the school.

Aboriginal students are by definition the most socially and economically disadvantaged group in Australian society (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Reeve, 2012) despite the fact that many have rich linguistic backgrounds. Many Aboriginal students speak one or more Aboriginal languages or a Creole or other non-standard variety of English at home but all are expected to learn using the medium of Standard Australian English (SAE). While it may be argued that English is itself an Aboriginal language (Eades, 2013) or that the non-standard varieties should be viewed with the same respect as any language (Shnukal, 2002), there will still be a disjunction between the language of the home and school if they are not able to use language in a way that is oriented towards the use of elaborated codes.

The role of language in education, the disjunction and its implications for the classroom, are beautifully illustrated by Christie (1988) in his discussion of teaching Aboriginal students:

Aboriginal learning takes place as a by-product of any meaningful activity which a group works on together. It is not general, abstract learning, It is a specific response to the whole complex of factors involved in the situation – the people, the place, the time, etc. When Aboriginal children learn, the most important thing they learn is to measure up the situation they are in, to
see all the different concrete factors that are at work, and to RESPOND intelligently to what is happening around them. (p.6)

The types of discourse which accompany Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft (Cahnman, 1976) have been identified by Scollon & Scollon (2001) and this analysis can be clearly applied to the context which Christie describes. Students may not only be required to use a language at school which is different from the language used at home but will also be expected to engage in a discourse which is also different from that of the home.

There are two major types of discourse system: those into which one becomes a member through the natural processes of birth and growth within a family and a community (one’s gender and one’s generation, for example), and those into which one chooses to enter for utilitarian purposes such as one’s professional specialisation or the company for which one works. The social structure of the first kind of discourse system is more like what the sociologists would call Gemeinschaft, and the goal-directed discourse systems such as corporations are rather strong examples of the Gesellschaft form of social organisation (Scollon & Scollon, 2001, p. 149).

Educational failure for the individual can be clearly related to the failure of the education system to meet the needs of particular communities, including many Aboriginal communities (Burney, 2006). Therefore understanding the relationship of speech communities to school communities is also vital as is an understanding of the differences and complementarity of spoken and written language (van Lier, 2006). An understanding of these issues is crucial to the successful development and implementation of both
curriculum and pedagogy. The Australian Aboriginal community includes many communities both urban and remote, with a vast range of linguistic profiles. However some specific examples from a few Aboriginal language groups clearly demonstrate why Aboriginal students are still disadvantaged in most Australian educational settings.

The very powerful nature of the Aboriginal religious attitude and how closely the individual’s experience of the material world is aligned to religious experience is explained by Harris (1990):

One indicator of the pervasive religious nature of Aboriginal consciousness, or of the degree of integration of religious thinking and human activity, is the absence of prayer in traditional religious ceremony. Aborigines do not see sources of religious power and humans as a them and us situation.

(p. 22)

Therefore the experience of schooling is very different from the traditional way in which children are treated, as in Bavin’s (1993) explanation of the Walpiri way:

The child learns through direct observation and real-life experience, the responsibility for learning being on the child. Similar patterns prevail in other Aboriginal communities (Harris 1981 . . . The question-answer routine found in some other societies is not part of the interaction between a Warlpiri mother and her child. Such routines tend to be limited to societies with books and pictures, and books are not found in Warlpiri camps. (Walsh & Yallop, 1993, p. 87)

As the individual develops within their cultural group their linguistic resources also develop. It is here that Bernstein’s coding theory is the most illustrative, as Scollon and Scollon (2001) demonstrate when describing the differences between two men. One, a
brain surgeon, was around forty years of age by the time he had completed all the training necessary to his profession. The other was an Athabaskan hunter who entered his adult occupation at around fifteen years of age. The contrast between the processes of socialisation within their cultures and discourse systems provides an example which illustrates how coding orientations are developed in relation to culture and discourse.

While Aboriginal communities have been, and are still being, assaulted by policies which have oppressed and disadvantaged them in every way, Aboriginal people have been able to maintain and pass on their culture. The oral traditions which depended on a relationship to the land and language have been damaged and in some cases destroyed, as have the languages that were used to maintain them. However the resilience of Aboriginal people and their cultures have resulted in new ways of sharing the culture, from painting their stories on school doors or on canvas (Sutton, 1988) to the development of creoles, the annexation of English as an Aboriginal language and the resurrection and teaching of languages that were thought to be lost but are considered by Aboriginal people to have just been “sleeping” (Zuckermann & Walsh, 2011). New Aboriginal voices are emerging as contemporary artists and writers build on their cultural heritage not only maintaining but also enriching their own and the wider Australian society.

**Summary**

Central to an understanding of the importance of text in the teaching of reading is the age-old cultural importance of story, which preceded the British invasion and the literacy practices it brought to this country (Harris, 1982a; Harrison, 2008). Story has maintained its centrality in Aboriginal cultures and continues in a modern context. The British invasion and how this has impacted on contemporary Aboriginal culture and
educational practices and the Aboriginal experience of literacy and literature have defined contemporary Aboriginal voices (Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Wigglesworth and Simpson, 2008; van Toorn, 2006; Walsh & Yallop, 1993).

The rich cultural heritage of every Aboriginal child has been threatened by the extinction of languages (Schmidt, 1990) and the physical displacement of many people from the traditional lands to which their stories belonged. The oral traditions which depended on a relationship to the land and language have been damaged and in some cases destroyed, as have the languages that were used to maintain them. However the resilience of Aboriginal people and their cultures have resulted in new ways of sharing the culture, in new stories. Contemporary Aboriginal voices are emerging and building on their cultural heritage.

Although traditional Aboriginal societies are usually considered to be oral cultures, art (Sutton, 1988) is a starting point for examining the stories that have been handed down orally and through song and dance. Since the invasion, contemporary Aboriginal identity has also developed in response to government policy (Goodall & Cadzow, 2009; Parbury, 2005). However their stories and their experiences include their cultural heritage and the struggle to maintain it in the face of unjust and destructive policies. Therefore to understand the language and literacy needs of individual Aboriginal students in specific educational contexts it is important to keep a focus on the local identity of a community, their history and their struggles. Rather than trying to define what being Aboriginal means it is more realistic to focus on what being Aboriginal means for these people, in this place at this time. The localism that is a feature of communities across Australia (Sansom, 1982) must be recognised as an important factor in any discussion of Aboriginal education and literacy.
Narrative is an important genre in the early socialization of all children so it is important to recognise how storytelling and story reading are both important in the maintenance of culture and the development of both language and literacy. In some Aboriginal communities the children and their parents are speaking one or more languages or creoles but not Standard Australian English (SAE) and in others children may be speaking Aboriginal English or switching between SAE and Aboriginal English. There are also differences in some Aboriginal storytelling styles which include differences in both the structure and features, and in the use of first language words (Disbray, 2008; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). “A nation chants, BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY” (Wright, 2006). However it is time that contemporary Aboriginal stories are told and that the “collective” Aboriginal story (Richardson, 1990) is heard in our schools.

In the following chapter I outline the methods and methodology which informed the collection and analysis of data. The ethical considerations and both the limitations and significance of this study are discussed. My role in this ethnographic case study is also examined as I was a participant in both the book development project and the project which was exploring the development of the One Mob books community writers’ kit. I am not an Aboriginal person and this adds another layer of complexity as my ethical commitment was to listening to and developing empathy for an Aboriginal perspective. While the participants told their stories I was also listening to the telling of the big story, their collective story, which informed all the personal stories which were developed into books.
Chapter Four: Methodology “The Elders are our First Teachers”

I do not regard the interpretive educational researcher as engaged in an activity somehow less ‘objective’, ‘empirical’, or ‘rigorous’ than any other researcher in any other discipline (Freebody, 2004, p. 7).

The main reason for undertaking social research is to identify social patterns and social meanings and therefore the focus of the research may be exploratory, descriptive or explanatory or indeed may have multiple aims (Walter, 2006, p. 7).

In this chapter I discuss the methodology adopted in conducting this research and the context in which the research was undertaken. I also discuss the choice of sites, the methods employed and how the findings are represented by the crafting of stories for “big fullas and little fullas”. The ethical considerations related to this case study are outlined and an explanation of the choices made in ensuring the trustworthiness of the data and its collection and analysis is provided. Finally, the limitations and significance of this study are considered and a summary is provided.

The data was collected by both recording interactions during book development sessions and individual and group interviews, and later each case study experience was crafted into a narrative account. Video and audiotapes were made of book development sessions which were then transcribed and emerging patterns were noted and developed into categories for further data analysis. A qualitative, interpretive stance informed my approach to this study as I wished to examine a moment in time which cannot be recaptured. Rather, I hoped that through close observation and “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) a picture of this story could be developed which would hopefully replace a thousand words.
A typology which identified three forms of educational research was developed by Carr and Kemmis and encompasses several paradigms (Merriam, 1998). The typology includes the positivist which accords most closely with a traditional understanding of scientific methodology in which an object is observed in the context of a stable reality and data is validated through repeatable testing; the interpretive which is characterised by inductive reasoning in which a hypothesis or theory is generated but multiple realities are accepted and seen to be socially constructed. They also identified a critical form of research which usually has a focus on a critique of power and privilege or of oppression. This typology encompasses all the social research paradigms. Nevertheless a false dichotomy between the positivist paradigm and interpretive paradigms still persists (Kemmis, 2013). This is a false dichotomy identified by Kuhn (1970). As Flyvbjerg (2013) states:

More generally, Thomas Kuhn has shown that the most important precondition for science is that researchers possess a wide range of practical skills for carrying out scientific work. Generalisation is just one of these. In Germanic languages, the term ‘science’ (Wissenschaft) means literally “to gain knowledge”. And formal generalisation is only one of many ways by which people gain and accumulate knowledge. That knowledge cannot be formally generalized does not mean that it cannot enter into the collective process of knowledge accumulation in a given field or society. Knowledge may be transferable even where it is not formally generalizable. (p. 177)

In intercultural studies particularly, there is much to be learned and part of that learning is in developing a perspective which reflects cultural understandings about what constitutes knowledge and how that knowledge can be kept or shared.
Methodology – An Ethnographic Case Study

Flyvbjerg (2006) defines the value of the single case study in developing knowledge as opposed to a large sample:

If one, thus, assumes that the goal of the researcher’s work is to understand and learn about the phenomena being studied, then research is simply a form of learning. If one assumes that research, like other learning processes, can be described by the phenomenology for human learning, it then becomes clear that the most advanced form of understanding is achieved when researchers place themselves within the context being studied. Only in this way can researchers understand the viewpoints and the behaviour, which characterises social actors. (p. 236)

In choosing to undertake a case study an opportunity is provided to share an experience of a unique situation at a point in time. The value of the case study lies in the sharing of unique data as “. . . in their experiential and contextual accounts, case study researchers assist readers in the construction of knowledge.” (Stake, 2000, p. 442) Thus what is common to all social researchers is that their study will include the particular social context and by definition the researcher’s own relationship to, or place in, that context. Therefore “the ethnographic productions of such a self and the ‘cultural other’ are always historically and culturally contingent” (Foley, 2002, p. 473) and this is evident in the reflexive stance adopted by the researcher.

In the historical development of interpretive research it is this issue of the researcher’s relationship to the subjects of the research which has most concerned researchers as it challenges the positivist view that an object can be studied in a stable reality which is observable and measurable (Merriam, 1998). In contrast, interpretive social
research is characterised by the researcher as participant observer and indeed “. . . participant observation is not a particular research technique but a mode of being-in-the-world characteristic of researchers” (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998, p. 111).

Moreover positivist views of what may be deemed to be scientific research have also been challenged even when the subject of research is not social. In his seminal discussion of the development of scientific revolutions, Kuhn (1970) questions the development of science in a way that reflects the current debate about interpretive social research. His view is that, “An apparently arbitrary element, compounded of personal and historical accident, is always a formative ingredient of the beliefs espoused by a given scientific community at a given time” (Kuhn, 1970, p. 4). Historically, he asserts, there have always been competing and distinct views of nature all of which were developed using what might be regarded as scientific methods of equal rigour. These competing views may all be viewed as scientific but all are not accepted as equally valid at a given point in time. The notion Kuhn puts forward is of a scientific paradigm, a period in historical time which is socially constructed by the scientists who participate in developing science in that period.

Indeed Kuhn’s notion of a paradigm in relation to research in the physical sciences indicates that not just social but all research is to some extent subject to the social conditions in which it is conducted. Interpretive research began developing along with social science in the twentieth century as a result of interest in understanding cultures other than the researcher’s own. At first the interest was past cultures and then contemporary cultures, including minorities and sub-cultures. This happened at the same time as the social sciences were institutionalised in western universities and led to the development of competing paradigms like the Functionalist, Interpretivist, Marxist, Feminist, Postmodernist and Indigenous. Kuhn’s use of the terms ‘beliefs’ and ‘given time’ sit oddly with a conventional
view of science as it concerns the natural world but are reassuringly familiar to social researchers undertaking interpretive research.

Interpretive research is a term which encompasses many types of research, one of which is case study. A case may be defined as a bounded system and this research is an intrinsic case which is made up of groups and occasions (Stake, 2000). Undertaking a case study implies that both the methods used to undertake the research and the report produced will comply with certain expectations: “A case study is both a process of enquiry about the case and the product of that inquiry” (Stake, 2000, p. 436). Furthermore in an ethnographic case study “investigators explore in depth the ways in which their personal histories saturate the ethnographic inquiry” (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p.1028). Rather than seeing the close relationship of the researcher to the subject as a weakness, and by allowing the researcher’s own personal history to be part of the account “the juxtaposition of self and subject matter is used to enrich the ethnographic report” (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 1028).

Therefore as Flyvbjerg (2013) argues, despite the validity of society as a subject of research and even if it is accepted that knowledge can be produced in more than one way, there is still a problem which ethnographers need to address: “whether and how other cultures could be understood, a problem that still lies at the heart of modern ethnography” (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998, p. 113). This problem is best addressed by producing knowledge using methods appropriate to the case and the context. This is especially relevant when the case relates to Aboriginal people (Flyvbjerg, 2013; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008; Kuhn, 1970; Nakata, 2004) as it is in the juxtaposition of two cultural traditions that it is most clearly seen that the concept of “knowledge” production needs to be examined:

As complex as the question of indigeneity may be, we believe that the best interests of indigenous and nonindigenous peoples are served by the study
of indigenous knowledges and epistemologies. An appreciation of indigenous epistemology, for example, provides Western peoples with another view of knowledge production in diverse cultural sites. (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008, p. 137)

It is not only the concept of what constitutes “knowledge” that needs to be addressed, but also the methods used to construct knowledge and the context in which data is gathered.

In one sense the main concern of the researcher is the reflexive turn (Foley, 2002; Flyvbjerg, 2013; Richardson, 1990; Yates; 2003) as it is this that defines ethnographic research. The reflexive stance taken by the researcher may be defined by one of these ideal types the confessional, the theoretical, the intertextual and the deconstructive (Foley, 2002). However some post-modernists (Foley, 2002; Yates, 2003) rather than defining types, encourage the opening up of analytical categories to allow the exploration of new and radical ways to interpret and represent reality. Many of these representations are more personal and literary than more conventional forms (Foley, 2002) but this does not mean that the report is less truthful or accurate.

Indeed, “Social and generational cohesion, as well as social change, depend upon this ability to empathise with the life stories of others.” (Richardson, 1990, p. 127) and it is the narrative account of the “collective story” (Richardson, 1990, p. 128) which is developed in this study. It is the importance of story that informed the project and the personal stories and opinions shared around the development of local books do tell the “collective story” as they both tell the story and evaluate its importance for the tellers and listeners in their communities.

Cultural stories provide exemplars of lives, heroes, villains, and fools as they are embedded in larger cultural and social frameworks, as well as
stories about home, community, society and humankind. (Richardson, 1990, p. 127)

The fact that Aboriginal communities are marginalised and usually silenced (Connell, 2007; Freire, 1975; Richardson, 1990; Tatz, 2009a) makes it even more important to listen to their voices, both as they tell their stories and as they discuss the value of their stories to their communities. Indeed, in urging Indigenous people to participate in academic research, Martin Nakata (2004) defines their strengths, strengths which are focal to this research:

What we have to ensure is that we bring to this dialogue a sense of coherence as we marry academic convention to all our greatest strengths – our experience, our knowledge, our traditions. We have to make meaning for them of the things they have difficulty understanding or can no longer speak on, we have to address their logic, their assumptions and we have to write in our experience in a way that challenges academic knowledge and standards. (p. 4)

**Ethnography**

Ethnography can therefore be viewed as both a set of methods and the written record which is produced through the use of those methods (Merriam, 1998). However the use of ethnographic methods like interviewing and participant observation do not in themselves make an ethnography. Rather, it is the reflexive turn of the researcher and the interpretation of the data collected by the methods they have chosen.

Concern with the cultural context is what sets this type of study apart from other types of interpretive research. Wolcott (1980) distinguishes sharply
between the techniques of ethnography and the ethnographic account itself.
(Merriam, 1998, p. 14)

This ethnographic case study was constructed around a project which had at its core a question about the importance of text in the teaching of reading. The question could be asked in many communities but this situation was unique because the participants were involved in producing books for their own Indigenous communities which could also be read elsewhere. Bearing in mind “. . . the injunction from Marx that our task is not merely to study the world, but to help change it” (Smith & Deemer, 2003, p. 453), the questions that arose and the answers given to those questions in relation to a particular community at a particular time may also provide insights for other communities. Lincoln & Denzin (1994) suggest that ethnographers who have a vision of their research as promoting social justice must make a commitment:

. . . the humanistic commitment of the qualitative researcher to study the world always from the perspective of the interacting individual. From this simple commitment flow the liberal and radical politics of qualitative research. (p. 575)

It is therefore important that ethnographers work outwards from their own experience and clearly situate themselves both historically and culturally in the community in which they are interacting so that the research will have the authority and clarity that the community would want. Lincoln (1995, cited in Smith & Deemer, 2003) states that it is necessary to have a “vision of research that enables and promotes social justice, community, diversity, civic discourse, and caring” (p. 451).

If social research is itself seen to be a basis for social change it is necessary to recognise that the human subjects of this research cannot be viewed as static ‘things’ which
can be studied without the subjective views of the subjects or researcher contributing to what can be known. Nor is it possible to separate the researcher from the subject matter in an ethnographic case study in which the relationship between the researcher and the subjects contribute to the subject matter of the research. (Beattie, 2009; Bruner, 1991; Kuhn, 1970). Gergen and Gergen, (2000) rightly confirm that social relationships are never static and as a result, “Our mission should be that of contributing to the cultural dialogues on the here and now as opposed to the there and then (p. 1040).

What is needed is a different perspective, one in which “. . . we must change our imageries and metaphors from those of discovery and finding to those of constructing and making” (Smith & Deemer, 2003, p. 429). For this reason this ethnographic case study is informed by narrative inquiry (Beattie, 2009; Chase, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Richardson, 1990). Therefore, as Creswell (2007) comments:

Throughout the slow process of collecting data and analyzing them, we shape our narrative – a narrative with many forms in qualitative research.

We tell a story that unfolds over time. (p. 43)

In undertaking an ethnographic study the dialogic “constructing and making” of meaning between the researcher and the participants in the research (Gergen & Gergen, 2000; Smith & Deemer, 2003) can be enriched if the researcher’s subjective views are foregrounded and become part of the understandings being developed (Ellis & Bochner, 2000. Indeed, the concept of the ‘subject’ of research is defined and challenged by the methods chosen by researchers (McCurdy, Spradley, & Shandy, 2005). For instance, observers attempting to take a detached stance may refer to the humans in their research as ‘subjects’ or as ‘respondents’ if they are responding to questionnaires or surveys but ethnographers are more likely to view the human beings in their research as ‘informants’ or
by the term I have chosen, ‘participant’, which reflects both my role and the role of those engaged in sharing their views.

Think of the ethnographic process like this: Informants are our teachers; we are their students. We are trying to learn how to view the world the way they do. We hope to learn the “inside information” that guides their actions and conveys meaning. To do this we need a tried method to help them teach us systematically without imposing our views and interests on what they tell us. Learning their culture and later writing about it is our ethnographic goal.

(McCurdy, Spradley, & Shandy, 2005, p. 11)

This is not to suggest that quality should be abandoned because subjectivity is recognised but rather that by including subjective and personal responses a clearer understanding of the human interactions may be developed (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). Indeed, as Gergen & Gergen (2000) suggest, by revealing the history of my personal investment in the project which is the subject of this research I have also explicitly revealed my own position and therefore what I may have unknowingly chosen to foreground or discard. Furthermore this research could never be exactly replicated because of the nature of the project, the time at which it took place and the fluid organisation at each site which resulted in an uneven representation of each individual’s views as some attended sessions sporadically and others attended regularly. Therefore, because this is a unique situation, the inability to develop comparative description is viewed as a positive aspect of the research: “Comparative description” is the opposite of what Clifford Geertz (1973) calls “thick description” (Stake, 2000, p. 444). Rather than being a disadvantage the value of the case study is that it has provided an opportunity for ‘thick description’ to be developed about a unique situation.
For instance, the dual problem of viewing Aboriginal Australia as a monoculture
with a wheel and spoke relation to land and ‘authentic’ community is overcome when the
imposed non-Aboriginal conceptions of ‘Aboriginality’ and ‘community’ are contested.
Instead, the characteristics which are used to evaluate the data “. . . must inevitably evolve
out of and reflect one’s “effective history” (Smith & Deemer, 2003, p. 446). The benefit of
this approach is that the participants in this research are viewed as sentient beings whose
views are as valid as those of the researcher. Indeed, the interactions between the subjects
and myself, as researcher and participant, helped to develop the criteria for the research. I
have been closely involved with many of the participants in this project and because I am
also personally committed to the improvement of literacy outcomes for Aboriginal students I
value the opinions and understandings that Aboriginal people can bring to the discussion of
the issues involved in this research. Furthermore, as this is an interpretive study I took the
advice that Stenhouse (1983) offers to researchers in this area of education, especially to a
researcher in my position: “. . . though research findings, modified and enriched by the study
of cases, may be highly instructive, the knowledge teachers and students might acquire from
them remains hypothetical and in need of careful situational testing”. (Stenhouse, 1983 p. 212)

Understanding is, I suggest, always provisional and furthermore the whole notion of
ethnographic research within or about Aboriginal communities is being challenged by
Aboriginal and other researchers (Bishop, 2003; Smith, 1999). Bishop (2003) suggests that
“the solutions to marginalization do not lie in the culture that marginalizes.” (p.223) He
suggests that “structural issues of power and control - initiation, benefits, representation,
legitimization and accountability ” (p.223) can only be addressed by using the experiences
of those involved. In the case of most indigenous peoples these experiences will include colonization, resistance and educational initiatives that reflect their own cultural concerns.

. . . traditional ethnographic work has been criticized for embodying a hierarchical and therefore undemocratic relationship between researcher and researched, because it is the former who makes the decisions about what to study and how to study it, and whose voice is represented in the written ethnography. . . . (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998, p. 121)

I am aware of these issues and I valued the development of the first two series of One Mob books in each community because they gave non-Aboriginal teachers the opportunity to hear the voices of contemporary Aboriginal people in their classrooms which provided an opportunity for both non-Aboriginal teachers and students to develop understandings about Aboriginal culture. The sessions also provided a source of pride and identity for the participants. For these reasons the focus of this research was on respectful listening because non-Aboriginal people are largely responsible for mainstream Aboriginal education and I believe it is only by listening to Aboriginal voices that some of today’s challenges will be met. My focus was therefore on the views of the participants about the processes involved in developing stories and books in their community and also of the role those books might play in the education of their children. I shared Pat’s strong conviction that the making of these books was important for the community and I approached the research with this bias already evident to all the participants because of my voluntary work in developing the earlier teachers’ guides for the books produced by One Mob books.
Context

The four communities chosen for this project were identified because of their social and economic disadvantage and their relatively large number of Aboriginal students. Therefore all the problems which poverty and marginalisation bring with them were present at these sites. In the face of consistent educational failure for Aboriginal communities I believed there was a unique opportunity to listen to Aboriginal views on some important social and educational issues.

This research is therefore interpretive and ethnographic as it recognises my active role as both researcher and participant observer. However my role as both participant observer and researcher cannot be defined by one particular theoretical perspective.

. . . there is no simple one-to-one relationship between ethnography and any given theoretical perspective. It is not the case that all ethnography has been undertaken under the auspices of one epistemological orthodoxy. Rather, the distinctive characteristics of ethnographic work have been differentially appealed to by different disciplines and tendencies (Atkinson & Hamersley, 1998, p. 258).

However my relationship to the participants in this research was “dialogical and co-constructive” (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 1036) as throughout the research I was engaged in discussing the transcripts I was making of the book development sessions with Pat. I also took part in discussions about book development, some of which were recorded. Our discussions were focused on the development of the processes of storytelling and book development and, when talking with Pat, focused on the strategies she was using to support the telling of stories and how these were being shaped by the participants’ responses and opinions. My aim was to focus on the opinions and personal stories of the participants to develop a rich picture of their views. As Mary Beattie (2009) suggests:
. . . a story is always working on several levels at once; it holds within it a suggestiveness of the other stories that it is not; it has an irony and ambivalence about its own identity and posture and immunizes itself against take-over by any definitive reading or interpretation. (p. 13)

This is an intrinsic case study as the subject of the research is bounded by membership of the group that participated in book development for the third series of One Mob books. However the group has subsections made up of groups and occasions (Stake, 2000) in particular contexts at particular times. The sample is purposive and selective. The social/geographical communities which were chosen by Pat were Tolu, in a regional area in the west of New South Wales, Va, in the western suburbs of Sydney, and Rua and Dua, in two northern suburbs of Melbourne.

Because the focus of this research is on the importance of authentic text in the teaching of reading, the background knowledge which children bring to texts is very important as it reflects the values and cultural capital of their community. Background knowledge is of vital importance when learning to read (Clay, 1991; Goodman, 1990; Meek, 1988; Freebody, 2007) so it was critical to listen to what representatives from each local community held to be important for them and their children at this time. It was their views which informed the content of the local texts they were developing, as well as the mode in which it would be communicated.

As Aboriginal ‘communities’ today are often the result of state interventions, they may not always represent one particular Aboriginal language or cultural tradition (Merlan, 2007; Foley, 2008). However they do represent the attitudes and wishes of the contemporary Aboriginal people who live in those communities today and their personal histories, experiences and wider connections to Aboriginal people in other communities. Therefore in
this study the voices of Aboriginal people reflect individual opinions at a certain moment in time relating to the social and geographical place in which the case study was undertaken. The history of dispossession and policies which have resulted in the removal of Aboriginal people from their families and lands have resulted in new ways of identifying local communities, ways which may not fit well with non-Aboriginal definitions. It is therefore clear that the twin faults of either perceiving Aboriginal Australia as a monoculture or of oversimplifying the relationship of particular geographical sites with Aboriginal cultural and language groups (Merlan, 2007; Foley, 2008) must be addressed. To define the subjects of this research there needs to be some sense of history and a sociological perspective to develop what Patti Lather calls the “rigor of reflective competence” (Moss, Phillips, Erickson, Floden, Lather, & Schneider, 2009, p. 506).

For instance, the Aboriginal people involved at each site originated from many places, as would be the case in many Aboriginal communities today. As at the Va site, Aunty Jenny said, “I’m from Nambucca. Our totem is the dolphin so the people that’s goin’ to tell you stories here are going to tell you about fishin’ . . .” so different areas . . .” have got different stories . . .” (Interview, Va). However Aunty Jenny was accepted as an Elder in the Va area because she lived there and was well known in the area as an artist and Elder. This could be seen as resulting in distortions and partiality as what is reported or inferred may not accurately reflect the views of the groups at each site. These random representations develop a very rich picture which reflects the complexity of these Aboriginal communities at a moment in time. “The rigour of any ethnography rests firmly upon the researcher’s awareness of what it is possible to say given the nature of the data that was and was not collected” (Ball, 1990, p. 164). Therefore the data collected in this case study can only reflect the complexities of the given situations.
This is especially true when seeking to define ‘Aboriginal identity’ and ‘Aboriginal community’ (Foley, 2008) and as a result I have accepted the definitions offered by the participants. This also reflects the Government’s definition of Aboriginality which is based on an Aboriginal community validating the identity of their members. In the state of New South Wales, for example, this is certified by a Certificate of Aboriginality (Anti-Discrimination board of NSW, n.d.). The community which validates a person’s Aboriginality could be a community anywhere in Australia as it is the one in which they live, not one they are descended from. The confirmation of a person’s identity is dependent on their own willingness to identify as an Aboriginal person and then in their recognition as being of Aboriginal descent by the community in which they live. This more closely resembles identity as it is established by traditional Aboriginal kinship relationships than in the modern world which depends on written documentation. Furthermore it is interesting that in this modern world of pin numbers and identification documents Aboriginal identity and community are defined, even by our own government, in a way that is truly subjective.

Choice of Sites

The four common factors which influenced Pat’s choice of sites, and which were shared by each site, were that each site had been identified as having a large number of Aboriginal students; was in a socio-economically disadvantaged area (Vinson, 2007); had a low level of achievement in literacy as measured by standardised tests; and had Aboriginal staff employed as teachers or education workers. The four educational communities chosen by Pat for the project included three from major cities in two states and one regional site. The sites chosen were educational sites and the local communities were made up of the people who were local at that moment in time. The participants were employed by schools
as Aboriginal Education Officers or Workers to support Aboriginal students or were Elders or members of the local community or the school community. The communities in this research were producing books for the third series of *One Mob* books and while there were these common factors shared by each site, in every other way each was unique.

Dua and Rua are both in the northern suburbs of Melbourne but the school at Dua was one of a group of schools in the state which had been developed to cater specifically for Aboriginal children although non-Aboriginal children were not excluded. The school at Dua catered for children from the first year of school into secondary and was characterised by very small class sizes. The staff at the school acknowledged that there were many community needs they were trying to meet, as well as the literacy needs of the students. Uncle Terry Simpson was a community Elder who had close links with the school and attended the sessions Pat held there. Because this very close-knit community tended to be made up of mostly Aboriginal families, community issues and problems were closely connected to the school.

As this was the first school Pat visited some of the days were spent waiting for community members who were invited but did not attend. It was at this site that Pat made the final decision to work with Aboriginal workers in the schools as she saw that they would be key participants in any resource she developed.

The community, the workers are going to be the ones that deliver the community writers’ kit to the community . . . The community workers just do know, they know. If they’re trained they’ll know how to do it, whereas training up people who haven’t got the mindset of education, or who haven’t got the mindset of the school, how schools work…it’s never going to work . . . (Interview, Pat Smith, Tape: 1:11:06)
Those who did attend at Dua were Uncle Terry Simpson, who sadly passed away during the project, Aunty Shari House and her husband Uncle Richard and Laura Smart, the Koori Educator (Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013) at Dua. Children, parents and teachers also visited from time to time but the average number of participants each day was only three or four. This was the first site that Pat had visited for this project. Initially she was despairing as even though it was well advertised and a participant’s fee was being paid no one came. “I had this vision that the whole thing was a failure . . . because I couldn’t . . . because it wasn’t working.” (Interview, Pat Smith, Tape: 1:11:06). Pat reflected on the possible causes of this situation: “I figured out that no matter what I did I was not going to get . . . community people to come regularly to our sessions . . . I’ve got theories about that, I think life gets in the road of . . . doing regular things . . . particularly . . . with the endemic poverty, lack of opportunities, grandmothers minding kids . . .” (Interview, Pat Smith, Tape: 1:11:06)

Nearby Rua was a typical primary school, taking in children from the local community, a large number of whom just happened to be Aboriginal. As a result, the links between the school and the community were different as the school community was comprised of a wider range of families with looser connections to each other. The group at Rua changed from session to session but nearly always included Kay Mairey, Paul Mackenzie and Shirley Roberts who were Aboriginal workers at the school.

At the Tolu site Pat worked with a teacher and Aboriginal Education Workers from primary and secondary schools and a technical and further education institution. One of the books was developed by the whole group: Lilac Cooper, Eleanor Harrison, Nell Carter, Rachel Williams, Rick Jones and Val Holland; and one was developed with a young primary student, Luke Blaxland. In this setting there was a shift in the sense of what constituted a
context, as in this very small country town about a third of the population were Aboriginal and the total population was smaller than the largest primary schools found in urban areas. Therefore the geographical setting of the local town was the context and Pat worked with a group that spanned educational sites in the town. This was also a site in which the unique anthropological Aboriginal heritage was a focal point for the community. Even so, in all these contexts some of the Aboriginal people were from various other parts of the country, but it was clear in Tolu which Aboriginal language and clan group had always been associated with the area and local Aboriginal people were easily able to demonstrate a connection to their land and Aboriginal culture over millennia.

Yet another interpretation of context was made at Va where Aboriginal Education workers Tate Barker, Diane Thring, Alison Muirhead, Marie Taylor, Kate Barry, Ngaire Thompson and Sue Wills were drawn from several similar public schools in the area. They were brought together with the support of the local director of public education to develop books with a local Elder, Aunty Jenny White, and from time to time with young students like James Harrison. This was undertaken with the support and encouragement of the local public education authorities, both principals and executive officers. All the sites for this project and research were most strongly defined by geography and they had a focal point of one or more educational institutions but otherwise loosely defined by the relationships which the participants formed with each other and with others within the site or the wider community. The people who took part in the book development process were sometimes invited but at other times ‘wandered in’, like James, because they knew some of the participants.
Methods

Relationships are at the heart of this kind of research, which is based in a collaboration between researcher and participants over time. A researcher enters the research relationship in the midst of the life as it is being lived and told, relived and retold, and seeks to understand the stories of the experiences that make up peoples’ lives, individual, relational and social. (Beattie, Dobson, Thornton, & Hegge, 2007, p. 122)

In an attempt to provide a rich and rigorous account, a multi-method approach was taken using crystallisation. There are “far more than ‘three sides’ from which to approach the world” (Richardson, 1994, p. 522) and because the data provides many rich accounts which force us to recognise this, as Richardson (1994) suggests “we do not triangulate; we crystallize” (p. 522). Crystallisation was a way to consider more than one perspective. This process was developed by including multiple perspectives gathered over time from participants who were drawn from a range of geographical sites. This was achieved by using both recordings of participant interactions during book development sessions and individual and group interviews with participants. This provided an opportunity to clarify the meanings that were being made while “… acknowledging that no observations or interpretations are perfectly repeatable …” (Stake, 2000, p. 444). At each site individual and group interviews were undertaken and video and audiotapes of book development sessions were transcribed and coded. The Aboriginality of the participants was defined by themselves and their communities and there were also non-Aboriginal participants involved in every book development.

At each site video and audio case records of the process of book development were made by One Mob books. The result was a series of recordings over several days or weeks
which allowed for sampling over time (Ball, 1990) at each site. Having the camera set up on a tripod as a fixture in the room resulted in some recordings featuring voices but no people as they moved out of sight to get tea and coffee or to have a break. This also meant that the camera was largely ignored and the interactions were focused around the book development task. In some cases I was in the group as it was recorded but in others I watched the interactions from the video only, as in the case of Tolu, a site which I did not visit although I was able to meet some of the participants.

My interaction with the participants and the subject matter of our discussions supported both the exposure of the researcher as subject and the ability to develop a close descriptive study of the settings in which the research took place. As the focus of the research was to elicit the opinions of the participants in particular settings at a particular point in time, both the setting and the trust in the researcher were of paramount importance (Beattie, 2009; Clandinin, & Connelly, 1994; Richardson, 1994). I believe these contextual elements were foregrounded for all participants as the interviews were conducted after a relationship had been developed and I either participated in or observed many of the sessions conducted by Pat when she was conducting book development sessions.

**Representing the findings: Crafting stories for ‘big fullas and little fullas’**

One Mob stories have been categorised as being suitable for either big or little ‘fullas’. In representing the findings I have used these categories as metaphors for the stories that were told. I have attempted to tell the story of each site in this case study as a story for and about ‘big fullas. The stories of the ‘big fullas’ are the stories of the adults who were creating stories for their ‘little fullas’. At the same time as they told those stories and created those books they were also telling their own deeply-felt personal stories. Theirs are the
voices that they hoped would be heard by those adults and children who read the ‘little fulla’ stories in their homes and classrooms. They are the storytellers. As Chase (2013) notes, “For some individuals and groups, the urgency of storytelling arises from the need and desire to have others hear one’s story (p. 69).” Even more relevant is her comment that. “Stories about injustice are often more than individual stories” (Chase, 2013, p. 70). In this sense all of the One Mob books and the findings from this research are telling a collective story (Richardson, 1990) about Aboriginal people.

During the course of the research changes were taking place in the processes that Pat Smith was using to develop books at each site and I undertook interviews with her in which she reflected on her interactions with the participants and how they guided the changes in the process. Her experiences at Dua had a great impact on her ideas about how the resource could be delivered and as I coded and transcribed sessions I discussed them with Pat and also undertook three semi-structured interviews with her, in which she reflected about her work and progress at each site. Discussions and interviews with community members and stakeholders were undertaken, sometimes in person and at other times by forwarding questions and a tape recorder to the group. This took place over the course of several months and each video or audio tape was transcribed and coded. The recording and analysis of repeated sessions of book development over time and space provided triangulation and enabled a thick description to be made of settings and events. These responses were then analysed, along with transcripts of interviews with Pat Smith. This was undertaken with the understanding:

. . . that there is no perfectly transparent or neutral way to represent the natural or social world. For example, however ‘impersonal’ and formulaic the work of the natural scientist, it stands in no “natural” relationship to the
phenomena and events it describes. On the contrary, the textual products of natural science are highly conventional. Their apparent guarantee of authenticity and credibility is dependent on readers adopting shared strategies of reading and interpretation (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998, p. 123).

It is unlikely that many of the participants will read the final report of this research but I would hope that if they do there would be nothing surprising or objectionable and that it was obvious that I had tried to represent their opinions and ideas in as faithful a manner as possible. I think the process of crystallisation was achieved by collecting data at several intervals of time and at each site and as noted earlier this meant that there were a range of voices on each occasion (Beattie, 2009), but as Stake (2000) notes:

Some call for letting the case “tell its own story” (Carter, 1993; Coles, 1989).
We cannot be sure that a case, telling its own story, will tell all or tell well – but the ethos of interpretive study, seeking out emic meanings held by the people within the case, is strong . . . Even when empathic and respectful of each person’s realities, the researcher decides what the case’s own story is, or at least what will be included in the report. More will be pursued than was volunteered. Less will be reported than was learned. (p. 441)

In an attempt to tell this story, over 10,000 words have been transcribed from audio and videotapes. From these tapes the following categories were developed as descriptive of the discussions: reading/literacy; lack of education for older Aboriginal people; violence, poverty, disadvantage; the role of humour; relationship to the land; focus on the local area.

The patterns which emerged from participants across sites related to the subject matter of the sessions which were focused on producing books so I searched for data related
to reading/literacy. The discussions around the production of the books included the processes of reading and writing, the intended audience and the selection of the subject matter. The context in which the process was unfolding pre-supposed the importance of education and literacy and also the importance of local stories as there was an obvious and simple alternative which was to use existing books rather than producing their own. I also looked for references which had a focus on the local area because the purpose of the project was to produce engaging materials for students in the local school.

These discussions and the interviews helped to build a rich description of the local contexts and to place the participants and their views in a particular time and place. The references to violence, poverty, disadvantage, the role of humour and the relationship to the land were not unexpected but the lack of education for older Aboriginal people was a surprising issue that arose from the data. Similarly, there were many more references to the local area than to any other subject. The development of these major categories allowed resonances across sites to be identified and related to reading pedagogy and educational policies and theories that have impacted on Aboriginal people. Developing ‘thick description’ supports the validation or accuracy of the findings as it demonstrates the closeness of the researcher to the participants and the project which formed the basis of the research (Cresswell, 2007, p. 207).

**Ethical Considerations**

The title, *The Elders are our First Teachers*, is taken from the data (Interview, Va) and was used at the beginning of this chapter because it exemplifies the cultural sensitivities that must be addressed. The main ethical issue in this case study concerned the protocols for working with Aboriginal communities. At every stage of the process Pat Smith had carefully
negotiated with the board of One Mob books and with appropriate local Elders and community members and also relevant Aboriginal organisations like the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group NSW and the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association.

After the completion of this third series of books and the delivery of the interim report (Appendix A) this project was abandoned at the One Mob board’s request. The abandonment of this project was not related to the quality of the work but rather because the board ceased to embrace such a confronting and challenging vision. Because the project had up until that point been fully supported by the board and funded by the Federal government, when Pat Smith left One Mob books the remaining funds had to be returned and the project was left unfinished. Pat however continues to develop her vision and her work with one of the participants from this study. Researching any aspect of Aboriginal life and culture requires the researcher to take a reflective stance which must include an understanding and respect for worldviews which might be in direct opposition to those accepted by the researcher and the wider culture.

Ethics approval was given on 24 May 2006 and modified on 26 April 2007 (Appendix B) for this research on the development of the One Mob books community writers’ resource. This need for sensitivity and confidentiality is clearly illustrated in the case of research into any aspect of education and exemplified by the statements of the Maori writer, Patricia Grace as summarised by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999). Patricia Grace warns indigenous readers that books may not accurately reflect their values and culture and that they may also incorrectly represent communities and people in a negative, insensitive way. Linda Tuhiwai Smith extends these warnings beyond texts written for schools to include academic writing. Especially in the light of Tuhiwai Smith’s comment about ‘academic writing’ it is obvious that a special sensitivity must be applied to the study of any group of
people, especially, as in the case of Aboriginal people, when they have been badly served by researchers in the past.

Confirming the need for sensitivity in the context of Aboriginal communities, Pat related an anecdote which clearly outlines the challenge for ethnographic researchers working with Aboriginal communities. “They call them seagulls, because they’re always white. White fellas fly in, pick up the food, get out” (Interview, Pat Smith, 22.11.06). In the role of researcher I was determined not to do what Pat, quoted above, called ‘an ethnography job’. For this reason I focused my research on the views of the participants about the development of these resources. My focus in the collection and analysis of the data was on listening to what the participants said, not on evaluating their views. I did not wish to contribute further to the study and subjugation of Aboriginal people by diagnosing their problems but rather to listen respectfully to their views. The research was undertaken with the aim of telling the stories of the development of books at each case study site. Understanding what was important to the Aboriginal people in the context of this project and of encapsulating their knowledge and understanding about the education of their children was paramount. This understanding has already been flagged as an important issue in the wider educational field.

One important option is for the interpretive community to develop methods by which situated knowledges can be brought into productive (as opposed to conflicting) relationships with each other. Frequently our methods of inquiry support (or “empower”) particular groups. This outcome contributes to the situated knowledge of these groups, but also tends to diminish or erase alternative realities. The challenge, then, is to develop methods of inquiry that can generate productive
exchanges at the border for competing or clashing “situations”. (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 1032)

I had a longstanding involvement as a participant in the development of the teachers’ guides for the first two series of One Mob books and as a teacher and friend of some of the authors and artists who created the books for those series. As this series was developed I was also participating in developing the third teachers’ guide that would accompany the series. I was also involved in some of the book development sessions. I was therefore easily accepted by the participants as I was seen as one of Pat’s many supporters who helped to develop the books and teachers’ guides. I knew what Pat did to gain trust and show respect with each group of people she worked with and I trusted her in the same way that the other participants did. As Ngaire Thompson said:

I . . . trust Pat . . . some of us have said things that nobody else knows… It’s made a special bond between us. Pat is part of our extended community and our family. Because she has come in and accepted everyone for who they are . . . no questions asked. (Interview, Va)

My own view is that listening to Aboriginal people’s views about the education of their children is intrinsically valuable (Tatz, 2009a) and Pat shared this view. She demonstrated this by ensuring that the copyright for each book was held by the individual authors and illustrators. In the context of this research the views of the participants helped to shape both the process Pat undertook in development of the books and of course all aspects of the books themselves. Interviews and observations of teachers and other members of school communities were undertaken with the permission of principals and the individuals involved and confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms for the sites and participants. One Mob books paid a participation fee to each participant and each person
signed an agreement which included permission to record the sessions. *One Mob* books also gave me permission to use all the data collected in the development of *One Mob* books and the community writers’ resource. (Appendix C)

**Data Analysis and Validity**

How **should** we write our research? The rhetorical, ethical and methodological issues implicit in this question are neither few nor trivial. Rather, the question reflects a central postmodernist realisation: all knowledge is socially constructed. Writing is not simply a “true” representation of an objective “reality” instead language creates a particular view of reality (Richardson, 1990, p. 116).

Working in an interpretive paradigm is important in a study which so clearly crosses cultural boundaries and therefore invites multiple interpretations. Indeed the data is socially constructed in an interpretive case study like this through the interactions of the researcher and participants and in this case also through the use of theoretical sampling (Ball, 1990). The strong relationship with the participants and my professional knowledge contributed to my analysis of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) as my perspective was influenced by my personal experiences. These included my work in schools and my voluntary involvement with several aspects of the earlier development of both books and teachers’ guides, as well as the community writers’ resource. When coding the data, patterns emerged which were common to all of the sites and reflected the findings of other researchers.

However as I progressively collected, transcribed and coded data I was able to see that some issues were not fully discussed in the book development sessions. I thought it was important to collect data that related to some important educational issues that had not
naturally formed part of the discussions. I therefore conducted interviews with participants from the four sites, most of which were undertaken by the participants recording answers to a set of questions. The questions dealt mostly with the reading process and this was one area that had not been comprehensively discussed in the data collected from the book development sessions. As this was a pivotal issue related to the project and the research I decided to interview each group.

The following are some of the questions asked: “What do you think helps kids to be really good readers?” and “Do you think reading stories about local people and places will help kids be better readers? Why?” I also asked some direct questions about the resource Pat was hoping to develop and the support that would be needed to implement them in communities. Two of the questions were: “What do you think a Community Writers’ kit should have in it?” and “What sort of training, if any, would be needed for someone to use the Community Writers’ kit that you are thinking of?” These questions were sent to the sites at Tolu and Rua and I conducted the interview at one of the book development sessions for Va (Appendix D).

I made this decision because I wanted to provide an opportunity for explicit discussion of some aspects of education to guard against the situation outlined by Gergen and Gergen (2000):

For Foucault, knowledge-generating disciplines including the social sciences – function as sources of authority, and as their descriptions, explanations, and diagnoses are disseminated through education and other practices they enlarge the potential realm of subjugation. (p. 1033)
My theoretical insights based on an understanding of the reading process and the teaching of reading therefore prompted me to collect more data using structured interview questions to elicit opinions on some of the abstract and theoretical concepts related to the book development. Focusing on “the production of meanings” (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2013, p. XX), without a clear understanding of power relations within society and how this impacts on the data being collected can lead to false understandings and misinterpretations. Rather the “critical researcher-as bricoleur” uses traditional methods while at the same time striving to clearly demonstrate their own place in the network of relationships which are the focus of the research. Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg (2013) state:

The bricolage can be described as the process of getting down to the nuts and bolts of multidisciplinary research. Research knowledges such as ethnography, textual analysis, semiotics, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, historiography, discourse analysis combined with philosophical analysis, literary analysis, aesthetic criticism, and theatrical and dramatic ways of observing and making meaning constitute the particular disciplines and peer through a conceptual window to a new world of research and knowledge production (Denzin, 2003; Kincheloe & Berry, 2004; Steinberg, 2011).

(p. 349)

In this instance I have suggested that when the data did not include discussion of issues which I believed were of importance to educators and the wider society I developed more specific questions and initiated further interviews. I did this with an understanding of the power relations between the community and the wider society. I realised that these issues
were not of paramount importance to the Aboriginal people in the communities or they would have commented on them. I have therefore attempted to show what was important to the Aboriginal people who were making the books by foregrounding the issues which were mostly commonly discussed by them across the communities. However, in asking for specific information I have also been able to provide the reader with the views of the Aboriginal people on the issues that are perhaps most important to the wider society. There is a sense in which “bricoleurs come to understand research method as also a technology of justification, meaning a way of defending what we assert we know and the process by which we know it” (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2013, p. 352). My understandings of educational issues and priorities in education systems across the nation, especially as they relate to Aboriginal communities, have helped me to develop understandings about the critical issues that need to be addressed in order to change the educational outcomes for Aboriginal students.

My personal experiences with the participants and my professional knowledge can be seen as contributing to my theoretical sensitivity and may be seen as a positive factor influencing my analysis of the data (Smith, 1999). Furthermore, the issue of reflexivity is addressed by clearly revealing my role as both researcher and participant observer in this study. As a case study it allows for a rich and multi-layered collection of data which is open to multiple interpretations by both the reader and the researcher. In this case, as the researcher I was able to bring my own experiences to support the evaluation of the data. During the course of the research project I was also in constant contact with Pat Smith discussing and reviewing her progress and in some cases made suggestions about what she might do in the next development session. I think this contributed to the quality and richness of the data collected, and its analysis, as the process provided all of us with a reflective tool.
The benefit to the research is that there were established relationships between the participants and myself, as the researcher. As part of our normal working relationships we regularly discussed many of the issues, which have been addressed as part of the research. I analysed and coded the tapes of Pat’s work as she progressed and was able to engage her in discussions about the workshops she was conducting. The coding was done by generating broad categories which were then further refined and related and linked by their attributes. The patterns which emerged reflected commonalities in the opinions of the participants across sites, as noted by Creswell (2007):

Perhaps the most popular analysis procedure, also mentioned by Wolcott (1994b), is the search for patterned regularities in the data . . . Making an ethnographic interpretation of the culture-sharing group is a data transformation step as well . . . The researcher draws inferences from the data or turns to theory to provide structure for his or her interpretations. (p. 162)

Validation of the data was addressed using a framework with four primary criteria described by Creswell (2007) as credibility, authenticity, criticality and integrity. Credibility and authenticity were addressed by the fact that the participants and sites were not selected by the researcher using the criteria discussed earlier and were part of a project to develop local books in Aboriginal communities. This ensured that the data collected was not the result of purposive sampling by the researcher herself but rather was directly related to the aims of the project. As stated earlier, the Aboriginal people in this project were drawn from many geographical and social groups, their connection to the project being through their relationship to educational sites in particular communities. Criticality and integrity were assured by the rigorous analysis of the data and the detachment achieved during the process of analysis as well as by the publication of two peer-reviewed papers during this time. As
Cresswell (2007) states: “Peer review or debriefing provides an external check of the research process . . .” (p. 208). The feedback given to me during the process of publication helped me to refine my ideas and to critically reflect on all aspects of the research, including the coding of data and, especially because of the broad base of some aspects of this research, the literature review.

**Limitations and Significance of this Study**

This is an ethnographic study and no claim is made for its replicability, rather it is an opportunity to carefully observe particular people engaged in a particular project at a certain period in time. The policies that have shaped the education systems in Australia and defined how and what Aboriginal students will learn and how Aboriginal people have made sense of this situation may be revealed through the similarities and common themes that can be observed across sites in the statements of the participants. The participants in this research reflect all levels of educational attainment as community members: Aboriginal Education Officers/Workers, teachers, parents and students were all represented at some time during the data collection. The composition of the groups at each site also changed from time to time over the period the data was collected as community members, students and others “dropped in” to some sessions but not others. The thick description that has been developed is therefore of a unique situation.

The significance in this study lies in the opportunity to listen to the opinions of Aboriginal people regarding an issue which educators in Australia have deemed to be of the utmost importance. There is almost no research which has canvassed the opinions of Aboriginal people about the education of their own children (Freebody, 2007; Foley, 2008; Tatz, 2009a). This study has its focus on the relationship of the learner to the text and is not
built on a deficit model examining an individual’s skills and understandings but rather the nexus (Bernstein, 1990; Scollon, 2001) between the discourse of school and the discourse of home. Hopefully this research will support educators to think about the development of effective reading pedagogy which recognises the importance of the relationship of the community with the school when selecting texts. Defining culturally appropriate texts requires culture to be closely examined as Bourdieu (1971) states: “Culture is not merely a common code or even a common catalogue of answers to recurring problems: it is a common set of previously assimilated master patterns . . .” (p. 192). As such, close attention should be paid to how Aboriginal culture is portrayed in the school.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have outlined the various contexts in which this case study was conducted and described the methods by which the data was collected. The ethical considerations have been discussed and the main issues have been addressed. The data collection methods and analysis have also been presented. The data was collected through video and audiotapes of sessions and interviews which were transcribed. Each case study site experience was then crafted as a narrative. The validity of the data was assured by a multi-method approach using crystallisation as a way of examining various perspectives gathered over both time and space. Finally, the data was analysed by coding and then developing and refining categories for organising and discussing the data.

In the following chapter I present the data as a collection of stories from each site then in the following two chapters I discuss the data and how these stories contribute to an understanding of some of the views Aboriginal people have regarding the education of their children. I have provided a framework for the discussion developed from my analysis of the
data. This framework was developed by moving between the data, my experience and the theories that informed my understandings of the field (Foley, 2002). In the following chapter I present the stories from each site and then in chapters Six and Seven I discuss how together they tell a “collective story” (Richardson, 1990).
Chapter Five: Local Stories – Laughing in the Face of Violence and Poverty

In this chapter I introduce four narrative case studies of the four communities, Dua, Rua, Tolu and Va as they responded to the development of the community writers’ resource that One Mob books was trying to develop. Each of the narratives is accompanied by an interview with participants from that site and excerpts from interviews with Pat Smith as she worked on developing the kit and the books which each community was producing. Finally, I present some interviews and personal communication with Pat Smith that explain her motivation and vision for this project.

The four educational communities chosen by Pat for this project included three from major cities in two states, Dua, Rua and Va, and a site in a regional area, Tolu. These local communities included Aboriginal people who were local at that moment in time but who often related to, or grew up in other parts of the country. The participants included school students, community members, Elders and some teachers but in most cases the participants were Aboriginal Education community workers employed by schools to support Aboriginal students. The Aboriginal Education community workers were in most cases the people who were being supported by Pat Smith to develop books for One Mob Books. All of the groups were aware that Pat Smith was trying to develop a kit or resource which would support future book development and that it was this project that they were being asked to comment on and evaluate.

At all the sites for this case study the participants had a connection to the school as Elders, Aboriginal workers, teachers, parents, students or community members and they were involved in some way with the development of local books. The case study encompassed a project that was firmly focused on providing at least one opportunity for
Aboriginal people to share their views about what was important to them in the education of their children, especially in relation to the teaching of reading and the development of literacy.

When selecting the sites Pat had made contact before the project began, sometimes meeting the participants at the site. After these recorded sessions she also continued to work with the groups or individuals, such as at the site at Dua where two students produced a book. At each site Pat visited these sessions were recorded using both audio and video and I then transcribed these tapes. Before the third series of One Mob books was published the groups at three of these sites also participated in interviews and some of the participants from the three sites also met together to complete their final drafts. I had visited all the sites except Tolu but I also met some of the participants from Tolu at that final meeting. Up until this time Pat had worked with individuals or small groups to develop their stories but this was the first time she had worked in this way. In order to develop a resource to support book production she had sought out these four sites and was hoping to attract community members to create local stories. The aim was to pay those who attended to write books and Pat also ensured that the copyright of the book would remain with the authors. However this was a new experience for Pat and she approached it with some apprehension, not quite sure how to set about this new project.

Dua

Dua was the first site that Pat had arranged to visit. This school was focused on supporting Aboriginal students and although it was open to enrolment from all members of the community most of the students were Aboriginal. The school had very low numbers and the class sizes for primary and secondary were very small. It was situated in an urban area in
a large city not far away from the second site, Rua. The first meeting was at the school in a
conference room with a large conference table and in one corner a large tank containing a
Murray cod. I attended the first session that was recorded and it included introductions
around the table and then separate discussions about the first two series of One Mob Books
that were lying on the table. Sitting around the table were Uncle Terry, an Elder from the
community, parents Shari and Richard House, One Mob Books workers and a board
member, as well as Laura Smart, the Koori Educator from the school. I was there with a
colleague as researchers from the university evaluating the project and, of course, Pat Smith.
Pat introduced herself and talked about her work and how One Mob Books was the result of
a wish to get Aboriginal students to engage with literacy. She said that some Aboriginal
Aunties had first suggested to her that she should develop a kit so that people all over
Australia could make the same sort of stories as those produced by One Mob Books.

During the discussion around the table Uncle Terry commented, “until you can get
that teacher to understand our culture then this’ll be a success” (Dua, Tape: 1:1:1). He also
stated:

. . . I can understand what you are doing with this. . . and I think the best
way you are going to get a result would be to meet some of the 15 or 16
year old students and call them into a meeting and say well look, ‘What do
you think of these?’ and let the kids tell you what they think, not what you
want to drum into the kiddies, ‘cause it doesn’t work that way. . . If I was
still going to school I wouldn’t be interested in reading this I’d want to read
what that white man has written, because that’s the world we live in we
don’t live in this world. (Dua, Tape: 1:1:1)
After a morning tea break introductions continued as adults and children wandered in and out, read the books and chatted. This session dissolved rather than ended as no other community members came to the meeting. The next day some community members came to the school and Pat started to talk with four of them about one of the One Mob Books. As on the previous day, adults and children came and went and stopped to chat with Pat about the books. She discussed how the books were made and some of the technical aspects but a phone call prompted a break. When Pat went to take the call there were comments about the room being airless and the session going on for too long, however the mood shifted when Uncle Terry joined the group and talked about his views on culture and making books. He also addressed the parents “You’ve got to support your children.” (Dua, Tape: 1:2:1). After this session Pat spent time at the second site Rua and returned the following week.

During the next two days Pat met with parents and again with Laura but, as in the previous week, quite a lot of time was spent waiting. During lunch one of the parents talked with Laura about the issues at the school. Pat was acting as a scribe for a story about the Murray cod in the fish tank, which was in the same room. They looked at the fish as they wrote the story, and then used the digital camera to take photos of the fish. Pat showed one of the parents how to use the camera and they discussed a book they might write. Uncle Terry was to be interviewed by students in the presence of the teacher and some parents. He talked to the children about his life and where he grew up and his feelings about the injustices of the past and the way forward. The students and the One Mob Books staff recorded the interview. Also during these two days another parent joined in the group discussion. On one day the group went outside to watch students performing an Aboriginal
dance and took pictures which were then discussed and viewed again with the possibility of book making.

The following week was much the same. Pat discussed making a book about Uncle Terry with one of the teachers and Shari House, a parent who came to almost every session. Adults and children also tended to walk in and out of the room each day. At times Pat discussed possible books or started to write out stories. She did not visit the site for another week but when she returned she again talked with Laura Smart, the Koori Education worker, and asked her what she would wish for if she could wave a magic wand. Laura replied “Preferably Koori teachers and if not Koori teachers, culturally experienced teachers” (Dua, Tape: 5:1:1). She then went on to define the support she would like to have if she was going to produce local books “Ever seen Black Chicks Talking (Purcell, 2002) . . . seeing people sitting around a table, having a laugh, showing how they got to it or celebrating what they’ve produced . . . that would be beneficial” (Dua, Tape: 5:1:1).

Over the next two weeks Pat had only a few sessions at this site and spent quite a lot of the time with Uncle Terry talking about his life and his views on the project and education for young Aboriginal people. He talked about education and how he thought some of the issues could be addressed: “What’s the answer to all this? I thought don’t take the education to the kids bring them to the education” (Dua, Tape: 5:1:2). He suggested that the students should be taken away for a weekend or for an educational camp. He discussed books that could be made and the students’ interest in writing raps. He also talked about Aboriginal activism and the Freedom Bus. Sebastian, a young Aboriginal man, was introduced by Laura and one of the school staff as a person who might be able to contribute to a book for the students. Sebastian talked about activism and the history of the local Aboriginal people and then Uncle Terry asked some questions and joined in with comments.
about black leadership today. Discussion continued about the young students’ rapping and Uncle Terry said “Get the kids motivated” (Dua, Tape: 5:1:2). Laura elaborated on this comment and all agreed that this was important.

Discussion then moved to family and Sebastian’s son who was taking medication “for ADHD”. He then discussed his wife who he said was an Aboriginal woman from central Australia and that she was an artist. He discussed who she was allowed to teach to paint and then referred to Aboriginal lore and stated that she was not allowed to teach boys. Sebastian described his wife as a “full-blood” and the conversation about her included reference to her successful struggle with alcohol. This conversation ended when a teacher entered and began to talk about one of the parents and the children who had just gone home.

Uncle Terry then talked about his pet lamb story and how it could be told. He said, “it’s a spiritual story” (Dua, Tape: 6:1:1). Then he talked about a poem his daughter had written and then about his health, his diabetes and how he nearly lost a leg. He talked about the bible and religion and continued to talk about Sebastian and his family when Laura entered with a little boy, Scott, who had needed to be removed from his class. Scott talked to Uncle Terry and then he read the One Mob book Me and My Mum with help from Pat and Uncle Terry and after successfully reading it twice asked if he could take it to his teacher. He then read another of the books Having Fun at School which was much harder for him. He then asked to return to his class. Pat and Uncle Terry talked about Scott’s ability to read and how children learn to read. Uncle Terry talked about one of his teachers and how he learnt at school. They then started to make Uncle Terry’s story about Sally the lamb.

There was only one more session recorded at this school and no books were produced from these sessions. The final session was again a discussion about what to do next with the books that were being written. Pat found this site very challenging and later
she did produce a book for the third series, *Dreamtime at the ‘G*, with two senior students from this site but she used the familiar process of setting up opportunities and providing a lot of personal support for the two students to photograph and write about a subject which she also helped them to select, in this case football.

**Interview Pat Smith: Dua**

When she started on this project at Dua Pat had gone to the schools selected by the education department as having a high Indigenous population. She had thought that community people would come but nobody came. Those involved were Uncle Terry, who sadly passed on during the project, Shari and her husband Richard House, and Laura the Koori Educator. Some others came when they could but the average number had been only three or four a day. “I had this vision that the whole thing was a failure . . . because I couldn’t . . . because it wasn’t working” (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06). She said that even though it was well advertised and they were paying a participant’s fee, still no one came.

I figured out that no matter what I did I was not going to get . . . community people to come regularly to our sessions . . . I’ve got theories about that, I think life gets in the road of . . . doing regular things . . . particularly . . . with the endemic poverty, lack of opportunities, grandmothers minding kids . . . At first I thought there’s something the matter with our model, there’s something the matter with how we’ve set this up to do it. (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06)

At the end of these sessions Pat reflected on the challenges: “I thought ‘What are we missing?’ and it was only . . . after three or four weeks . . . I realised that OK, no matter what happens sometimes you’re not going to get community people to turn up” (Interview, Pat
Smith, 1:11:06). Also when asked what she thought could be done to get community members in to work on the books Pat stated, “Well I gave up on it . . . the workers are going to be the ones that deliver the community writers’ kit to the community” (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06).

Rua

As Pat was initially visiting both Dua and Rua during the same weeks she was also making comparisons about her processes and seeing what worked and why. Rua differed from Dua because as well as a strong Aboriginal enrolment it also had a range of students from other diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Pat felt that there were fewer issues to deal with at Rua than at the Dua campus and that sessions were not disrupted by crises in the school (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06). More importantly, at Rua the principal had allowed her to work closely with two Aboriginal Education Officers, Kay Mairey and Paul Mackenzie, and also with Shirley Roberts, another Aboriginal community worker.

At Rua the meetings took place in the Indigenous Studies Room, a very spacious airy and bright room with a wall of windows and a galley kitchen. The room had computers and plenty of small tables which could be joined together for larger groups. The walls were covered with Aboriginal artwork produced by the workers and students. In this very welcoming space there was plenty of room to set up the camera and recording equipment in a way that made it hardly noticeable to those working in the room.

At the first session Kay Mairey, Paul Mackenzie and Shirley Roberts, all Aboriginal Education Officers, and Charmaine, a parent at the school, with her youngest child Evelyn, were discussing the One Mob books when Kay began to talk about how much her young sons had enjoyed reading some of them at home. The same group were at the following
session but this time Evelyn, who was a pre-schooler, was “doing” Kay’s hair when she asked Kay to read her the *One Mob* book *Me and My mum*. The books were then discussed and Pat read one of the books to the group. Kay suggested brainstorming on the whiteboard as a way to start thinking about the stories they might like to write. Brainstorming then continued until the end of the session when the group broke for lunch.

Over this first week the same group of people formed the central core of participants across the four sessions that were conducted. In the session following the initial brainstorm the group discussed aspects of the text, such as the audience and structure, and Pat used the *One Mob* books teachers’ guides to prompt discussion of these aspects of the text. During this session a mother from the school joined the group for a short while and then returned again the next day when Kay started to suggest a book about Aunty Shirley. She described it as showing Aunty Shirley asleep in her car after a hard day and emphasised the fact that as all the students know Shirley really well they would therefore enjoy the book. The discussion about book writing and teaching reading continued with a focus on what was needed in the books to support reading.

In the following session during morning tea, Kay talked about the ideas she had contributed to the brainstorm. She talked about growing up in Bourke and how it was special for her even though she thinks it now has a bad reputation. She recalled how as a kid she just focused on her friends and going swimming so she now just focuses on her positive memories. She also mentioned that Bourke always had dignitaries visiting. She recalled Mother Theresa and how she brought nuns to work in Bourke. Pat and Kay then discussed Fred Hollows, the wonderful ophthalmologist who had done so much work in restoring sight in Aboriginal communities. Because he had made a connection with the people of Bourke he was buried there after his state funeral.
Aunty Shirley then talked about the car she had bought and driven in Broome in the rain and how much she had loved the experience. Charmaine talked about shopping on a budget and the challenges she faced in enrolling her kids in school and organising shopping and washing with her limited means. In the final session that first week Pat developed a role-play interview with Shirley with the idea of learning how to interview someone for a book. This was followed by discussion about giving the questions to the interviewee first and other aspects of the interview process, such as making sure that everyone took turns in asking questions. Charmaine then suggested that everyone write something using the same title to see what language would come out of it. All agreed that it would be for a beginning reader and they would use a *One Mob* book to find a pattern such as “At Rua we . . .” They then agreed to work on some ideas for the next session.

Over the next week, during several sessions, the same group started to develop stories under the headings of *Little Fullas* and *Big Fullas*. Most were *Little Fullas* titles. On one day students entered to talk with Kay, and Charmaine suggested the title “What I want to be when I grow up” and then “Me and my tidda” based on the pattern from the *One Mob* book *Me and My Mum*. A discussion developed about the term *tidda* as Charmaine wondered whether it needed to be explained but Shirley and Pat were both in agreement that it shouldn’t be and that *whitefellas* would have to look it up for themselves (Rua, Tape: 2:3:2). Charmaine and Pat then jointly constructed “Me and my tidda” discussing the choice of words and the subject matter which was what me and my tidda share. They discussed the ‘punchline’ which was that they share everything except one thing – they don’t share underwear. Charmaine offered the word ‘gumbies’ as a synonym for underwear but Kay didn’t know the word so they changed it to ‘jocks’. They also, line by line, discussed the illustrations or photographs that they thought might support the text.
Kay asked Pat, “Is it easier for them to pick up a word . . . within the text or is it harder on its own?” Pat answered that children learnt to read by talking about the text and learning sight words by repetitive exposure to them in the texts that they read. Pat also talked about strategies such as telling the young student to get his/her mouth ready to say the first sound and to look at the picture cue for contextual support with more difficult words. Pat suggested that it was easier to start by developing stories for the younger readers, so using *Having Fun at School* as a pattern they started writing another text using high frequency words. When Shirley returned to the group accompanied by a young student, Charmaine read *Me and My Tidda* which Shirley enjoyed and she then offered ‘jowies’ as an alternative to ‘gumbies’.

The next day the same group met again and Pat handed out information about the project and the participants read through the contracts for participating in the project. Kay talked about the Arts Council website that informs Aboriginal people about their rights concerning art and cultural knowledge. Some parents and students joined the group and discussion about the project continued. Charmaine then read *Me and My Tidda* as yesterday the group had written this story and *Our Aunty S*. Pat talked about high frequency words and how the pictures carried the meaning of more difficult words. There was then further discussion about how to get yarns from the Elders. Charmaine read *Our Aunty S* and one of the mums said, “I like that” (Rua, Tape: 2:4:1). Charmaine said that her favourite was ‘What I want to be’ she then read the draft. The group discussed the pictures which would support the text and they continued their discussion about the proposed books.

In the next two sessions there was discussion about emailing digital photos and airbrushing and everyone had their photo taken. One of the mums, Shelley, who had visited in the last session joined in the discussion about the local pre-school and some of the books
in the *One Mob* second series like *Wanja*. Charmaine brought up the subject of the wages that weren’t paid in the past and how there are categories into which some people may not fit. Shirley said that some of her family were removed and that she doesn’t know who the members of her extended family are (Rua, Tape: 2:4:3).

The first session this next week started with Kay, Shirley and Charmaine inserting photos into their book about Aunty Shirley. Kay and Shirley then left to go and take photos of children and Charmaine and Pat discussed starting sentences with ‘and’. Pat said, “I don’t worry about what teachers say because if it’s natural Aboriginal English I just let it go” (Rua, Tape: 4:1:1). Kay and Shirley returned to view the book and Pat started work with Shirley discussing the cultural knowledge for her book which would be included in the teachers’ guide. They discussed the meaning of ‘Aunty’ but this then developed into a four-way discussion about connecting the printer and downloading some software. Shirley and Pat also discussed some activities that could be used with the book.

In the following session the group expanded to include some other staff from the school and a representative of an educational charity. Kay talked about literacy and what she felt the purpose of the Community Writers’ Kit would be for her. There was some discussion around the table then Charmaine said, “What kind of language do we use? We did a whole day of just talking . . . “She also corrected someone’s use of the word *Koori*, saying, “We’re not Kooris here” (Rua, Tape: 4:1:2). There was talk about the work of the charity in Cape York and this then turned to discussion of a newspaper article about the rapper who developed the book of raps in the second series of *One Mob* books. Aunty Shirley read her book aloud followed by a discussion about how it was made. Accompanied by laughter, Pat said, “Aboriginal people have had to figure out what white words were for 200 hundred years . . . you’ll figure it out by the story” (Rua, Tape: 4:1:2). Sharon then read
"Me and My Tidda" followed by a discussion about some books that had been written for young children in the Wagga area. Pat said, “Our books have to have national resonance” (Rua, Tape: 4:1:2). In the third session on this day Shirley and Kay started to work with Pat on the book. Then as the afternoon lengthened the camera rolled on…on an empty desk, phone calls were overheard, people walked in and out of shot and someone used a computer. Work was over for the day but the camera rolled on unnoticed.

On the following day, Charmaine, Kay and Shirley were all using computers to put a book together. Pat was looking for something and Charmaine suggested jokingly that it might have been stolen. She commented, “Come on Pat you’ve been around us long enough, you know the ways of our people” (Rua, Tape: 4:2:1). Pat then needed help with the computer which Charmaine provided. Again the camera rolled on an empty desk as people walked in and out of shot to use the computers in the room but focused on the task at hand, seemingly unaware of the camera. The group discussed activities for one of the books over lunch and Kay talked about why “What I want to be” was more inclusive for all children than "Me and My Tidda" as the latter was gender specific.

On the following day, as well as Kay, Paul and Shirley, two of the educational consultants from Dua joined the group which I also joined with my colleague from the university. Aunty Shirley discussed her book and everyone looked at the photos that had been taken to support the development of the illustrations. The discussion then centred on Uncle Terry from Dua and how the kit could provide a model of how to make books with the cooperation of an Elder.

In the following week Aunty Shirley went with Pat to visit Elders in a local nursing home. They discussed the project for making books with the Elders and one of the Uncles gave Pat his story to read out. It was about his 21 years of service in the army and how he
was brought up in an orphanage after his mother died. Another Aunt, born around the 1930’s, then talked about her grandmother who took to the road with her and two boys after her grandfather sold their farm. She said her grandmother worked in the shearer’s sheds and got food from the hotels in the towns they passed through. This story of her family had been published and she stated how important education was for her kids. She had nine children and now has more than 27 great grandchildren.

Another Aunt was born on a reserve to a family of 18 children and she said she was young to be in a nursing home but that she had suffered from bad health. This Aunt was only in her early sixties but had already overcome a stroke and a heart attack and was now improving in health. She said her family had moved to Goulburn when she was about five and her mother, who was one of the Stolen Generations, had kept moving because of the welfare. She said they had a three-room house with nine girls and nine boys and her father had to have two jobs just to feed them all. They had also lived on the outskirts of Sydney where she said her mother had had trouble using the washing machine because she was frightened of it. As an adult, Aunt had moved again hoping to find her mother’s people because she had promised her mother to look for the family. She did find some relatives and finally she found the whole family and her brother was able to take her mother to visit some of her mother’s sisters. The visit to the nursing home ended with another Aunt singing *It’s a Long Way to Tipperary*, everyone applauded her and one of the staff kissed and hugged her and told her how wonderful she was.

The next day Shirley talked about how she liked to take photos and record her life and her family’s life. Pat also talked about her own mother and how she had failed to record her mother’s life even though it was so interesting that a famous Australian poet had written a poem for her. Kay worked alone while Paul and Pat discussed the layout of the books.
People came and went and the discussion continued while the three of them continued to work and talk. Some teenage boys joined the group and started to look at some of the *One Mob* books on Aboriginal sporting heroes like Preston Campbell. The boys seemed to be engrossed in the books and oblivious to the adults in the room.

In the final week at Rua there were three sessions over three days and, while people came and went, the core group was still the Aboriginal Education community workers, Kay, Paul and Shirley, and Charmaine one of the mothers from the school. In this last week they discussed the photos, illustrations and layout for the two books they had produced during these sessions. Eventually three books were produced by the Aboriginal Education workers at the Rua site.

After viewing and transcription I felt a rich picture had been developed but as the participants had been focused on a practical task there had been little opportunity for them to discuss specific aspects of the purpose of developing the Community Writers’ resource or the reasons for writing local books. I therefore organised some interviews with Pat to assess her opinion of the workshops she was trying to develop. I also asked Pat to help me organise some interviews with the participants and those at Rua, Tolu and Va agreed to answer the questions that I put to them. In the case of Rua and Tolu the questions were sent to them with a tape recorder and they made audio recordings of their answers and sent them back to me for transcription while the participants at Va were recorded when I was present asking the questions and prompting for answers.

**Interview Pat Smith: Rua**

At Rua the principal allowed Pat to work with two Koori educators Kay Mairey and Paul Mackenzie, and also Shirley Roberts. Pat had wondered what was wrong at Dua but
said that she realised, after three or four weeks that sometimes it was just not going to
happen and people from the community might just not turn up. She made some changes and
realised how the Community Writers’ kit might best be developed. At Rua she also felt that
there were fewer issues to deal with than at Dua, so sessions were not disrupted by crises in
the school (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06). When asked what she had changed at this site
Pat stated:

I was still treading water even at Rua . . . I sort of jumped straight into ‘this
is how I do stories’ instead of doing all that rich tapestry, discussion and
talking and all of that, laying down all of that ground work, um, that
communities do, that people do . . . when they’re telling stories . . . knowing
each other and everything . . . The community, the workers are going to be
the ones that deliver the community writers’ kit to the community . . . The
community workers just do know, they know. If they’re trained they’ll
know how to do it whereas, um, training up people who haven’t got the
mindset of education, or who haven’t got the mindset of the school, how
schools work . . . it’s never going to work . . . The community workers are
the glue between the community and the school. (Interview, Pat Smith,
1:11:06)

**Interview Rua**

This interview was recorded at Rua as Pat sent the group both the tape recorder and a
copy of my interview questions. After the interview the tape recorder was returned to me for
transcription. Kay and Paul recorded their answers over two sessions with Shirley also
present at the first session. Before starting to answer the interview questions Paul said he was not taking responsibility for anything anyone said on the tape (laughter.) The first two questions were about what made children good readers and whether reading stories about local people and places would help to improve reading:

I think it’s reading material they can relate to or are interested in. Familiar faces. Being read to, not much time spent on reading to children in class. Family members can help. It’s sort of like role modeling isn’t it? Seeing people that they know. They mightn’t have a book but they do know the stories, they relate to the stories that they know about, because oral things still happen in the community. Remember the day all the big boys came in they went straight for all the sports books. Some students were looking in a book about the local area and one, who knew about his family connections, was telling the other about his connections to the people in the book even though it might have been hard for them to read, they were discussing the book. (Interview, Rua)

The following two questions were about the importance of having Elders and community members involved and how this could be done. Paul said, “I think it’s very important.” (Interview, Rua). He pointed to the fact that if they hadn’t visited the old people’s home with One Mob Books they wouldn’t have known about or heard the stories from the old people. Kay said, “Their experiences are so different to ours . . . it fills in that whole gap for us about . . . to understand who we are as Aboriginal people they’re the ones who keep us connected to identity and our culture . . .” (Interview, Rua). They talked about how their grandparents and relatives had told them stories to explain their lives and the meanings of life as well as cultural stories. They commented that it didn’t seem to happen so
much now because there were not a lot of old people around and the children didn’t sit and listen like they used to.

They also stated, “It will be different wherever you go” (Interview, Rua). They suggested that festivals like NAIDOC day might provide opportunities to involve the community but they also said that sometimes you get information “in bits and pieces from different people and places like a jigsaw” (Interview, Rua) and that you have to bring the pieces together. “You’re not going to get people to come to you, you got to go to them. It’s like a . . . If you want . . . to collect a story . . . give them the computer to take out to Woop Woop. Go to them. You’ve got to have an interest, the environment has to be friendly and welcoming if you want people to come to you, they have to feel welcome.” (Interview, Rua).

Kay pointed out that, “a lot of Koori people move ‘round now.” She said that, “We don’t even come from Rua, so the notion of communities has changed” (Interview, Rua). Paul then commented, “You need to have a really good understanding of the community you’re working with and who the Elders are” (Interview, Rua). They also stated that attending events was really important so that people know who you are by sight even if you haven’t really met personally. Paul said, “You actually have to be involved in the community.” He joked, “That’s another thing, you have to be related . . .” (laughter) (Interview, Rua).

The focus of the next two questions concerned the development of a Community Writers’ kit, what it should have in it, and the criteria for selecting someone to implement it. The first comment was, “They mightn’t know the name but now they’ve seen the face . . .” (Interview, Rua). They stated that it didn’t matter if the person was Indigenous so long as they were involved in the community and that a trust and understanding had been developed. Paul said, “It’s about being patient in a lot of communities. Like my pop if he didn’t know you he wouldn’t let you inside . . .” (Interview, Rua). Paul also suggested that
the kit should include “Paper and a pen” (laughter). “People might not have the skills, the tape-recorder . . . not every Aboriginal house has a computer in it” (Interview, Rua). They also said that what was in the kit needed to be able to meet those needs. “It could have a program that takes you through step by step. A resource disk. The kit would be something that gets you started. Pat we’ve got to sign off . . . we’ve got to love you and leave you . . . so long Aunty” (Interview, Rua). The first session ended here but when Paul and Kay returned to the questions they continued to talk about what needed to be in the Community Writers’ Kit. They felt what was needed was:

- A range of things because different communities have different resources . . .
- a CD program that could take people through writing a book, practical things like a little booklet where they could just draw things and write themselves if they couldn’t use a computer. A guide that would be easy to use, not only people working in schools, just people living at home and it’s easy for them to use themselves. (Interview, Rua)

They also thought you needed some sort of resource book so people could contact other people who were writing books or where they could go to seek stories from Elders. Having a tape-recorder in the kit was especially very important for them. Kay said,

- It’s so valuable . . . Aboriginal people have oral histories and that . . . to be able to use this type of technology like the tape-recorder and the video you . . . are able to capture a whole lot more than what you would normally do if you were trying to get someone to write the story. (Interview, Rua)

So tape-recorder, video, a program for the computer and booklets for people who could put it together . . . and as Paul said, “of course Aunty Pat’s contact details for when you get stuck.” Kay agreed, “You can’t leave people on their own. They’ve got to have
someone there that they know they could ring up or email . . .” Paul said, “Someone you can ring and have a yarn to . . . and get some advice” (Interview, Rua). Kay concluded:

That’s probably the most important thing . . . When people have come into communities a lot of times they come in and take something and then they go away . . . and our people are left with nothing because their stories have been taken . . . for Koori people to know that there’s somebody there that they . . . feel comfortable enough to ring somebody and ask them about how you go about writing a writers’ kit. (Interview, Rua)

Paul suggests the final safeguard is, “Maybe a contact how to get their stories copyrighted . . . so that the stories . . . can never be taken” (Interview, Rua).

The last question was about training and if any would be needed for someone to use the Community Writers’ kit that they were envisioning. Paul summarised the needs,

People who knew how to work the computer, tape-recorder and video who could go out and show people how to collect the stories. Maybe the stories need to be stored in the Aboriginal Institute in Canberra as well. People would need computer training, maybe some training around story writing. You would want to hope the kit was community-friendly . . . keep that side of it as simple as you can so you wouldn’t have to spend more money. Don’t need a PhD . . . to use it. Not make it too difficult for just say, people like me to use. (Interview, Rua)

Kay said, “It feels like a bit of trial and error . . . we really need it to be community-friendly” (Interview, Rua).
Finally there was an invitation to make any comments about the Community Writers’ Kit, participation in the workshops, or anything else related to the project. Kay began by saying,

Personally I’d really like to thank and just acknowledge . . . the great contribution Pat has brought on board to doing this project she gave us the confidence . . . she instilled in us the belief that we could actually come up with things and do things . . . there was no judgment, there was no boundaries, it was up to us to take things on and she guided us . . . Our people need people like Pat, who respect us and respect our culture . . . you can’t put a price on what Pat’s done . . . and how she’s done it. (Interview, Rua)

Paul added,

She definitely has been priceless in her sharing of knowledge and her wisdom . . . taught me a lot . . . She’s been great . . . I’m going to get all sentimental on you now Pat. I think a community writers’ kit would definitely be an advantage for any community . . . it’s definitely needed in the schools . . . there’s still a lot of knowledge from our Elders . . . to be taught to the kids, maybe this is one avenue of doing that. We’ve definitely seen it work here with “Our Aunty S” and how well the kids responded to that, it was just amazing. I definitely think it’s going to be a very powerful resource and definitely looking forward to using it in the schools. (Interview, Rua)

Kay further elaborated on the contents and context in which the kit would be used,
The community writers’ kit needs to be adaptable to each community . . .
you need to be able to pick it up and carry it with you and go down to
people . . . at the missions, in the park, down on the river . . . It’s all about
going to the people and giving them the opportunity . . . Whether it’s . . . all
packed up in a carry case . . . the people that are responsible for it are also
looked after by the community of who will be involved in the community
writers’ kit whether it’s us here in Rua or . . . there’s this network of support
. . . having those valuable people on board to be able to give you the
direction and that to take the writers’ kit and the stories to where they need
to go . . . The stories need to be told in the voice of the people, in the
language of the people . . . We’ve just been recently talking about language
acquisition at our school . . . Indigenous people have come to schools and
we still aren’t achieving the way . . . what is expected of us, maybe now we
need to change our thinking around and . . . it’s not about Indigenous people
going language acquisition but it’s about us using our language . . . as a
platform to say well we’re gonna make sure our kids read and write in terms
of who we are as Indigenous people and our culture . . . if we talk . . .
without our “h’s” . . . well that’s a part of our culture and I don’t think that
it’s something that can be changed like that . . . Indigenous people might
say “kangaroo there” . . . that’s the way that we speak to each other and we
know that that’s our language . . . and we need to look at where our
language has come from and what it is and use that as the basis of our
stories . . . That’s who we are as Aboriginal people we can’t change that
we’ve got to use those strengths . . . (Interview, Rua)
Paul then commented,

Koori kids seem to respond better to the way they hear language being spoken at home than the way it’s being spoken at school . . . they tend to struggle with it a bit more at school because that’s not how they hear it at home . . . Uncle and Aunty. A big advantage for the writers’ kit is to maintain that language that we speak . . . in some of the books that we read to the kids and some of the language that they write . . . it doesn’t go with the story and even tryin’ to read them books as an Aboriginal person, to the kids . . . that’s not really how it comes out…it isn’t the way I’d say ‘em . . . I’d probably relate more to a book that has “unnit” and “brother” . . .

(Interview, Rua)

Kay agreed,

. . . when you hear that word “which-way” . . . Aboriginal people use it in the context of . . . “What’s goin on?” . . . that base of language that Aboriginal people have that should be a foundation . . . of the stories that we get out of the communities. Something we look forward to. (Interview, Rua)

Paul finished the interview by saying, “I hope y’s get at least one or two things out of what we’ve said . . . It’s been a great experience working with Pat . . . hopefully we’ll see you soon Aunty” (Interview, Rua). Kay then concluded, “This is not the end, it’s only the beginning . . . we look forward to what comes next.” (Interview, Rua)
Tolu

In all Pat had spent five months in the city visiting the sites at Dua and Rua to set up the project and then recording sessions there but here at Tolu, an isolated community, she had only six weeks to complete the work so Pat felt that every day had to count. Tolu was the only site that I did not visit during this project, but here too she was allowed to work with Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEA) and Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers (ACLO). The participants were drawn from several education institutions in this small country town. Some participants were working with small children and others with secondary students and adults. Pat felt that she needed a very tight lesson plan every day with warm-ups and ice-breakers and that she also wanted to question the participants about the activities to see whether they would work for them as models to use in the Community Writers’ Kit. The change from Dua and Rua was that Pat was now feeling more confident about how to work with groups to develop a story. “They were champing at the bit to write stories but I held out. For the first two weeks we did all of these exploring what we know, all sorts of different areas of life, ‘What’s your favourite movie star?’” (Interview, Pat Smith. 1:11:06).

In the first session Pat went straight into games like ‘hot seat’ and ‘hot seat pick a bag’. She used a stopwatch to stop all talking for a minute and then used soft toys for throwing and asking questions. She also introduced the pay forms and sign on sheet and the contract for One Mob books. Pat started with a nickname game, throwing soft toys, then moving into favourite footy teams, favourite TV programs, choosing your favourite Vegemite/peanut butter, tea/coffee, bath/shower. In the next game a volunteer observed the room and was then sent out of the room while Pat made changes which the rest of the group had to note, then the volunteer returned and had to pick the differences. During these games,
which Pat was playing with a group of women, Alex, Eleanor, Nell and Lilac, Rick and Val came in and joined the group. All of these people were Aboriginal Education assistants, teachers or community workers.

Pat introduced the digital camera with the idea of taking pictures in pairs to accompany a press release for the Koori Mail and the National Indigenous Times. These photos were also to accompany the individual biographies that would be developed from the games played earlier. Pat took a group photo, scribed a joint construction of the press release and asked the question about what a community like Tolu needed in a community writers’ kit and what would be done with it. One of the answers offered was to make “local culturally appropriate readers… that will enhance Aboriginal literacy in primary and secondary schools” (Tolu, Tape: 1:1). Comments reflected a desire to engage students by providing materials that reflected students’ own experiences.

In the next two sessions of this first week Pat introduced a game of ‘Celebrity Heads’ followed by a game in which one of a pair read out three things, only two of which were true, while their partner sat in the ‘hotseat’. The rest of the group then had to ascertain which one was the lie. Rick took the ‘hotseat’ first with Pat as his partner, then the game continued over these two sessions. Nell and Lilac followed then the rest of the group also took turns and at the end of the third session individual pictures were taken of each member of the group. In the second week the group, which again included Rachel, Lilac and Nell, was also joined by Bruce. They played a warm-up game, throwing the soft toys and asking and answering questions. The group was again introduced to the observation game and Pat talked about how to build up a biography. She suggested ideas like, “your favourite smell, your favourite holiday spot, your favourite chore, something that makes you mad” (Tolu, Tape: 2:1). The group discussed these suggestions and Pat recorded their thoughts.
The next week’s session took place in a kitchen in Tolu with Rachel, Val and Nell cooking. Using the One Mob book *Emu Egg* as an inspiration they were going to make a cake from ostrich eggs. Rachel was draining the white and yolk from an ostrich egg, while Pat helped one of the group operate the camera. Rachel talked about what she had done to extricate the yolk and white and what she was going to do with them. Nell then took over the job and the talk revolved around both the ostrich egg and the camera and how to improve the filming. Rachel was making the cake while Nell and Val drilled a hole in another ostrich egg with an electric drill. Rachel described Val as “a white djin with black skills” (Tolu, Tape: 3:1). The group continued cooking while Val emptied the egg and Rachel’s finished cake came out of the oven.

In the following two weeks Pat worked with the same group and discussed the difference between Little Fullas and Big Fullas and brought some *One Mob* books and teachers’ guides for the group to read and discuss. Pat also explained the new Australia Council requirement to fill in a form which needed to be witnessed to verify that each participant was Indigenous. A general discussion then developed around the river, especially about fishing in the river. Each member of the group was given a map of the river and a list of questions. Pat offered prompts about fishing and other aspects of life on the river to help spark some ideas about each individual’s experiences. On a large map of the river each person tried to mark three places that were special for them. At the end of the session the group had lunch while Bruce showed a film and discussed what he had seen in the bush. Lilac’s partner also joined the group for lunch and Pat talked about the book the group was planning and the experiences they expected to have at Lake Dhurrun on the guided visit they had planned for the following day.
During the visit to Lake Dhurrrun the guide talked about the history of the area, about how the area was opened up by government and how stations were developed. He also discussed the fossil remains and the giant fauna that had once lived in the area. The group looked at sketches of giant fauna and also looked for ancient fireplaces in the landscape. This group, with the help of a photographer, produced a book about Lake Dhurrrun which is beautifully illustrated with black and white photos. However some members of the group also produced two other books. One was a personal story by Rick Jones about his life growing up on the edge of a mission and the other was developed by Rachel and Nell with a very young boy, Luke Blaxland, from the school where they worked. Luke told his story to Rachel and Nell who scribed for him because he was too young to write it himself. *Fathead the Bird* is a yarn told in the storytelling tradition of the tall tale with both humour and the desire to engage even at the cost of the truth.

**Interview Pat Smith: Tolu.**

Pat said she used the same protocol in this isolated community where she was also allowed to work with Aboriginal Education workers. There was less time so she planned tight lesson plans for each day with warm-ups and ice-breakers. Every day had to count so:

We explored the extent and the depth of the experience and knowledge that the AEAs and the ACLOs had and we valued that over academic achievement which anyone might or might not have. We valued the local knowledge, the cultural knowledge and the experience of their lives; their lives now and earlier (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06).
I asked Pat if this group had written any stories and she replied that they had wanted to start straight away but she had focused on exploring and slowing down the process. She also talked about the Community Writers’ kit and what it would contain.

That’s built in to the Community Writers’ kit workshops. How to use a recorder, a digital camera, a video camera, download things download photos, input the camera into the computer or laptop computer, get on the net find things that we need to know very quickly (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06).

Pat said because the river was central to life in that area a story was planned in which all participants told a story that related to “what the river means to me and why” (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06). The school workers from Rua had already given a presentation at Broken Hill on their use of the kit and they were keen to share their knowledge with other communities. The groups at Dua and Rua were also helping each other to produce stories and some of the workers were going to present at a conference.

**Interview Tolu.**

The answers to the interview questions were given by Eleanor, Nell, Rachel, Lilac and Rick. The same questions were asked in each interview at the three sites so the first two questions were again about what made children good readers and whether reading stories about local people and places would help to improve reading. The group suggested that what was needed was:

. . . lots of support and having engaging material available to them at the right level, and encouraging them to have books at home so that they will want to read. Information that’s relevant and they have to like it. Stories
about local people – the kids can identify with them. It helps children to learn about their own culture and history and sense of place. They are more likely to want to read about people and places they know. It’s a good way for them to get to know their own community. Yes, because the kids already have knowledge of it and they can extend on that knowledge. (Interview, Tolu)

They were then asked about how community members could be involved and the importance of involving Elders:

Yes it is important because they’re the ones with the wisdom and the knowledge and who give us the advice. They’ll lose their culture if it is not passed down. It is important that the children know that the Elders want to share and pass things on to them.

It gives the Elders a say in Aboriginal education and they learn something about the resources in the school for teaching English.

Being a good facilitator, communicating, go down, go out . . . have a barbecue, share our experience, pleasure and satisfaction and tell them how good it is being involved in the children’s education. Give them a good feed. Fill their moogles up. That’s probably the million dollar question. You can get involvement by talking but getting participation is different but the informal approach plants seeds of initiative. (Interview, Tolu)

The following questions were about the development of a Community Writers’ kit, what it should contain and the criteria for selecting someone to implement it.

A member of the community is better, someone they feel comfortable with and can go to, and if things go wrong you can blame them (laughter) . . .
Personal contact, having a yarn, getting feedback. Different people . . . one organiser . . . probably too much for one person to take it on, if something goes wrong it’s easy for people to jump on one person. I think it is much better to have a group of people answering to the community. On the positive side it’s great to have a picture of a whole group of people being involved in helping to improve Aboriginal education. Warragee. Big books, small books, CD-ROMS, cassettes, a lot of Elders’ stories, good pictures, good instructions, handy hints to help people get started to be a community writer, a tape to go with the book that you could listen to. The writers’ kit . . . at Tolu we just told stories about what we were interested in and that’s good but we could have stories about early childhood, things about family life or kinship. That is really important because kinship circles are very, very important. Put a theme up and come up with a particular message, it could be funny. Maybe there could be DVDs made because the community people don’t have to read it. (Interview, Tolu)

The last question asked if any training would be needed for someone to use the Community Writers’ kit that they were envisioning.

Some training in computer skills, usin’ these little gadgets, you’d need to have a kit and have a little workshop, what’s in it, why it’s there. And don’t make the menu like you need a PhD to read it, and making sure the person doing the training knows what is in the kit and why it is there. Warragee. The person would need organisational skills, I think they’d have to do training on organisational skills. The person would have to be assertive or they won’t probably like working with communities, cause it could be a
little bit threatening because you’re going to have disagreements. You need to be able to program it. A genuine interest (laughter) in reading and writing in general and using high tech devices like the one I’m talking at now . . . and computers. Communication kills.

Gee that’s too long isn’t? Absolutely, you wrote a book there. (Interview, Tolu)

The final comments were made by Rick as a response to the invitation to comment on any aspect of the development of the Community Writers’ kit, participation in the workshops or anything else related to the project. Rick was alone when he made this response:

I really enjoyed being part of the group it made us form a bit of a bond. We actually got to learn a bit more about the community. My part in the writer’s workshop . . . yeah that was great, I just loved every minute of it. I was sorry I didn’t get to go to all the favourite spots. I love the talking bit, I don’t like writing much . . .’d be only too happy to be involved in any sort of writing workshop . . . that is going to help our children in education, especially in the literacy area. Literacy is talking and listening as well as writing and reading. (Interview, Tolu)

At Va, we have AEAs ACLOs and Elders but no other community members, they all know about the culture of the school and they know their communities very well. As a result their input about what is needed in the kit is invaluable. For instance they are
pressing for a very friendly website . . . The kit will most probably be virtual but could also be a manual, CD and video (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06).

At Va the workshops were planned to be spread over four weeks and the participants were drawn from several schools in the Va area, which is on the outskirts of one of Australia’s largest cities. Most of the meetings were hosted by one of the schools and held in a meeting room. The group was made up of seven AEAs from both primary and secondary schools: Tate, Diane, Alison, Marie, Kate, Ngaire and Sue and an Elder, Jenny White. The group was also sometimes joined by other visitors. As at Tolu, Pat moved straight into developing biographies telling the group that because the questions have been wrong “the rich knowledge you have isn’t being accessed” (Va, Tape: 1:0). She told everyone why the biographies were being developed and how it would be done in a fun way with a focus on the important things in life. Pairs were then formed in order to interview each other. In the following session the principal again welcomed the group and discussed the importance of developing local books. Pat also talked about using familiar materials in teaching reading because, “Driving you along the reading path is this truck called meaning” (Va, Tape: 1:3b).

In the next session everyone took a turn to discuss one of the One Mob stories that they had read and they commented that children even up to year 10 enjoyed being told stories. The discussion then turned to a One Mob book which was based on a story which was familiar from the oral tradition, the story of the Min Min lights. The group discussed the different things that they were told about the Min Min lights when they were children. Aunty Jenny said that some Aboriginal people believed there was something in their own bodies which drew the lights. Ngaire mentioned that they were sometimes seen as guiding lights but that others believed you must not follow them. A teacher who had joined the group for this session then commented, “Aboriginal kids . . . they are the ones who can tell a
really good story . . . total engagement of kids in the class, better than anyone else, and I think it’s because a lot of the families are telling stories” (Va, Tape: 1:3). Kate pointed out how the cultural notes in the teachers’ guide could help the reader with unfamiliar terms. Pat agreed and emphasised that there was no glossary as “Aboriginal people had to figure it out for 200 years” (Va, Tape: 1:3). Diane then started to talk about the *One Mob* book *Fishing for Crabs* and Aunty Jenny said she could remember Uncle fishing for twelve hours. She said she remembered when everything was shared.

At this site it was agreed that the group would make a book about healthy food, *Good Tucker, Bush Tucker*, as an educational charity was keen to have a book that discussed that issue and the group was happy to support it. These last two sessions were focused on making that book. Pat discussed using high frequency words in the text and explained that small children don’t have to be able to read the book independently. She then asked the group what they thought ‘bush tucker’ might mean for this story. This lead to a discussion of the totems of the local people: possum and bat. They commented that the totems wouldn’t have been eaten and the group then went on to talk about plants like Lilli Pilli that could have been eaten. Pat had brought a basket of produce made from indigenous plants which the group opened and explored then the discussion turned to lemon myrtle. It was agreed that the setting for the book should be a supermarket but that bush tucker should be brought into the story. The group also discussed the illustrations and the desirability of getting a local Aboriginal artist to illustrate the book.

In this last recorded session the story had been outlined and some of the written text had been finished, but the details of the layout, written text in speech bubbles and thought clouds and pictures were still being discussed. I attended this session with the group, as did
several of the participants’ children. The group dictated the text, decided on the names and ages of the two main characters and Pat and I scribed. Ngaire then took over as the scribe as the process continued. Each double page was done on the whiteboard and photographed ready for compilation as the actual book.

**Interviews, Pat Smith: Va**

I asked Pat if she had had a plan that she was implementing at Va and she replied, “I started doing the protocols for Va about this time last year” (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06). One of the Aboriginal Education workers in the project from the school at Va was already an *One Mob* book author from an earlier series so Pat had already been at the site and was known to some people in the community at the school. Pat said that at Va she planned that the workshops would take place three days a week for four weeks and she thought there would be five stories coming out of Dua and Rua, four from Tolu and one from Va. She also said that because all the participants at Va were education workers and Elders that they knew all about the school and the community so their advice about the kit was invaluable (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06).

Pat had organised the visits to Va through the local public education office and she thought her time at Va had worked well and that the participants had enjoyed the workshops. She said of her time there:

I thought it worked well, the girls all loved it . . . I was able to refine what I did at Tolu exploring what they knew, what their experience in life was about. At the centre of the workshops was this bio that they all put together.

(Interview, Pat Smith, 5:12:06)
Pat believed that developing biographies in the workshops had helped to develop confidence in writing. She was also able to share some of the work that the group at Tolu had done, particularly Lilac’s, which showed what could be done with a personal biography with photos. Pat said that everyone could see the value of doing this for their families. “Then of course, Marie brought in her great grandmother’s bible” (Interview, Pat Smith, 5:12:06). She felt that using the biographies in the workshops gave the group a focus.

After we explored them orally we put them down in point form . . . their dreams, their goals their families, their experiences in life . . . none of it was scary . . . I’m making a big generalization here, but sometimes some of them (referring to AEAs) don’t have a lot of confidence in their ability to put things on paper. (Interview, Pat Smith, 5:12:06)

Pat said she had chosen the activities that were fun and that built confidence and self-esteem before starting to write books because it had helped to develop the skills needed. She thought that the drama activities leant themselves to it.

She reflected on her practice from Rua to Va and said, “I was guided by what they were telling me” (Interview, Pat Smith, 5:12:06). She used activities which she also expected the AEAs could use. She experimented, some activities working better than others, “It’s the discussion that leads to yarns.” (Interview, Pat Smith, 5:12:06). She considered that what she did at Va was what she would do at any other site, “I’ve never been one to do that sort of activity much, you know . . . I didn’t realise that the activities themselves were the story, were it . . . that was it. That was what we were there for” (Interview, Pat Smith, 5:12:06).
Interview Va.

The group was together in a beautiful venue in the city, which was offered for the project’s use by a large accountancy firm who were providing their support and expertise. Enjoying the hospitality and the views of the city from the conference room were Ngaire, Sue, Tate, Diane, Alison, Marie, Kate, Jenny and James, Marie’s teenage son. At this session I was also present with Pat Smith and two other young girls, daughters of two of the participants. They were working on finalising their book *Bush Tucker, Good Tucker* so I was able to take part of their session to ask the same questions I had sent to Rua and Tolu.

Firstly I asked what they thought would help kids to be really good readers. Jenny suggested: “At a very early age start ‘em off . . . you’ve got to get a kid interested in it, they can’t just pick it up . . . you’ve got to read to them” (Interview, Va). Ngaire then continued, “If you can get a child to interpret a story out of a picture you can get them to learn to read” (Interview, Va). Then Diane elaborated on their comments:

The way I taught her to read . . . I got all the stuff from the cupboard and all the stuff that this young boy had shopped for then I involved her in it so as I was reading the story she was that child doin’ the shopping. (Interview, Va)

I prompted, “Older kids?” Diane responded, ” Find out what their interest is” (Interview, Va). Jenny added, ” Show ‘em how to break the word down” (Interview, Va). Then James offered, “Breaking it down into syllables” (Interview, Va). Ngaire then said: “I’m self taught . . . and I taught all my children . . . and they’re all good spellers except one” (Interview Va). She continued to talk this time about the importance of the Elders, “Without our Elders we have nothing” (Interview, Va). Diane then added, “They have the knowledge . . . They’re our first teachers” (Interview, Va). Jenny and Ngaire then exchanged views on teaching reading and engagement in learning.
Jenny: Writing a story about our people . . . in the past it interests them and it also educates them, it’s not only a story it is an education as well.

Ngaire: We also don’t pick ‘em up for their broken English . . . we do not correct ‘em at that time until we’ve got more confidence from them . . . We are Elders . . . we are Aunts, Mums, counselors, you name it, sisters whatever.

Jenny: Different eras . . . we had our own schools. Aboriginal people weren’t allowed to go to white schools . . . coming into the 60’s and 70’s . . . what’s happened to that little glory Aboriginal people had then? . . . that sort of slowed them down.

Ngaire: Going from the bush to the big smoke . . . that was hard.

Jenny: We need more Aboriginal teachers.

Ngaire: We also have teachers, non-Indigenous . . . some of them are still coming through our schools that have never seen an Aboriginal or an Islander in the same school as themselves. (Interview, Va)

I then asked the group what they thought might be the best way to get community members involved in a project like this and how they would choose an organiser. This exchange between Ngaire, Jenny and Marie followed:

Ngaire: You can’t access them without an AEA.

Jenny: It’s important to know the person, eh . . . you can’t get anyone to talk that doesn’t feel right . . . When you’re with someone you know it’s like a flower, the petals, everything opens up.

Ngaire: At the time when I met Pat I introduced Pat to all my students and my students actually liked Pat . . . I have total respect from all my students
If you just go in and say I’m only here for Aboriginal students then you’ve segregated your kids, don’t do it to ‘em, it’s not fair.

Marie: Some of the teachers don’t even know who’s Aboriginal and who’s not. (Interview, Va)

The discussion then turned to who had the right to tell Aboriginal stories and Jenny and Ngaire agreed that sharing stories was necessary to promote culture.

Jenny: Our kids read Cinderella, Snow White . . . What’s the big deal here? . . . it’s knowledge for the children.

Ngaire: What does it matter what nationality a person is that reads . . . a story out of a book . . . why can’t we just share it . . . How are we supposed to make non-Indigenous people aware of our culture if we do not share it?

Jenny: This is my argument exactly . . . share the knowledge. How are people going to understand, how are they going to find out these things if you’re not going to put it out there for them? (Interview, Va)

The last question was about training and if any would be needed for someone to use the Community Writers’ kit. All agreed that the kit and training had to be ‘hands on’ (Interview, Va), This comment was followed by a discussion about copyright and photocopying parts of the kit and the following comments were made by the group: “Can you put a stop on it? Our cultural background is all about sharing. You need something to explain what the languages are” (Interview, Va). Jenny then said, “I’m from Nambucca. Our totem is the dolphin so the people that’s goin’ to tell you stories here are goin’ to tell you about fishin’ . . . so different areas . . . have got different stories . . . you’re going to have a beautiful collection it’s just that you’ve got to have training there” (Interview, Va). Ngaire responded, “All the clans now are interested in other clans they’re all learning about each
The whole group then contributed the following comments about their views on the development of a resource for community writers.

Local knowledge, people that have been involved in that kit, people should be accessing them . . . but it’s not to be used and abused, it needs to be used in the right way . . . this is something really special; it’s sacred; say you sent a kit to Nambucca Heads Primary school, well then ask someone . . . to go to Nambucca primary school and give the teachers an example . . . you can’t just send out a package. (Interview, Va)

They suggested that community members and Aboriginal Education workers “go through the kit yourselves and then you see what’s appropriate to use . . . because each area is totally different” (Interview, Va).

Finally there was an invitation to make comments about any aspect of the project. The Elder, Aunty Jenny, who had been part of this group commented:

I think that this is a fantastic idea . . . I know kids out there today, beautiful kids, that can’t even write their own name . . . This here has really got me in . . . This has been one of the best things that has happened for Aboriginal people for years. (Interview, Va)

The whole group agreed with Aunty Jenny’s comments. Diane also commented: “All our kids, not just our Aboriginal kids . . . a lot of our kids are urbanised and they need to be aware of their culture . . . Education is the way to go for our kids now, and a lot of our Elders are feeling more positive” (Interview, Va). Marie also commented about a project she had taken part in and her disappointment in the way she was treated, “They took our stories and they were supposed to give us copies and they never did . . . and my mother died and she was sat there for hours doing that and all she asked for was a copy, and it’s too late”
(Interview, Va). She also addressed Pat and said, “You’ve taught us things we could never
know about” (Interview, Va). Pat assured the group that they would all be given copies of
the book they had produced.

I commented that, like many non-Indigenous teachers, I wanted materials to be able
to teach authentically about Aboriginal culture. Ngaire then replied, “All we learnt was
Captain Cook” (Interview, Va). A vibrant discussion about teaching Aboriginal history and
culture followed, punctuated by laughter, then James, Marie’s teenage son said:

When you have a book I noticed . . . they were seeing really little writing
and no pictures so they were putting it away . . . For little kids I think
they should have bigger writing so it’s easier for ‘em to see and . . . it
shouldn’t be such a long book because if they see it’s a long book . . .
they’ll say no point in reading it, it’ll take ages. (James, Interview, Va)

Discussion continued about older disadvantaged students, especially boys. Ngaire
commented, “A lot of the young ones these days . . . a lot of them have hard times, and they
don’t know how to deal with them and there’s no one to listen” (Interview, Va).

Ngaire also said:

I think it’s great that we have workshops like this . . . I thoroughly enjoyed
myself . . . like we’ve all shared stories about when we’ve grown up. We all
shared stories about our fears, our joys, our sorrows . . . and I think for me
personally it’s been good. All I want from it is a copy . . . a copy of what
I’ve done . . . I’ve enjoyed working with community members . . . I trust Pat
. . . some of us have said things that nobody else knows . . . have come out
that have been hurtful . . . It’s made a special bond between us. Pat is part of
our extended community and our family. Because she has come in and accepted everyone for who they are . . . us no questions asked. I thoroughly enjoyed this because everything came from our hearts . . . (all agreed).

Regardless fail or pass this has been a triumph for us . . . it is a positive thing . . . (all agreed). Pat on behalf of our community I would like to say thank you (Interview, Va).

Interviews & Email Pat Smith

During the three personal interviews I conducted with Pat Smith about her work she discussed each of the sites and talked about how she had started to develop the books which had lead to this project. She also discussed the protocols which she observed when approaching communities. I asked her what had inspired her to develop a Community Writers’ kit and she replied that it was a practical reason and talked about the importance of training in the use of technology. Pat said that producing a story was hands on and labour intensive and that she could only be at one place at a time so she thought that a kit which reflected input from a number of communities would “help kids learn to read in their little local school” (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06).

I then asked Pat to explain what she meant by ‘doing the protocols’. Pat said this described how she approached each community:

I ask them if they think it’s a good idea, ask them can I do it on their country . . . It used to take me ages to do it because I didn’t know my way round.

But now I know if I go to the AECG or a land council . . . listen, if they want to modify it . . . if they think that we can do it, but do it so that they
have input . . . so that’s how we do it. This time I went to a regional AECG meeting so a lot of representatives were there and I did that last year so this year I just went straight to the Education Department . . . Doing the protocols is good manners. (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06)

Pat also talked about her interest in producing local books and how it had started in the classroom. She was a Special Needs and Reading Recovery trained teacher who had worked in a country school with a large number of Aboriginal students.

Because with Reading Recovery you have to have books for the kids and I couldn’t find enough books for little Jim . . . so we just started making books, he’d tell me about his goin’ fishin’ with his Pop and all of that and we’d just make books about that. That’s how it started and then the Education Office got wind of that . . . Marie Clay says ‘you can only read what you know, what you know about’ . . . If I put a bit of quantum physics down in front of you you’d revert to sounding out letters . . . not reading for meaning, you’d try to decode. And so it works with little kids learning to read, like it’s so screaming obvious that if they aren’t reading about stuff they’ve got the concept of . . . about their own experiences . . . they haven’t got a mindset for what they’re reading. So of course they’re not going to read for comprehension they’re just going to decode words, that’s a waste of time . . . So I’d just try and stay two or three books ahead of him. (Interview, Pat Smith, 22:11:06)

The Indigenous Education Officer from her local Education office had originally worked with Pat on a project to develop books for Aboriginal students, and this eventually became One Mob books. Around this time Pat had undertaken a professional course to bring
her teaching qualifications up to date and one of her lecturers had given her some valuable advice.

The one absolutely smart move I made was to go over and talk to him at the University . . . He said ‘For God’s sake Pat’ . . . I’ll never forget him, I love him for this . . . ‘there are enough books written by white, middle aged, middle class women . . . for black kids. Let’s not do that . . . If you want to write books that are going to be relevant for Aboriginal kids go out (to the community) . . . and hang out there for a couple of weeks, talk to some of the Aunties, talk to some of the Elders, talk to some of the community. And find out: A. If they’d like you to do it, if they’d like you not to do it but to help them do it and then you be the facilitator of it. You’re not writin’ books for black kids.’ I still remember it, it was 1993, that was the best bit of information . . . I thought, ‘Oh, okay, I know I have to do that’ . . . That was the first community that I got to know. (Interview, Pat Smith, 22:11:06)

I also asked Pat how she came to know the groups of Aboriginal people who wrote the books in the first two series of books.

I didn’t know . . . I didn’t know, but there was a mission out there . . . and people had been brought there . . . By going out with, they call them AEWs, the Aboriginal Education Workers . . . to meet parents of the kids at the school, to meet Aunties, Uncles . . . and I just knew that I had to immerse myself . . . Whatever was on in the community, if the . . . AEWs would take me, I mean I had to get their trust first, the three girls, the three women . . . looked me over. I didn’t get out . . . the first day, or the second day, or the first visit or the second visit either. It was about the third visit when Jan King said to me one morning, ‘Do you want to come out to the mission with
me?” They checked me out as well . . . not in a ‘right, I’m checking you out’. It’s just a subtle . . . here’s another white woman . . . That was 1993. When I go into a new community, if I haven’t been recommended . . . by Aboriginal people from other places . . . like places I’ve been . . . Now if I said at Va, ‘I’m goin’ down to . . . Nunnawal country’ Aunty Diane Thring would say, well you know my Aunties are there, my Uncles are there, I’ll tell them you’re coming. You just say you’ve been working with me . . . so it’s like a bush telegraph. When I went to Tolu . . . Rachel Williams who’s an AEA at Tolu, she said ‘I’m Rachel Williams’ and I said ‘Hey listen, I know Shelley Thomas . . . ’ She said, ‘She’s my cousin.’ . . . I said, ‘Shelley wrote this book.’ I’d take One Mob books with me, because there would be no way in the world, if I went to a remote community . . . there would be somebody either an author or an illustrator of one of the books would be a cousin, rel, you know and so then that’s an entrée now. So that breaks down barriers, that gives us, One Mob books, that trustworthy status, that we’re not seagulls. Do you know about seagulls? You (white people) fly in, pick up the food, and fly out. That’s what they call white fullas who come into their communities and just do their anthology and all that shit. Their ethnography job . . . (And get their PhD out of it . . .) (laughter) and get their PhD, yeah. Go in get their PhD and get out. They call them seagulls, because they’re always white. White fellas fly in, pick up the food, get out. So we’re not seagulls and they know . . . because One Mob books has been around for heaps of time now, in terms of anyone doing anything in Aboriginal communities we’ve got that credibility as well. We’ve got that,
and we’ve always done the right thing. We never make a move without the Elders, and the community saying this is the way to go. (Interview, Pat Smith, 22:11:06)

I then asked Pat how non-Indigenous people who want to meet Aboriginal people could make contact in a way that was acceptable to Aboriginal people.

The (Aboriginal Education Assistants) AEA would take them, that’s the way . . . once the AEA, they’re sort of like gatekeepers, the AEAs know the community they work in intimately and absolutely totally . . . Not Land Councils . . . not the (Aboriginal Education Consultative Group) AECG…they’re doing those other . . . higher level policy things . . . I suppose if you didn’t know your way around you’d go to the AECG and say something like . . . I want to go and meet some people in that community . . . and they’d put you on to the AEAs in some of the schools or they’d put you on to the Education Department office out there . . . That’s the other way you could go to the Aboriginal Medical service. Anyone who came to me I’d say . . . go to the local school ask if you can have a cup of tea with the AEA, put it down on the table what you want to do in the community, and ask the AEA for help. To take you by the hand into that community because . . . they’re the most studied, exploited, explored people on the planet, and they’re all suspicious and why wouldn’t they be? They greet a lot of people with suspicion now because they’ve been exploited. The AECG has the protocol . . . and I would imagine they would have some guidelines for people . . . The Australia Council, The Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander Arts Board . . . they’ve got all the protocols. (Interview, Pat Smith, 22:11:06)

Pat then went on to talk about the development of the Community Writers’ kit and especially of the importance of training in technology. Pat started by focusing her comments on one of the participants of the project:

She didn’t have an extensive education herself and so she’s got that classic, you know . . . ‘I’m not that flash at academic stuff’. And that’s a thing that I’ve had to overcome. In each group I’ve found the same thing . . . and so I decided the way round it was to do confidence-building things. I decided to focus on the thing that was going to be the most useful for making books . . . I focused on the digital camera, the printer . . . and my laptop. Now . . . (she) is keen to get the school camera . . . she’s figured out already . . . that she can make little stories for her tiny tots with them in the story, with little captions underneath, with the school camera. They were having a go. I said ‘You can’t break these things, have a go, do it, and it doesn’t matter’. (Interview, Pat Smith, 22:11:06)

Pat envisaged that users of the kit would need training in using technology. They would need to be able to take photos with the digital camera, download them into a computer and print them off. There would also have to be some core competencies that would be incorporated into a training program. For instance, the group at Va was unwilling to use email and requested all communication with Pat to be done by fax. Pat gave further details of the core competencies necessary to use the kit.

They should be able to receive and send an email, they’ve got to be able to take a photo with a digital camera. They’ve got to be able to download it
into a computer and drop it into a file and maybe crop it, turn it whatever
and drag it across into a file, which will be the software for the book. No
one’s ever going to be able to ring up and order a community writers’ kit. It
can only go . . . we’ll have to go into regions, train people up. We’ve got all
these people now . . . the trainers. They’ll have to get a certificate in a
workshop before they use the kit. (Interview, Pat Smith, 22:11:06)

I also asked Pat why she wrote the word “Elders” with a capital when referring to
Aboriginal Elders. She answered: “Because somewhere back in the last fifteen years an
Aunty would have told me to”. (Interview, Pat Smith, 5:12:06)

Pat sent this email to me while she was engaged on the last stage of the project,
which was halted at the request of the board of One Mob books. She had completed the third
series of books that she had developed at the sites in this project and she was by then
working with Kay Mairey who she had met at the Rua site. With the aid of federal
government funding Pat and Kay were expanding the program in another regional area,
Mosman. Kay Mairey had recorded a session with her young son Bobby and she was
working with participants to show how books could be both developed and used with young
children. Pat also talked about Marie from Va and reflected on missed opportunities at Rua
but also on her vision for the project.

Hi Kathy,

Only two weeks later I'm back with this . . . So, about participation and
engagement . . . it will be important for us to get information from our
workshop participants . . . on the increased level of student reading (of those
texts) and the students’ responses and opinions of the stories. Our
participants will have the technology and the skills to record this evidence in
a number of ways . . . (they) will be able to record kids, Bobby’s age, engaging with our little fullas' stories . . . I'm sure some of them will just need to see what Kay does with Bobby and they'll be right into it. I'll also get Kay and Shirley to talk to you about the presentations they've done on our behalf . . . especially the ones they've done without bothering me with any details etc . . . Chat to Marie on Thursday about documenting the work we did to put the O'Loughlin book together . . . Zoe is still at school but the other two drop in to see Marie every week or so. Marie kept every piece of work the kids did throughout that three or four months. The footage of those 3 or 4 teenage boys in the room on their own is at Rua I think . . . those kids were the usual Yrs 7, 8, 9 who were on (almost) permanent in-school exclusion . . . they mostly loitered round our room, played with all the technology, showed me how to use it all, and when they weren't punching each other and swearing, were a great asset. They would have been great to have in our group as workshop participants . . . I never thought of it but I should have . . . they would have been learning some things and teaching me plenty!! . . . and their teachers would have been thrilled to have them meaningfully occupied . . . and not in classes causing havoc. They really loved our sport stories and the yarns and of course the raps . . . I think they would have written great stories for the little kids . . . God! I have all these ideas when I've left . . . anyway I think we should explore these ideas in Mosman (on the days that we're not doing workshops). There's bound to be some similar wild lads up that way. We
already know Nigel East is coming to our final presentation . . . I'm sure more of the principals will also be there.

See you Thursday,

Pat (personal communication, email, Pat Smith, January 14, 2008).

Pat’s vision for this project was concisely described in an email she sent to the educational leaders at Va regarding the further training she had planned for the participants from the Va schools.

The benefits to be had from this initiative are extensive and long term. These AEOs will have far more confidence, classroom skills and presentation skills once they have completed Cert 4. I'm sure there will be opportunities in the future where you will have presentations or programs you want delivered into the community, particularly the local Aboriginal community and you will have well trained, local Aboriginal staff to do just that.

(personal communication, email, Pat Smith, January 24, 2009)

Summary

In this multi-site case study across four communities participating in the development of a community writers’ resource, the interactions of the participants and their responses to interview questions provided a rich picture of their communities and the issues related to developing local stories . . . and there was a lot of laughter in the face of violence and poverty. Where possible I tried to capture the individual voices of the participants to demonstrate the rich variety of responses. I also tried to capture the comfortable, familiar tone which was overlaid by gentle teasing and humour and regularly interspersed with
laughter. This was present in the video and audio recordings and I think it reflected the trust that many of the people in this study had for Pat. The communities were chosen because they had few social and economic resources and high numbers of students with low levels of literacy (Reeve, 2012; Vinson, 2007). They were also selected because they had Aboriginal students and one or more Aboriginal Community Workers. The four communities, Dua, Rua, Tolu and Va, all participated in workshops to develop books for the *One Mob* books project but each marked a development in the process for Pat and all contributed to an understanding of what their communities valued.

At all sites there was agreement that Aboriginal students needed to be engaged in learning and in the culture of the school. At all sites comments were also made about the importance of sharing Aboriginal culture. Ngaire and Jenny from the Va community and Laura from Dua also agreed on the importance of having school staff who understood Aboriginal students and their culture and at all the sites there were comments about the importance of local stories and language. Without due regard and understanding for an individual’s speech and social community it is impossible to make the school an inclusive and natural place of learning for all children, especially for Aboriginal children. Inviting young students into the world of the school, and the wider world, by firstly reflecting their own world in their own words is one way to engage young students and to help them to develop as readers.

In the following chapter I discuss how the stories told at these sites contribute to an understanding of what it means for Aboriginal people to tell their stories their way. I discuss the storytellers and examine their language choices and some features of their stories. I also explore the importance of their stories and some of the challenges involved in the production of local books.
Chapter Six: Telling our Stories our Way – “It’s About us Using our Language”

In this chapter I explicitly examine the development of authentic texts and the aspects of this development which are unique to Aboriginal communities. I examine the storytellers and their stories, both the literal meanings of the stories and the inferences they make. As Goodson and Deakin Crick (2009) noted in their work with adolescent Aboriginal students:

The negotiation of conflicting stories is one key characteristic of public conversation. To hear the voice of the ‘other’ is potentially to be enlarged in vision and understanding and thereby for the community to make better decisions. (p. 233)

I also examine two relevant features of Aboriginal storytelling styles: the language choices and the use of humour (Stanner, 1982). I then discuss some of the issues related to producing local stories. Underlying these stories is a bigger collective story relating to the poverty, disadvantage, dislocation and marginalisation of Aboriginal people. I therefore examine these issues as they arise in some of the stories produced by One Mob books.

Kay Mairey, at Rua, said of this project:

It’s not about Indigenous people getting language acquisition but it’s about us using our language . . . as a platform to say well we’re gonna make sure our kids read and write in terms of who we are as Indigenous people and our culture . . . if we talk . . . without our “h’s” . . . well that’s a part of our culture and I don’t think that it’s something that can be changed like that . . . Indigenous people might say “kangaroo there” . . . that’s the way that we speak to each other and we know that that’s our language . . . and we need to
look at where our language has come from and what it is and use that as the basis of our stories . . . That's who we are as Aboriginal people, we can’t change that. We’ve got to use those strengths . . . (Interview, Rua)

Kay’s words reflect the themes that developed as I transcribed and analysed the data gathered at these sites. One theme that emerged strongly was the importance of identity and how this was established through the use of language (Herbert, 2006; Hooley, 2009). The workshops and meetings Pat coordinated were all centred on language and those who participated were active in reflecting on the language choices they were making in writing their books. The authors realised both the power and the political nature of these decisions as Kay Mairey said, “The stories need to be told in the voice of the people, in the language of the people . . . ” (Interview, Rua). Kay also referred to the importance of “our culture” as the starting point for engagement in learning. She stated that, “we’ve got to use those strengths” to “make sure our kids read and write in terms of who we are as Indigenous people” (Interview, Rua). Kay was also very clear that education was “not about Indigenous people getting language acquisition” (Interview, Rua); it was about what some have called two-way learning (Harris, 1990).

As Kay inferred, in two-way education the Aboriginal community takes the responsibility for their children’s education, “We’re gonna make sure our kids read and write in terms of who we are as Indigenous people . . .” While everyone at these sites agreed that student engagement and academic success at school were important for Aboriginal students, giving voice to the community, recognising links to country and defining “their mob” were also seen as important issues in defining Aboriginal identity. Government policies and the resulting dislocation and marginalisation, poor health and poor educational outcomes for their people provided the context for many of the stories. Also, at all sites
indirect or direct reference was made to the legacy of poverty and disadvantage that Aboriginal communities have inherited.

The ideal that Kay envisioned involved Aboriginal people confirming their identity through the use of their own languages in schools and educational settings. Her opinion resonates with the opinions of other Indigenous people, both at these sites and internationally (Cummins, 1986; Kawakami & Dudoit, 2000; Restoule, 2005). How the contemporary use of language evolved relates to the policies and practices that forced language groups together when they were removed from their land (Schmidt, 1990). The role of the Elders and how Aboriginal cultural resilience can be demonstrated in the contemporary use of language (Eades, 2013) and this was also important to Kay, “we need to look at where our language has come from and what it is” (Interview, Rua). During this project nine books were produced for the third series of One Mob books which, together with the earlier titles, brought the total to 29 titles which were accompanied by three teachers’ guides. What Kay did not mention but what provides a vibrant focal point for all this discussion is the style of storytelling in which laughter and joking were used to engage and include the audience in both the oral and written texts that were being created.
Telling Our Stories Our Way

But our Aunty Sharon is way too DEADLY!

![Image of Aunty Sharon]

Figure 1. Our Aunty Sharon

The storytellers

Our Aunty Sharon has long, wavy hair. Every day her Mum says, ‘Sharon, have you brushed your hair today?’ ‘Yes, Mum.’ (Don’t look like she’s brushed it.)
Our Aunty Sharon drives a big white ute. She wants to drive it all over the place. (Where that sista goin’ next?) Our Aunty Sharon’s got a big smile . . . a cheeky grin . . . but she ain’t got no backfulla nose! (She got her father’s nose, eh!). *Our Aunty Sharon* (2007)

These few lines are from the first three double pages of one of the books produced by the group at Rua about one of the Aboriginal workers. The comments in brackets are made by two little characters, a frill necked lizard and a kangaroo, who make asides on each page using Aboriginal English, as does the main text. The pictures support the text, making it quite easy to read and from the beginning the language and themes in this text will be very familiar to most Aboriginal readers but may require both translation and interpretation for non-Aboriginal readers. “She’s just gammon. Nah. She growled me one day, real mean. But our Aunty Sharon is way too DEADLY!” Intercultural understandings are clearly required to understand even the obvious issue of identity but the “our” in the title tells all the children in that community, especially the Aboriginal children, that this story is about them.

The development of this story and all the others reflected ongoing cultural traditions as it was a collective practice at each site with ownership of the story. The choices made in telling the stories were left with the authors, the storytellers. This was because these authentic stories need to be told in the way that is natural for the storyteller; they need to be told in their own voices. The powerful effect of stories like these is underlined by Mary Beattie (2009).

Hearing these stories had the effect of greatly expanding all our horizons; they helped us to understand each other, and to develop not only our self-knowledge, but our intercultural knowledge and understandings. (p. 24)
However as Kay Mairey from Rua commented, when working in communities there can sometimes be issues with literacy which may prevent the sharing of stories with the wider community:

... Aboriginal people have oral histories and that ... to be able to use this type of technology like the tape-recorder and the video you ... are able to capture a whole lot more than what you would normally do if you were trying to get someone to write the story. (Interview, Rua)

Because the Aboriginal education workers had all received training in their positions they were able to make contributions to story development that reflected their familiarity with the issues related to the teaching of reading. However the adults in the groups who participated in the development of the books had a range of educational backgrounds. Some, like Kay, had tertiary qualifications or had completed secondary schooling, while others struggled with their own literacy. Pat commented on this aspect of the workshops as she talked about one of the participants, “She didn’t have an extensive education herself and so she’s got that classic, you know ... ‘I’m not that flash at academic stuff’. And that’s a thing that I’ve had to overcome. In each group I’ve found the same thing ...” (Interview, Pat Smith, 22:11:06)

The level of literacy in the communities is not the only challenge to be met when trying to develop local stories. Defining cultural identity (Interview, Va) is also a complex issue for people who may have been forcibly removed both from their families and the traditional languages, culture and land to which those families belonged. However Uncle Terry’s comments (Rua, Tape: 1:2:2) show his understanding of how traditional cultural organisation, in which particular Aboriginal people are the custodians of particular knowledge, is still reflected in contemporary communities.
Culture’s not just cooking . . . it’s talking, you know, if you have someone there that knows, especially . . . an Elder . . . not anybody can just get up and talk about Aboriginal culture, you know . . . You want to be honest in . . . that book . . . make sure that everything we do is honest. (Dua, Tape: 1:2:2)

When Uncle Terry says “someone that knows” (Dua, Tape: 1:2:2) he is referring to traditional practices in most Aboriginal communities where the rights of particular people to tell certain stories are acknowledged. Elders are seen as both the custodians and owners of that knowledge and pointedly Uncle Terry refers to those Elders as “talking . . . about Aboriginal culture” (Dua, Tape: 1:2:2) which offers a very rich picture of his view of contemporary Aboriginal culture as still being maintained by an oral transition based on kinship relations. Inviting community members and Aboriginal education workers to participate in writing local books confirms their specialist knowledge as storytellers within the educational institution and provides a way to honour that knowledge and to formally bring it into the school.

When I asked Pat why she had written the word ‘Elders’ with a capital ‘E’, her response clearly indicated her respect for the Elders as gatekeepers and custodians of the culture. “Because somewhere back in the last fifteen years an Aunty would have told me to.” (Interview, Pat Smith, 5:12:06). Ngaire talks about her role as an Aboriginal Education Worker and how she defines herself as an Elder within that role.

Ngaire: We also don’t pick ‘em up for their broken English . . . we do not correct ‘em at that time until we’ve got more confidence from them . . . We are Elders . . . we are Aunties, Mums, counselors, you name it, sisters whatever . . . (Interview, Va)
In many contexts the Elders referred to are not necessarily the Elders of the particular Aboriginal ethnic or language group who belongs to the geographical place. Like Uncle Terry at Dua, some of the Aboriginal people in the group at Va are also traditionally related to areas outside the city of which Va is a part. The comments about Elders refer in general to those people in Aboriginal communities who have the experience and knowledge which command the respect of community members:

Ngaire: Without our Elders we have nothing.

Diane: They have the knowledge . . . They’re our first teachers.

Jenny: Writing a story about our people . . . in the past . . . it interests them and it also educates them, it’s not only a story it is an education as well.

(Interview, Va)

For instance the One Mob stories Pet Crabs and Wanja One Smart Dog were written and illustrated by Aboriginal people from different parts of Australia. The authors and illustrators were from different Aboriginal cultural groups and from different generations. One of the authors had first-hand experience of the policies which have defined contemporary Aboriginal communities. The author, who grew up in the infamous Cootamundra Girl’s Home, tells the story of her dog Wanja, who lived with her on the Block at Redfern. She is one smart dog because:

Wanja would see a police van. Wanja loved to chase the van. Wanja loved to bark at the van. Wanja loved to bite at the wheel. The police van would drive away. (Wanja One Smart Dog, 2004)

As with other very simple stories produced by One Mob books this book has layers of meaning and as Uncle Terry suggests needs discussion with “someone that knows,” (Dua, Tape: 1:2:2). Knowing about the historical relationship between Aboriginal communities,
the laws, and the police who are mandated to enforce them requires knowledge about Aboriginal culture and history and how this is enacted by the state’s institutions in courtrooms and classrooms (Allison, Cunneen, Loban, Luke, & Munro, 2012; Harrison & Greenfield, 2011; Howard-Wagner, 2010).

The respect for the Elders is based on an acceptance that some older Aboriginal people hold traditional knowledge; they are able to both engage and educate. As Aunty Jenny says, “it’s not only a story, it is an education as well.” (Interview, Va). It is an education because their understandings about history, identity and culture can be passed on through story. This is what is valued, along with respect for the leadership that older people provide in the community. At Rua, Shelley responded to the information about the author on the cover of *Wanja One Smart Dog* which said she was raised in a girls’ home. She stated that she had been told she was not “Stolen Generations” even though she was brought up in a children’s home and removed from her family. Shirley then responded that some of her family were also removed and that she doesn’t know who the members of her extended family are (Rua, Tape: 2:4:3). They were telling their unique and poignant stories in that discussion and those stories were prompted by one that had already been published. (Rua, Tape: 2:4:3). This exchange exemplified how stories overlap, interlink and at the same time can provide a starting point for a new or parallel story. As Aunty Jenny said about the telling of stories:

> It’s important to know the person eh . . . you can’t get anyone to talk that doesn’t feel right . . . When you’re with someone you know it’s like a flower the petals, everything opens up. (Interview, Va)

The setting for *Wanja One Smart Dog* is an inner city suburb famous across Australia as a heartland of Aboriginal political resistance (Parbury, 2005), while *Pet Crabs*
is set in a coastal area famous for holiday spots and fishing. One theme is however common to both stories: the relationship of the Aboriginal community with the law. The author of *Pet Crabs* says that it is a story that was passed down to him from his father. In this story two “gubbuhs” (whites) watch “the old Koori (Aboriginal) lad” putting crabs into the boot of his car and they call the “Gungies” (police). When the Gungies arrive they ask the quick thinking man what he’s doing and he says they are pet crabs that he is taking for a swim. When they swim off the Gungies ask when they will return. The old Koori lad then says:

Did you think I said “pet crabs”? “Wet crabs” . . . I dropped those “wet crabs” into the water for a bit of a swim. Then he looked at his watch,

“Holy smokes! Is that the time? I’d better be getting home. My missus will be mad at me if I’m late for my dinner!” (*Pet Crabs*, 2004)

Again “someone that knows,” (Dua, Tape: 1:2:2) is needed to elaborate on the context, which is one in which the local Aboriginal people are struggling for land rights, including fishing rights. As Chase (2013) suggests, “When survivors or marginalised or oppressed groups tell their collective stories, they demand social change” (p. 71). Also suggested is that researchers do not often look at the audience and how it is influenced. This is a very important consideration in this book development project as the audience in an educational context will include teachers and family members from both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

At each site the development of the book was all about collaboration and sharing and also at each site the book development project was viewed as a group effort and the story was clearly seen to belong to the group. Each group saw themselves as a cohesive group or mob, formed around the production of the story as it reflected the lives of the people in the geographical place in which it was unfolding.
The traditional concept of collaboration in which members of the group were assigned roles through the kinship system (Mullins, 2007; Sutton, 1988) was strongly demonstrated in its contemporary expression across sites. The group at Tolu stated, “On the positive side, it’s great to have a picture of a whole group of people being involved in helping to improve Aboriginal education” (Interview, Tolu). In this sense the groups saw themselves as working on something they owned and that would bring benefit to their people but would also support them to share their culture with the wider society. Diane (Interview, Va) commented, “All our kids, not just our Aboriginal kids . . . a lot of our kids are urbanised and they need to be aware of their culture . . .” Mullins (2007) defines these concepts of collaboration and sharing as central to Aboriginal culture:

It is my contention that at the core of those sets of understandings whereby Aborigines feel at home with each other is a unique conception of what it means to be a person. This conception reveals itself in the colloquial expressions ‘mob’ and ‘boss’ . . . these structures are identifiable in situations as different as the communities of the Western Desert are from the towns of New South Wales and even cities like Adelaide. (p. 32)

So the storytellers are often, but not always, the Elders. They are, “the someone there that knows, especially . . . an Elder . . . not anybody can just get up and talk about Aboriginal culture, you know . . . ” (Dua, Tape: 1:2:2). The storytellers also know who they are and how they are related to the community. “Aboriginal people have oral histories” (Interview, Rua) but sharing stories is all about relationships. “When you’re with someone you know it’s like a flower the petals, everything opens up” (Interview, Va). These precious stories can be shared only if the storytellers are respected and allowed to tell their stories in their own voices and if the stories are able to unfold in their own way. This often means that
the stories will be poignant and embody important cultural values but that they will also engage the audience with laugh-out-loud moments.

**Humour as a survival strategy.**

While the heritage of poverty, disadvantage and marginalisation is a real part of all Aboriginal communities, their responses have often been defined by the use of humour. This is part of Aboriginal traditional life and it still finds expression in contemporary Aboriginal stories and interactions at all levels of society. As the group from Tolu showed when discussing who could best work with the community, “A member of the community is better with someone they feel comfortable with and can go to, and if things go wrong you can blame them (laughter) . . .” (Interview, Tolu). The question surrounding the authenticity of the name of the annual Melbourne festival of Moomba very well illustrates this use of humour.

The Moomba festival was named after an all-Indigenous performance but in the 1960s an academic publicly questioned the meaning of the word “Moomba” suggesting that the person who had provided the name did not really understand its meaning, or had intended to hoax the white population by suggesting the word meant “happy-get-together” (Kleinert, 2009). The person who had provided the name was Bill Onus, father of the well-known Aboriginal artist Lin Onus, and the latter took action to defend his late father’s memory.

Stung into retaliation at the racial slur on his father’s reputation – and the charge of inauthenticity leveled at the cultural heritage of the southeast – and Lin Onus sought to reclaim Indigenous control over Moomba . . . by
asserting that Moomba was indeed a hoax perpetrated against whites
(Kleinert, 2009, p. 353).

Lin Onus’ response reflects a traditional use of wry wit as, by suggesting that his father was perpetrating a hoax, he also defended his father’s memory as someone who knew his language and culture. This Aboriginal use of humour and mimicry was noted from the earliest days of the colony as demonstrated in the comments made in 1788 by Watkin Tench (2012) in his account of the first settlement of Sydney by Arthur Phillip. He commented about Baneelon (Bennelong) the famous Aboriginal after whom Bennelong point, the site of the Sydney Opera House, was named.

Baneelon expressing pleasure to see his old acquaintance, and inquiring by name for every person whom he could recollect at Sydney; and among others for a French cook, one of the governor’s servants, whom he had constantly made the butt of his ridicule by mimicking his voice, gait, and other peculiarities, all of which he again went through with his wonted exactness and drollery. (p. 137)

This wry humour is a feature of the data I collected. In many of the stories produced in each series of One Mob books, there is a sense of gentle teasing which is an inclusive practice that serves to define and strengthen the Aboriginal community as a group (Kleinert, 2009; Stanner, 1982).

This use of humour as a strategy for survival and social cohesion can be seen to have grown from its origin in traditional Aboriginal social organisation which provided no privacy as the clan groups moved together across the land. In that context relationships were defined by lore and by interactions within the framework of kinship. This has had an impact on how Aboriginal people use language to seek and give information today and the use of
indirectness in verbal exchanges (Eades, 2013). Aspects of traditional social organisation, such as marriage arrangements, resulted in prohibitions like those between a son-in-law and mother-in-law (Stanner, 1982). These prohibitions included not touching or even indirectly passing an object, or speaking directly to that relation, or using a special language to address each other. These social prohibitions, which only sanctioned the use of indirect communication, provided a way of keeping these relatives apart and ensuring social cohesion in the traditional social context.

Some of the traditions to ensure social cohesion have continued, especially indirectness and a respect for personal privacy which precludes direct questioning. In fact it may be argued that there is a level of personal privacy in Aboriginal communities not found in other non-Aboriginal communities. This is because indirect interaction is the norm even when using Standard Australian English (Eades, 2013).

Non-Aboriginal speakers often feel that Aboriginal speakers are not clear in expressing their views. Aboriginal indirectness and circumspection is often interpreted as inarticulateness and the lack of a logical argument (Eades, 2013, p. 67).

For instance at Rua, Paul suggested that to gain the trust of the community, “You actually have to be involved in the community . . . That’s another thing you have to be related . . . (laughter).” (Interview, Rua). The use of humour is a way of being related socially, if not as kin, as it strengthens the identity and membership of the group by defining who they are. Humour is used to develop group cohesion rather than direct statements being made to define roles and relationships. In this case Paul was referring to the strong kinship links within extended family groups and the reciprocity that is expected in sharing resources and time with members of that extended group. The laughter demonstrates that all the
listeners understand his point and what he does not put into words, that it is hard to gain access to community members who are not related to you in some way especially if you have no clear place in the kinship system. As Paul goes on to elaborate in answering the question: “It’s about being patient in a lot of communities. Like my Pop if he didn’t know you he wouldn’t let you inside . . . ” (Interview, Rua)

Humour was a feature of the interactions at all sites. Sometimes it seemed to be used to lighten the subject matter which was otherwise bleak as in the Aunt’s story at the nursing home. This moving story which the group from Rua (Rua, Tape: 7:1:1) heard on their visit to a nursing home was from a woman in her sixties who talked about her family who had lived in a three room house with 18 children. The story was sad, a story of disadvantage and dislocation. At one point in her story, however, she commented that her mother had trouble using the washing machine because she was frightened of it. This underlined her poverty but at the same time made light of it using humour to lighten the tone of her story for the audience.

Sometimes it is used to gently tease, as at Tolu (Tolu, Tape: 1:3:1) where humour was used as an inclusive strategy to give Val, a non-Indigenous person, a place in the Aboriginal community. The group was preparing to write a book about making a cake using emu eggs. When Rachel described Val, with much laughter from all involved, “as a white djin with black skills . . . ” (Tolu, Tape: 3:1) it reflected both the practice in traditional Aboriginal communities of including new members by allocating them a place in the kinship system and how humour can be used as a cohesive social practice. It was also used in a self-deprecating way at Rua in Uncle Terry’s understatement or Paul’s comments about the community. Sometimes it also seems to be used to ridicule and laugh at something or somebody because there seems to be no other powerful way to respond, as in the story of the
Pet Crabs. The earlier story of the white researchers being described as seagulls also illustrates this response. In all cases, humour does help to define the group and it is one way in which Aboriginal identity is forged.

The use of humour and story-telling skill is no better exemplified than by Luke, a very young student from Tolu in his first years of schooling. His story was developed collaboratively with two Aboriginal Education workers, Rachel and Nell to whom Luke told his story.

Luke’s story is a yarn about his pet bird Fathead the Bird. He described his bird travelling with him by flying alongside his bike and resting on the handlebars when tired. He also suggested that his pet bird once tried to steal lollies from the local supermarket. This type of yarn with a trickster spirit like Luke’s bird is a very old form of story told in Aboriginal communities. The genre is a familiar one in which the reader also participates in the joke as they are taken in by the tall story.

This story told by a very young boy about his pet has many similarities to other yarns produced by adults for One Mob books in other communities, for example, the stories Wanja One Smart Dog and Pet Crabs, where the joke is on figures of authority. In Luke’s case he was not an independent reader or writer so it is likely that he developed his understanding of this oral genre, as the teacher from Va suggests, by listening to stories told at home. No matter what the subject matter or context Aboriginal people seem to use humour to confirm their identity and ensure social cohesion in their communities. Considering the recent and historical memories held in Aboriginal families and communities this is an important response to the problems and injustices Aboriginal people have had to face.
Bidialectalism, Aboriginal English and traditional languages

. . . that’s the way that we speak to each other and we know that that’s our
language . . . (Interview, Rua)

The use of local stories at school was being discussed by Paul and Kay at the school
at Rua (Interview, Rua) when Paul shared his views on the development of local books. It is
important to note the focus Paul puts on the use of Aboriginal English and the importance to
him of recognising his own spoken language in written texts.

Koori kids seem to respond better to the way they hear language being
spoken at home than the way it’s being spoken at school . . .

Interview, Rua)

Paul suggested that using familiar language was a very important aspect of both
engagement and the development of cultural pride and identity (e.g., Pennycook, 2007;
Phillipson, 2013; Rosen, 1979; Schirato & Yell, 2000; Sharifian, 2005; Sobulis, 2006;

This is important as since 2008 the Government focus through The National
Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing has been on the
development of English language and literacy. Teachers across the nation are therefore
focused on the assessment and development of Standard Australian English (SAE) (Oliver,
Grote, Rochecouste & Exell, 2013; Parkin, 2006; Rose, Gray & Cowey, 1998; Storry, 2007).
This results in the use of texts which reflect the target language. However for those students
speaking Aboriginal English or a first language other than English this focus on test results
may be an obstacle rather than a support in moving from the spoken language and discourse
of the home to the language of the school (Cormack & Comber, 2013; Eades, 2013). This
transition may however be eased in some ways if the subject matter of the text reflects the child’s life.

While many Aboriginal people are now living lives which most contemporary Australians would recognise, traditional kinship ties and other aspects of traditional culture are still part of the way modern Aboriginal people live. It is recognised that language and how it is used can define cultural groups and this is true for contemporary Aboriginal people today. For instance, information exchange is a linguistic strategy used in everyday situations and which defines many classroom events. It is clear cultural expectations and understandings govern these types of exchange and perceptions about roles may vary for participants (Eades, 2013; Malcolm, 1982). When behaviour is guided by kinship roles, views about polite behavior and participation in an oral exchange for an Aboriginal person may differ from a non-Aboriginal person. This has obvious implications in a classroom (Bond, 2010; Kral & Ellis, 2008) especially if the teacher is unaware of the cultural uses of language in the Aboriginal community.

Furthermore, to read or be read to in your mother tongue seems to be a logical first step in developing literacy (Brice Heath, 1982; Painter, 1999; Williams, 1999) and certainly informs the home literacy practices of the socio-economically advantaged families whose children experience educational success. The transition from home to school and from spoken to written mode is seamless for some families. However for families whose home language and discourse differs from that of the school the child is confronted by the transition even if that confrontation widens and enriches. As Marie Clay (1991) states:

Most reading programmes have assumed that children can learn to read on contrived texts which are controlled in many different ways. A different way to learn to read is more comparable to oral language acquisition. The
child is provided with texts that relate to what he already knows about language and about the world. (p. 202)

Therefore engaging students necessitates an understanding of what they know “about language and the world” (Clay, 1991). It also requires an understanding of their sometimes complex contemporary cultural and linguistic experiences. However in educational settings this appreciation is not usually part of a teacher’s preparation and many well-meaning and otherwise well-prepared teachers are not able to appreciate the linguistic resources their students bring to school. As Schmidt (1990) notes:

In the post-contact period, relocation of Aboriginal people irreversibly altered the integral relationship between language, land and identity which had characterised distinct language speaking groups and their territories in the pre-contact era. (p.13)

Standard English varies as, for instance, it can be British, American, Indian or Australian; it is “simply the dialect of English which is spoken by the more powerful, dominant groups in society” (Eades, 2013, p. 78). However acceptance and understanding of Aboriginal Englishes is not widely demonstrated. Eades (2013) describes Aboriginal English as:

. . . the name given to dialects of English which are spoken by Aboriginal people and which differ from Standard English in systematic ways. The historical development of Aboriginal English is fascinating because it demonstrates how Aboriginal people have adapted their ways of communicating to English. (p. 79)
The need for awareness of these issues was referred to in a discussion at the Va site:

“Jenny: We need more Aboriginal teachers. Ngaire: We also have teachers, non-Indigenous . . . some of them are still coming through our schools, that have never seen an Aboriginal or an Islander in the same school as themselves” (Interview, Va).

Gould’s study (2008) confirms this view as she also found that non-Aboriginal professionals were not always able to accurately identify issues related to the learning of Aboriginal students. She states that some non-Aboriginal teachers in her study were unable to identify:

The extent and nature of communication differences between themselves and AE (Aboriginal English) speaking Aboriginal children . . . I found that teachers in a rural NSW town demonstrated a limited level of awareness or understanding of the AE spoken by the Aboriginal children in their classrooms. In addition, Aboriginal students who were identified as speaking SAE by their families continued to have their listening and attention skills judged negatively and labeled as ‘deficit’ by their non-Aboriginal teachers. (p. 198)

The fact that the Aboriginal English spoken by many Aboriginal people today is grammatically close to Standard Australian English (SAE) may lead to this type of misunderstanding. It is necessary, however, to “look beyond grammatical features and include aspects of communicative strategies” (Eades, 2013, p. 3) to really understand the linguistic differences. As Eades (2013) points out, some Aboriginal Englishes may have minimal grammatical differences from SAE but still be used in an Aboriginal way. In some contexts children are not using and learning just one or two languages or dialects, rather they are growing up in multilingual homes where more than one language or dialect is spoken.
and code-switching sometimes in mid-sentence is common (Wigglesworth & Simpson, 2008).

It is therefore of great importance that non-Aboriginal teachers are aware of this variety in language and language use as it is a distinguishing feature of all Aboriginal communities. Whether they are more traditional groupings of clans and languages or urban groups made up of Aboriginal people with traditional ties to places all over Australia, they will by definition be groups with ties to one or more dialects and languages. This will also include SAE, the Standard Australian English, which they will all encounter at school. It is also important to note that those many languages and dialects are used to tell stories and the diversity of story-telling styles (Disbray, 2008) will also confirm language use that still exists.

That’s who we are as Aboriginal people we can’t change that we’ve got to use those strengths . . . (Interview, Rua)

**The importance of local stories.**

It has been through story that Aboriginal culture has survived for thousands of years and this is continued in the stories being told today. In traditional Aboriginal communities the stories, ceremonies, dances and the country itself are conceptually significant (Martin & Rose, 2008; Sutton, 1988). While the subject matter chosen was unique to each site it was also at the same time recognisably representative of Aboriginal culture. In their book about a heritage listed area at Tolu (Tolu, Tape: 5:1) the group demonstrated a connection to the past and the traditional use of stories to teach the young about their land and culture.

Stories about local people – the kids can identify with them. It helps children to learn about their own culture and history and sense of place.
They are more likely to want to read about people and places they know.

(Interview, Tolu)

The relationship of Aboriginal people with the land at Tolu, a relationship that has been demonstrated to have lasted for more than 40,000 years, is featured in black and white photos and a commentary which tells the history of the area. Aspects of cultural life and even the features of the land have more significance than a literal interpretation would suggest, for those who traditionally have been given the right to know. There are also cultural rules that guide oral interaction in traditional Aboriginal communities which are based on the kinship system which articulates who can request or give information, from whom and about what subject (Eades, 2013; Hiatt, 1965). These traditional relationships are still respected in contemporary Aboriginal communities as suggested by Uncle Terry at Dua and the Warlpiri artist Michael Nelson Jakamarra, who explains that his process for painting includes asking permission from the custodian and manager of the story: “You gotta canvas, and brush ready. Well, first you gotta ask your father and kurdungurlu” (Sutton, 1988, p. 102).

Learning about the land has therefore changed from the traditional cultural traditions that would have informed Yuwali and her people (Davenport, Johnson & Yuwali, 2005) and helped her to survive in a harsh environment but relationship to the land is still important in defining identity for contemporary Aboriginal people. There was also implicit agreement that the land itself was an engaging topic for Aboriginal people. “They are more likely to want to read about people and places they know” (Interview, Tolu). In the book the group at Tolu wrote about their country, the title includes the words “our story” and these lines confirm both their identity and heritage as they refer to their continuing presence on their country over thousands of years.
Figure 2. *Lake Mungo Our Story*

The lake filled up and emptied quite a few times over those many thousands of years, but slowly dried up completely about 15,000 years ago. The people who depended on the lake for survival adapted to the changes in its animal and plant life (*Lake Mungo Our Story*, 2007).
When asked what they thought the project could provide this group responded that they wanted “local culturally appropriate readers . . . that will enhance Aboriginal literacy in primary and secondary schools” (Tolu, Tape: 1:5:1).

A connection to their land informed the development of one of the books at Tolu, while at Va it was a yarn which had been published by One Mob books. The story which provided the starting point for one of the books (Va, Tape: 1:3) was the legend of the Min Min lights. While the group at Va came from many different areas, they were all familiar with at least one version of the story of the Min Min lights and they were keen to write a book based on stories they knew. No one claimed the story as belonging to their area but all in the group knew a story about the Min Min lights. This aspect of Aboriginal life, the sharing of stories, was confirmed by a comment from Aunty Jenny “. . . our cultural background is all about sharing” (Interview, Va).

An understanding that stories belong to particular groups, who are in turn defined by their relationship to the land, is held alongside an acceptance that stories have been retold and shared in their own communities by contemporary Aboriginal people. Jenny, who is originally from a coastal area and is now one of the group from Va, elaborated on this understanding and how it would be realised in the collection of stories that the groups participating in the project would produce.

In one of the stories produced at Rua, What I Wanna Be, one double page of the text shows a young girl and on the opposite page two women, one wearing a possum skin cloak. The verbal text next to the girl says: “When I grow up I want to be the mayor of Melbourne. I’ll make a Treaty with our Elders.” The verbal text is simple and is suggested for use with children in the early years of primary school. However those two simple sentences suggest that members of the intended audience are aware of the political issues which Aboriginal
people face. It is unlikely that a non-Aboriginal person would have written those words nor these, also from the same text: “When I grow up I want to drive a deadly car. I’ll pick up my mob and go cruisin’.” On this double page the young girl imagines a very expensive car and it is surrounded by the faces of her extended family. The repetition in this text “When I grow up . . .” is helpful for an emergent reader as are the supportive illustrations. These storytellers from Rua were using their knowledge about the teaching of English and the development of reading to produce this text. However they also chose to use Aboriginal English and subject matter that was relevant to their community as both were judged to be engaging and educational. Teaching the young about Aboriginal culture was seen as important as developing literacy in English. The final words of the text are also a positive confirmation of Aboriginal identity: “And when I grow up I will be ME . . . strong, black and free!”

Aboriginal culture and the rights and responsibilities inferred through the kinship system are exemplified in complex and layered stories which can be read at many levels depending on the understandings conferred on the audience by the kinship system. As Martin & Rose (2008) assert in regard to traditional stories that:

. . . abstract principles of social and natural order that such stories encode” (p. 74) “. . . are only meaningful in relation to the whole system of social principles encoded in the culture’s mythological system, and its associated religious songs and ceremonies.” (p. 74)

To understand how Aboriginal stories are unique, the non-Aboriginal reader must attempt to understand the perspective of the people who produce them. Unfortunately “dreaming stories” have often been relegated to the genre of “just so” stories (Martin & Rose, 2008) a genre which reflects an imperialist view and deems Aboriginal people to be
incapable of complex thought or innovation (Smith, 1999; Batty, 2005). Narrative is an important genre in the early socialisation of children so it is important to recognise the ways that culture is imparted and language developed through storytelling and story reading. Both the purpose and the audience of traditional and contemporary Aboriginal stories have special meaning within the culture and similarly the structure and features like repetition, rephrasing, elaboration, and the use of first language words are features of both traditional and contemporary Aboriginal stories (Disbray, 2008; Martin & Rose, 2008; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Other important features, like the use of humour and the choice of subject matter also make this collection of stories a unique reflection of contemporary Aboriginal life.

Although there is an unwillingness to view Aboriginal people as innovators who are entitled to borrow and adapt and still be authentically Aboriginal (Goodall & Cadzow, 2009; Fredericks, 2013; Sutton, 2008), the stories produced by these communities demonstrate both innovation and authenticity. As Martin & Rose (2008) suggest it is rather a lack of understanding on the part of the audience who can retrieve only a literal meaning rather than a symbolic meaning from a story which can be of great significance to contemporary Aboriginal people, the landowners and custodians who understand the deeper meanings. For an Aboriginal person in particular, the image showing the shadow of a man and his didgeridoo falling across the land they have inherited has a particular resonance. As Pat commented on how young students learn to read, “Driving you along the reading path is this truck called meaning.” (Pat Smith, Va, Tape: 1:3b). The stories young students interact with when learning to read should be full of meaning for them. The stories that were told by these groups did carry a “truckload” of meaning for the young members of these communities.
A focus on meaning and engagement with a text is always an essential aspect of learning but especially vital for older students who may not have developed the level of literacy needed for successful learning at school, and whose concept of their Aboriginal identity may have been developed in relation to negative outside forces (Merlan, 2007). In response, Aboriginal people have found new ways to positively confirm their Aboriginal identity through avenues like the arts and sport. This understanding was recognised by the participants of the book making project as demonstrated during one of the sessions at Rua (Interview, Rua) when some older boys entered the room where the group was working and started to look at some of the One Mob books. As one of the members of the group at Rua later commented: “Remember the day all the big boys came in they went straight for all the sports books” (Interview, Rua).

In this case the boys used their connections to country and kin as a starting point for discussion and reading. However the links the boys were making also sprang from the relationships that had been maintained by their families long after they had been removed from their traditional lands.

One of the first books that One Mob books published was an interview, early in his career, with an elite sportsman. Adam Goodes is the 2014 Australian of the Year and was interviewed by young Aboriginal students in the process of developing the book. Choosing to tell the story of an elite sportsman was prompted by an understanding of the importance and popularity of sport, especially football, in Aboriginal communities. This was also one of the books that was mentioned in the interview with the group at Rua.

Some students were looking in a book about the local area and one, who knew about his family connections, was telling the other about his
connections to the people in the book. Even though it might have been hard for them to read, they were discussing the book. (Interview, Rua)

The boys’ interest in sport, especially football encompasses more than just their interest in the game. Sport and the development of Aboriginal sporting heroes have been the basis for forming positive Aboriginal identities in contemporary Australia despite the racism and exclusion experienced by many athletes (Tatz & Adair, 2009; Tatz, 2009b). Tatz (2009b) states that:

Sport is arguably more important to Aborigines and Islanders than it is to any other segment of Australian society (Tatz 2004; 2005a: 154-5).

Participation in sport lessens the likelihood of delinquency and, in an era in which Aboriginal suicide rates are grossly abnormal, it gives youth a sense of ‘belonging’, something to ‘stand for’. (p. I5)

All the Questions you EVER Wanted to Ask Adam Goodes (Munro, Stadhams, Close, White & Morton-Thomas, 2003) was intended for use with Aboriginal students in upper primary and the middle years and even older students who were struggling with literacy. As this data shows the subject matter was relevant and engaging for all these age groups. One of the questions the students asked Adam was whether he liked wearing the clothes provided by his sponsor, a clothing manufacturer. His answer may surprise non-Aboriginal readers: “Of course I do. When you’re getting them for free and they give you footy boots and shoes to wear and for your family as well . . .”. He was also asked if he had a problem being “part-Aboriginal and part-white”. Again the way the question was phrased and his answer might surprise some:

During school I didn’t fit in very well because I was the only Aboriginal fulla going to the school. I copped a bit of trouble from my cousins
because I was going to school and they were the same age and they were bumming around outside school. Once I made it to where I am now, they respected the fact that I worked hard and hopefully that’s motivating a little bit to get out there. *(All the Questions you EVER Wanted to Ask Adam Goodes, One Mob Reader, 2003).*

Contemporary Aboriginal identity is reflected through this blending of contemporary life experiences and traditional knowledge. The exchange between Adam and the young students reflects both understandings about the importance of kinship relations and the marginalisation, poverty and disadvantage that marks Aboriginal communities. The openness, intimacy and familiarity in this exchange indicate that it could only have taken place between members of the Aboriginal community. As a result, the familiarity of the dialogue welcomes Aboriginal readers into the text (Interview, Rua) while providing non-Aboriginal people with an opportunity to respond to a genuine cultural exchange.

Following traditions exemplified as long ago as in Bennelong’s letters to his benefactors (van Toorn, 2006), Aboriginal groups are still developed around principles which directly link to their traditions. These are elaborated by Mullins (2007) who contends that in traditional Aboriginal communities the ideas of exchange, debt and obligation have meanings which differ from those of contemporary non-Aboriginal understandings.

For example, exchanges of service whereby persons ‘help’ each other out and thereby participate in a system of ongoing debt and obligation . . . distinguished from the exchange system of the market wherein the transaction is seen as impersonal and complete once the requisite amount of cash is exchanged for the required goods. (p. 21)
Adam acknowledges the importance of these relationships when he talks about being able, through his sponsorship, to supply clothing for his family. He also acknowledges that his Aboriginal identity is culturally defined and foregrounds that this has also been partly in response to the reactions of non-Aboriginal people. Despite the problems faced by Aboriginal people, cultural knowledge is still handed on in both rural and urban communities and many contemporary urban Aboriginal people understand and have knowledge of cultural traditions in their own and other communities. Students from the sites at Dua and Rua produced three books related to sport using the same interviewing techniques used to develop the book on Adam Goodes. One of the books was developed as a rap for use with young children and all clearly represented an Aboriginal perspective. However the diversity that defines most urban Aboriginal communities means that people from these groups are forced to define their identity in a more complex way than the members of more traditional communities which may more easily define their identity through language and a connection to a particular geographical area.

An understanding of contemporary Aboriginal culture is an issue which all educators face. Harrison and Greenfield (2011), in their study of the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge in the classroom, noted the importance of the books published by One Mob books in achieving this awareness:

And this is where our project started, with a desire to instantiate images in classrooms related to contemporary Aboriginality. This was also the desire of many teachers. They have many resources based on traditional Aboriginal society, but few relating to twenty-first century Australia, such as the One Mob books. (p. 73)
Jenny said “We need more Aboriginal teachers” (Interview, Va.), as Ngaire pointed out that the non-Aboriginal teachers do not have the experience and cultural understanding that is necessary to support Aboriginal students. This lack of understanding is, like understandings about Aboriginal language, relate to how cultural traditions have been maintained and are being realised in contemporary culture.

For instance, Rick Jones from Tolu developed a story of his own about his childhood but it is also a vignette which can be read on several levels. Many statements are made by his story about the life of Aboriginal families in the fifties and sixties: small boys looking for firewood and rabbits and living in a house built by their father. It is a light and whimsical story, not at all didactic. Many children would enjoy the story of the adventurous boys crossing the river in their homemade boat but it is also a statement about the past and clearly shows the situation of marginalised, disenfranchised Aboriginal families at that time (Fletcher, 1989; Goodall & Cadzow, 2009; Reeve, 2012).

As with traditional Aboriginal stories, it can be read on a literal level or, for those who have a deeper understanding, it can also be seen as a personal evocation of the time of assimilationist policies and the Stolen Generations. This story is a wonderful example of the type of story which prompted Kay’s comment: “Their experiences are so different to ours . . . it fills in that whole gap for us . . .” (Interview, Rua). It is also a story which needs an informed and sensitive audience. A sensitive teacher or other adult is needed to draw out the inferences and help to develop the Aboriginal perspective of the historical situation in which the story unfolded. Cultural identity, as defined by these groups, requires respect for both the traditional ways of life and the contemporary experiences of Aboriginal people.

Local stories are important because they confirm contemporary Aboriginal identity and engage young Aboriginal readers and members of their communities. Authentic stories
are about subject matter that engages and educates “two-ways” (Harris, 1990), helping Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children to learn about Aboriginal history and culture. These stories share language and culture and an Aboriginal perspective, and reveal that the perspective is one that enjoys a joke, even in the face of poverty and injustice.

**Producing Local Stories**

In this project all groups were keen to carry on what they saw as their cultural tradition of sharing and they saw the development of local books as one way of doing that. The group at Rua reflected on the ongoing problem of getting community members involved in a project like this one and Kay suggested that whoever was involved in producing the stories would have to be mobile and available to visit community members and collect stories (Rua, Tape: 2:3:1). There were also questions about what knowledge and understanding a person would need to support the development of stories that would be able to be used in schools. For instance at Rua Charmaine, in relation to an Aboriginal word, asked, “Do we put in there what ‘tidda’ means?” (Rua, Tape: 2:3:1). Also Kay asked, in reference to young readers, “Is it easier for them to pick up a word . . . within the text or is it harder on its own? “ (Rua, 2:3:1). These types of questions characterised the joint production of books and the decisions the groups were making. They reflect the need to know something about literacy and the criteria teachers might use to assess materials used to teach reading, especially if Aboriginal English is used.

Even the choice of which word to use from Aboriginal English will change from area to area as words from local Aboriginal languages have been drawn into use in particular areas. There was also the issue of teachers’ levels of understandings about both Aboriginal English (Eades, 2013) and the development of language which may both lead to a rejection
of texts which use Aboriginal English as reading material in the classroom. For instance, the group at Rua discussed starting sentences with “and” but Pat responded by saying “I don’t worry . . . if it’s natural Aboriginal English I just let it go.” (Rua, Tape: 4:1:1). In a further session the group were still discussing how a non-Aboriginal reader might be able to understand words like “tidda”. Pat pointed out to the group that “Aboriginal people have had to figure out what white words were for 200 hundred years . . . ” (Rua, Tape: 2:3:2) and of course this was followed by laughter.

Pat was concerned to provide the Aboriginal workers with strategies for working with other community members to develop stories and for working with school staff. Concerns about the use of Aboriginal English were demonstrated by the group from Rua as they quite rightly judged that many teachers would not recognise or sanction its use in reading materials. Understanding of these issues is necessary, together with knowledge of some of the simpler technical aspects of book production and a sound understanding of the reading process and how young children learn to read. For these reasons Pat had decided that the writers’ kit or resource would be for the use of the Aboriginal workers, who had already developed understandings of all these aspects of story and book development.

**Development of One Mob books Community Writers’ kit.**

Pat’s aim was to enable Aboriginal workers to replace her in the role as producer of both the texts and the writers’ kit so that they could use the kit or resource to work independently with people in their own communities. This was especially important as Kay and others pointed out: “you . . . are able to capture a whole lot more than what you would normally do if you were trying to get someone to write the story” (Interview, Rua). Pat commented on the types of processes she was working through in developing the resource:
That’s built in to the community writers’ kit workshops. How to use a recorder, a digital camera, a video camera, download things – download photos, input the camera into the computer or laptop computer, get on the net find things that we need to know very quickly. (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06)

Her experiences at Dua and Rua had convinced Pat that, “It’s the discussion that leads to yarns.” For this reason, at Tolu and Va she had moved straight into drama games and developing the use of technology (Tolu, Tape: 1:1). She considered that what she did at the last site, at Va, could be replicated at any other site. She also realised that the Aboriginal Education Officers/Workers who were employed by the schools, because of their training and their local knowledge, were the ideal people to implement a resource which would help to develop local stories.

We explored the extent and the depth of the experience and knowledge that the AEAs* and the ACLOs* had and we valued that over academic achievement which anyone might or might not have. We valued the local knowledge, the cultural knowledge and the experience of their lives; their lives now and earlier. (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06)

Pat’s view was supported by comments from several sites. Ngaire from Va said:” You can’t access them without an AEA” (Interview, Va). Paul’s description of the qualities needed describe the qualities being learned or demonstrated by the Aboriginal workers who were writing books in this project, these included skills with technology

Pat also realised that the development of local stories depended on the level of trust the participants felt in the process. This is why Pat had introduced the drama games to
develop trust in the group and help everyone to relax. Many of the participants didn’t feel comfortable in using technology, as summarised by these comments from the group at Tolu:

Some training in computer skills, usin’ these little gadgets, you’d need to have a kit and have a little workshop, what’s in it, why it’s there. And don’t make the menu like you need a PhD to read it and making sure the person doing the training knows what is in the kit and why it is there. (Interview, Tolu)

*(AEAs) Aboriginal Education Assistants (ACLOs) Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers

The process Pat initiated focused on using digital cameras and other forms of technology to produce personal biographies which supported the transition to confident user. The process was successful because the four sites produced eight books during the course of this project. Two were written by students and most were collaboratively written by a group from each site, some of which included student authors or contributions from students. While Pat’s contribution is clearly there, the books are recognisably linked because of features relating to the language and culture of their Aboriginal authors and each in its own way reflects that person’s or group’s community and culture as well as telling their own unique story. The common thread which links the choices made at all of these sites reflects Aboriginal cultural traditions and language.

The story that was eventually developed at Va, Bush Tucka Good Tucka, clearly demonstrates how a continuing cultural heritage is maintained in a contemporary setting. This story is told by Harry as Nan and her two grandchildren, Emily and Harry, go supermarket shopping. The written text which accompanies the illustrations and tells the story is simple and accessible to an emergent reader. However there are also speech bubbles and thought clouds scattered through the text. So as Nan nears the checkout and the end of her tether she shares her thoughts, “Take me back to the Dreamtime. It was easier to get a
feed back then!” (Bush Tucka Good Tucka). This complexity, showing the thoughts of the characters, is humorous and engaging and also provides an extra challenge for a young reader. Similarly, the recipes and the references to bush food in the text make direct connections for Aboriginal communities but the context of supermarket shopping would be familiar to many young readers. The choices made by this group also reflect their wishes to share their culture.
The importance of sharing stories between Aboriginal communities and with the wider community was discussed by the group at Va. They thought it was important to develop meaningful stories which could be shared with all Australian students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Ngaire and Jenny confirmed that the only way non-Aboriginal people could come to understand Aboriginal culture was if it was shared with all Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike:

Ngaire: . . . I have total respect from all my students . . . If you just go in and say I’m only here for Aboriginal students . . . then you’ve segregated your kids, don’t do it to ‘em, it’s not fair . . .

Summary

Developing authentic texts which are unique to Aboriginal communities is important because, as Lokan (2001) has noted, there is a correlation between engagement in reading and literacy achievement. This correlation was confirmed at the Va site by the observations of a teenager, James, (Interview, Va). He had noticed that literacy achievement predicated his fellow students’ attitudes to reading and also to their choice of reading material.

When you have a book I noticed they were seeing really little writing and no pictures so they were putting it away . . . For little kids . . . I think they should have bigger writing so it’s easier for ‘em to see and . . . it shouldn’t be such a long book because if they see it’s a long book . . . they’ll say no point in reading it it’ll take ages. (James, Interview, Va)

The importance of stories and an Aboriginal storytelling style is therefore a vital aspect of engaging Aboriginal children. As the group at Tolu suggested, “Stories about local people – the kids can identify with them” (Interview, Tolu). This was reflected in the
boys’ discussion at Rua, as they made links to places across Australia through their extended family networks and their relationship to the land. The engagement that those boys demonstrated with the *One Mob* books was because the subject matter was relevant to them and also because the voices of the storytellers were able to be heard. The stories were told in Aboriginal English from an Aboriginal perspective which was inclusive and engaging for those young readers (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011).

It is a vital aspect of reading pedagogy to select texts which will engage students and this must include texts which reflect their lives. For Aboriginal students this is especially important and the localism that Basil Sansom (YEAR) suggests is common to Aboriginal communities across Australia (Merlan, 2007) and has been built on ties developed through the kinship system and the relationship to land but also through the shared resistance to unfair laws and policies. Therefore stories which reflect the context in which many Aboriginal lives are lived – the poverty, disadvantage and discrimination which Aboriginal people have experienced – will also resonate with many communities, while being at the same time unique to their own place. Some Aboriginal people have been forced to forge new communities off country as exemplified at these four sites while others are able to trace their ancestry back to traditional lands even to those that are part of our largest cities (Goodall & Cadzow, 2009). Contemporary Aboriginal identities are therefore complex and young people need to have their culture, language and identity positively confirmed through the stories of their people told their way and in their language. This of course will most often be accompanied by laughter.

In the following chapter I discuss how these stories confirm contemporary Aboriginal identity as defined by Aboriginal people themselves (Dodson, 1994). Again drawn from the data, this exploration includes a discussion of the poverty, disadvantage,
dislocation and marginalisation which provides the context in which Aboriginal identities have been formed. I also explore Aboriginal literacy practices at school and at home and the relationships between homes and schools.
Chapter Seven: The Echo of our Elders’ Voices

In this chapter I explore how authentic stories produced by contemporary Aboriginal people confirm Aboriginal identity as they are told from an Aboriginal perspective about subject matter which they have chosen. These stories have unfolded in a context shaped by a legacy of poverty, disadvantage and marginalisation and this context will also be discussed. The Aboriginal people who participated in this research wanted their culture and identity confirmed by sharing their stories in the schools that their children attended. The identity of contemporary Aboriginal people is the big collective story which informs their storytelling styles, their language choices and the subject matter of their stories. It is also a story that has shaped and continues to impact on the relationships between Aboriginal homes and schools and this relationship will also be explored.

The confirmation of culture and identity through story is a well-researched aspect of cultural cohesion. As Biddle (1996) exemplifies:

In the words of Paddy Japaljarri Stewart (Warlukurlangu Artists 1987, 3):
We painted these Dreamings on the school . . . because the children should learn . . . The children do not know them and they might become like white people which we don't want to happen...

(p. 25)

As a non-Aboriginal person I have focused my research on respectful listening as I sought to hear the voices and stories and to understand the perspective of Aboriginal people. The issues that are a central to the teaching profession are not often discussed from an Aboriginal perspective and in this study I sought to challenge this by listening carefully and presenting what I heard. From the earliest days of the colony the development of literacy in
English was used as a method of assimilation and has therefore been correctly perceived by Aboriginal people as a challenge to their traditional culture.

Throughout the colonial period, and indeed until the 1980s, government policy-makers invariably assumed that literacy itself shaped societies – an assumption that went hand in hand with the belief that oral and literate cultures were successive, mutually exclusive stages in a single, unavoidable path of cultural evolution towards modernity . . . This positioning of Indigenous peoples as ‘where Europeans once were’ made the assimilation of Aboriginal people look like a historical shortcut, a mere speeding up of an allegedly natural, inevitable evolutionary process. (van Toorn, 2006, p. 12)

In response to these assimilationist attitudes many Aboriginal people used this new mode of communication for their own purposes as demonstrated in the letters that Bennelong wrote in the earliest days of the colony (van Toorn, 2006). They also resisted or were otherwise shaped by the ideas that were transmitted with the development of literacy, especially in the case of the young. As van Toorn (2006) comments, “It was not reading and writing per se that eroded traditional Indigenous cultures, but rather the particular circumstances under which Indigenous peoples acquired literacy and engaged with the material artefacts of literate Western culture.” (p. 13). The conditions to which she refers are the “poorly resourced, under-staffed mission and reserve schools that Aboriginal children attended” (van Toorn, 2006, p. 13).

For Aboriginal people there will always be a challenge to develop an understanding of the discourse of the school if it differs from the discourse of the home. Standard Australian English, Aboriginal English, a Creole, an Aboriginal language or a combination
of these may be used in the home but the most important factor is the role of adults in the child’s life. It is their interactions with the child and their use of language that supports the young student in transition to the language and discourse of the school (Bernstein, 1990; Painter, 1999; Williams, 1999). As Aboriginal communities are defined by low levels of literacy many Aboriginal children will find the transition to a second language or dialect and to the discourse of the school a challenge. Many of the Elders of this generation are members of the Stolen Generations, who were removed from their families, and many were therefore excluded from higher education and the opportunities that that provides.

In this chapter I will first look briefly at how the research highlighted that the Elders’ voices were hardly audible in the wider society and how the legacy of poverty and disadvantage have contributed to shaping contemporary Aboriginal identity. I will also examine the dislocation and marginalisation that have resulted in large contemporary urban Aboriginal populations. By examining these historical and social aspects of Aboriginal communities it is possible to better understand how Aboriginal communities see themselves and why this is important. The relationship between contemporary Aboriginal communities and schools is dependent on intercultural understandings that knowledge of Aboriginal history will inform. Learning to read and write in Aboriginal homes and in the schools that their children attend will also be examined to demonstrate why confirming Aboriginal identity through story is vital to engagement in education.

**Identity: “Who we are as Aboriginal People”**

**The silent generations.**

It is important to remember the intergenerational aspects of poverty and disadvantage and how the health and education of adults in the community impact upon the children.
Because older Aboriginal people were excluded from mainstream schools and often from secondary education, many adults struggle with literacy (Reeve, 2012; Vinson, 2007). At the same time that individual competence is tested there is an inference that the results are totally personal and not related to socio-economic factors. This personal acceptance of the outcomes of an exclusive education system is the result of what Freire (1985) referred to as the product of dominating and dominated cultures. The dominant culture always supports systems that work to its own advantage and therefore to the advantage of those with the most power within society (Connell, 1994; Dodson, 1994; Freire, 1975). Therefore individual failure must be contextualised within a system which produces success for some and for others many obstacles to that success.

Nevertheless all the Aboriginal people who participated in this case study valued education and saw educational success as a way forward for their children and their people. As the group at Tolu commented, students need:

. . . Lots of support and having engaging material available to them at the right level, and encouraging them to have books at home so that they will want to read. Information that’s relevant and they have to like it.

(Interview, Tolu)

However success has also been denied by policies which allowed Aboriginal children to be educated but only on missions with very little chance of completing secondary schooling, especially as in some states they were excluded from public schools. In the state of NSW for instance, the law was only repealed in 1972 (Parbury, 2005, p. 124) and until that time Aboriginal children could be and were legally excluded if the local community did not want them to attend the local state school. Many of the participants in this case study would have attended school during this period and their parents and grandparents would
have experienced these policies first hand. Indeed the White Australia policy was not completely repealed until 1973 (Australian Government Department of Immigration and Border Protection Fact Sheet 8). Educational disadvantage still exists for many Aboriginal students and as always it continues, directly or indirectly, to be related in the first place to their dislocation from the land.

This historical neglect of Aboriginal education can be exemplified by the Northern Territory which before the 1950s had no provision at all for the education of Aboriginal children (Tatz, 2009a). However the social and economic problems which Aboriginal people experience today are attributed to them rather than to the wider society (Merlan, 2007) and this is also true of educational failure. It is only around fifty years ago that the last clan groups in the Western Desert finally came face to face with white men even though their lives had felt the impact of their presence long before (Davenport, Johnson, & Yuwali, 2005). At the same time, in other parts of the country many other Aboriginal people were confined to missions, and mission schools, with no opportunity for secondary education (Fletcher, 1989). This era produced the Aboriginal people who are today’s Elders as Jenny says:

Different eras . . . we had our own schools Aboriginal people weren’t allowed to go to white schools . . . coming into the 60’s and 70’s . . . what’s happened to that little glory Aboriginal people had then? . . . that sort of slowed them down. (Interview, Va)

Aunty Jenny’s comments might not reflect all Aboriginal people’s experiences or views of that era but she obviously has fond memories of her schooling on the mission “that little glory”. However she does state that she was not “allowed to go to white schools” (Interview, Va) something she doesn’t evaluate but which is an obvious example of
discrimination. Jenny is focused on the positive experiences she had because she was with her own people. The dislocation and alienation experienced by Aboriginal people when they are moved away from their communities is also summed up by Aunty Jenny when she says “. . . that sort of slowed them down” or in Ngaire’s comments about her move from the country to the city, “Going from the bush to the big smoke . . . that was hard” (Interview, Va).

However Jenny clearly recalls being prevented from attending schools with white children and this resulted, especially in regional areas, in many Aboriginal people receiving a poor education which was inferior to that available to most other Australian children. As a result, many of today’s Elders were effectively excluded from those forums and occupations which depended on personal educational achievement for entry. Their personal experiences often resulted in both a low level of education and literacy and too often this was then reflected within the schooling system as being the result of individual inadequacy rather than systemic failure.

If learning an additional language or dialect was an impediment to learning to read, one would then expect Aboriginal children as a group to at least match the performance of refugee and migrant children on standardised tests, which they don’t. In fact Thomson, Hillman & De Bortoli (2013) point out that according to the PISA report for 2009, children from Indigenous backgrounds are achieving at a lower level than all other children. Similarly, Lokan (2001) noted that Aboriginal students were under-represented in the highest category of reading proficiency and over-represented in the lowest category as long ago as the PISA report for 2000, almost ten years earlier. Although many Aboriginal students may be speaking Aboriginal English, a Creole or an Aboriginal language or languages in their homes and may need support in making the transition to Standard
Australian English this in itself should not result in low achievement in Standardised tests (Dulfer, Polesel & Rice, 2012; Rose, 1999). Rather, the education system and the relationship between schools and Aboriginal communities should be examined to provide an explanation.

However what can be safely assumed is that traditional Aboriginal cultural practices are not in any way an impediment to learning to read (van Toorn, 2006) nor is the development of an additional language or dialect (Martin & Rose, 2008). Indeed the desire for learning demonstrated by Aboriginal children, especially the desire to learn to read, was so obvious even two hundred years ago, that an observer at that time considered it worth noting that: “The Aboriginal natives are indeed capable of attaining to the knowledge of any thing in which they may be instructed” (van Toorn, 2006, p. 35). It can be seen that the education systems across Australia historically excluded Aboriginal individuals through explicit policies or through poor and inappropriate schooling. While the Elders’ voices were still heard in communities they were often not valued in schools. Aboriginal languages, concerns and cultures were effectively silenced in those places that took over the education of Aboriginal children.

**The legacy of poverty and disadvantage**

We were nothing, we were treated like dogs in the street, and when you look at it now we are still like that, on this day. But in them days we were just nothing, we were just a bit of dirt. And then on the 27th May 1967 91% of Australia voted for us to be citizens. Then we were able to vote, be equal to the whiteman but now I think 91% hate us again . . . now it all falls back to youse because youse are the next generation . . . Respect that
teacher, respect that teacher that stands up and teaches you. (Dua, Tape: 2:2:1)

Uncle Terry was telling his story to students at Dua and through his personal story he was also telling the big story about his people. He was providing an Aboriginal perspective on Australian history in an educational setting when he told students about the “humpy” he grew up in, about its dirt floor and lack of water and electricity. He also said, “I didn’t know I was black until I was 19” (Dua, Tape: 2:2:1) when he was stopped from playing polo because he was Aboriginal. His story is personal and even when one of the parents challenged some of his views it was done with respect as the tone was set by a recognition of Uncle Terry as a respected Elder.

By sharing his personal life story in the school Uncle Terry was achieving one of the goals of two-way schooling (Harris, 1990) by developing his relationship with the young Aboriginal people in his community and sharing his experiences. The tradition of the young learning from their Elders is not unique to the Aboriginal community but the concept of two-way schooling which was developed by Aboriginal Elders from a range of communities is unique. It sprang from a desire to have Aboriginal culture and language honoured in the schools, a desire which is also reflected in the data collected in this research. The schools at Yirrkala and Yipirinya are examples of schools established on these principles.

. . . the history of the term two-way school goes back at least to the early 1970s . . . The term was used in contrast to the government school which was a one-way school. (Harris, 1990, p. 13)

One vision of two-way schooling, developed by Pincher Nyurrmiyarri, a Gurindji Elder, (Harris, 1990) was that there should be a fair representation of both Aboriginal and Western culture and that the school should be a place of two-way exchange and flow. The
power relations in the school should be equal and the school should help to develop a good relationship between generations. In this sense Uncle Terry, as an Elder at Dua, was demonstrating the principles of two-way schooling when he shared stories about his life in the school. He had lived through the years when Aboriginal people moved from missions to the cities and his story reflected the changes that took place between the 1950s and today.

In the eyes of the participants the purpose of sharing their stories was an opportunity to share the local Aboriginal language and culture with the broader school community and to engage their own children in education and the reading process. The One Mob books project also sought to provide an opportunity for the voices of the child’s family and community to be heard in the school. Their participation resulted in stories developed and told by community members in their own language and from their own perspective. The impact of books which reflect the life and language of the community is felt not only by children, but by caregivers and community members and Elders who may be reading those books with their children (Interview, Rua).

Uncle Terry’s community is in an urban setting in a large city but most Aboriginal children attend one-way schools in cities. While Aboriginal Elders are often invited into schools it is usually not to discuss their own life experiences in this way. As a result of this book development project he was provided with a legitimate reason to be in the school and to be telling his story his way to young people. His personal response to a major event in Australian history like the 1967 Referendum is a powerful personal perspective which unites the generations and also provides the students with an authentic Aboriginal perspective of an event like this. These aspects of his personal story call for further reflection, especially as Uncle Terry exhorted the young students to gain an education and get a good job, goals that were obviously of importance to him.
While Uncle Terry did not explain or complain about his experiences of poverty and discrimination it is also clear that he was very poor during his childhood and early adulthood, something that he said embarrassed him when he was about to marry. His experience of poverty and disadvantage would be familiar to many Aboriginal people who are still experiencing the same issues in their homes and communities today. Terry’s past experiences, his story, are echoed today by Paul, “. . . not every Aboriginal house has a computer in it.” (Interview, Rua) and Charmaine, “One uniform that we wash every day . . . I always say to myself there’s always someone worse off than I am.” (Rua, Tape: 1:4:2).

The indicators of poverty include “health, disability, education, employment, income, victimisation, incarceration and home ownership” (Reeve, 2012, p. 21). In a study of poverty in one of Australia’s most highly populated states, New South Wales (NSW) Reeve (2012) found that “Indigenous people in NSW major cities are significantly and substantially disadvantaged according to multiple socio-economic indicators” (p. 20). This one example, as it is from one of the largest states, debunks two myths: firstly, that most Aboriginal people live in remote areas and secondly, that it is only in these remote areas that Aboriginal people are living in poverty and disadvantage compared to non-Aboriginal citizens. As Reeve (2012) also states:

There are approximately 66,000 Indigenous people in NSW major cities, which is more than the entire Indigenous population of the Northern Territory of 64,000 (ABS 2006a). (p. 20)

Health is one of the indicators of poverty and a ubiquitous example is Otitis Media which is such an accepted part of an Aboriginal child’s life the participants must have considered it to be inevitable and unremarkable as it was not mentioned. However the statistical prevalence of the condition means that most of the participants would have
worked with students, or have family members, who have suffered from the condition. Otitis Media is another, often hidden, aspect of the legacy of poverty. This condition is also an important factor in obstructing educational success as Galloway (2008) contends:

Otitis media, and its resultant conductive hearing loss and speech and language development delays, is a significant problem for Indigenous people and requires both medical and educational interventions. Good oral language skills are essential for success in written literacy . . . especially when children are learning in a second language . . . (p. 231)

The fact that this very common condition wasn’t mentioned is in itself very significant as it indicates the issues which seem to be an inevitable aspect of Aboriginal lives (Vinson, 2007). Uncle Terry posed a very confronting question about these issues, “We die young, why does that happen?” (Dua, Tape: 2:2:1). This question was addressed to a group of students at Dua and it is a very profound question to pose to young people, one that is unlikely to be asked in the wider community, but sadly it is a part of the Aboriginal story. The complex relationship between health, poverty and other indicators of disadvantage is foregrounded by Reeve (2012) and one finding is particularly telling in regards to children and young people:

In the justice sector Indigenous people are grossly over-represented in adult and juvenile detention centres. The econometric results indicate that being charged as a child increases the likelihood of adult incarceration from 0.3 percent to 16.9 percent, on average. (p. 27)

It is therefore very important to build relationships between the generations and the Aboriginal community within the school (Sarra, 2007; Tripcony, 1995) to support young
Aboriginal people to gain the benefits of education. It is also important to recognise the intergenerational impact of past policies and events, as Reeve (2012) also notes:

The probability of being charged as a child more than doubles for people whose relatives were forcibly separated from their families. This suggests that ongoing trauma and lack of parenting skills for members of the Stolen Generations continue to impact on Indigenous youth, demonstrating the intergenerational consequences of past misguided policy. (p. 24)

Elders and community members as respected custodians of their memories, their culture and the traditions and language of their local community were invited to participate in the book making process. They were not seen as peripheral supporters but, like Uncle Terry, were valued for their ability to contribute to the big story of Aboriginal people. While the social factors which impact on Aboriginal students' families and communities are collectively of more significance than anything that might happen within the school (Connell, 1994; Freire, 1985) the opportunity to become involved in the education of their children is important. By telling their stories in the school and writing local books they are able to share their stories with a wider audience.

**Dislocation and marginalisation.**

Alongside the colonial discourses in Australia, we have always had our own Aboriginal discourses in which we have continued to create our own representations, and to re-create identities which escaped the policing of the authorised versions. They are Aboriginalities that arise from our experience of ourselves and our communities. They draw creatively from the past, including the experience of colonisation and false
representation. But they are embedded in our entire history, a history which goes back a long time before colonisation was even an issue.

(Dodson, 1994, p. 9)

As Michael Dodson (1994) contends, the development of identity for Aboriginal people is still challenged by colonial discourses. The poverty that Aboriginal people still suffer as a result of forced removal from their land (Reeve, 2012; Vinson, 2007) also led to the creation of new communities. These were created within the large cities in the post World War II era when many Aboriginal people moved there to find work. This resulted in a further dislocation for Aboriginal people, less discussed than the forced removal of children, but significant in understanding contemporary Aboriginal culture and identity (Yamanouchi, 2012). Developing an identity is strongly connected to country and place, especially if other connections like language and culture have been fractured.

The power of personal Aboriginal stories is in their similarities, as they demonstrate the damage that the policies of the past brought to Aboriginal lives and their resilience in maintaining their culture and identity in the face of these challenges. These personal stories together provide a collective story about the past and help to explain and confirm contemporary Aboriginal identity (Richardson, 1990). When the group from Rua visited a nursing home, one of the Aunts said that her mother was one of the Stolen Generations and that during her life the family kept moving because of “the welfare” (Rua, Tape: 7:1:1). Another Aunt talked about how her grandmother took to the road with her and two boys after their grandfather sold their farm. She said her grandmother worked in shearers’ sheds and got food to feed her and the boys from hotels in the towns they passed through (Rua, Tape: 7:1:1). What these storytellers don’t talk about are factors which relate to policies, like skin colour which may have prompted the threat of removal of fair skinned children, or the
relationships with white men that could easily be ended, leaving Aboriginal women totally vulnerable with no rights or often even the ability to keep or support their own children (Dodson, 1994; Partington, 1998).

To truly appreciate and understand the significance of these stories it is important to examine the context in which they have unfolded. This is part of the collective story within which these personal stories took place. The time when these stories unfolded was around the time when Australia had engaged in two world wars, two events which have great significance for Australians and are remembered in every school across the nation. However these stories also unfolded at the end of the much less well known frontier wars in which Aboriginal people fought for control of their lands. To demonstrate the devastating extent of these wars of resistance, Reynolds (2013) compares the Australian casualties in the two world wars with those in the frontier wars:

The two world wars resulted in just over 100,000 deaths, almost 62,000 between 1914 and 1918 and just under 40,000 in the Second World War . . . To find the appropriate place for the frontier wars in this grisly table we should begin with what would now be considered a conservative estimate of between 25,000 and 30,000 Aboriginal and between 2,500 and 3,000 settler deaths. (p. 245)

These conflicts have not been recognised or commemorated in our wider society but the impact is still remembered and felt in Aboriginal communities. For instance, the well-known Aboriginal artist, Rover Thomas, has produced several paintings which depict massacres on his country in the early part of the last century. Some of these from his Kimberley country are Ruby Plains Killing 1 and One Hid Under the Bullock’s Hide, One Bullet and The Burning Site. He depicted these stories visually and also related them orally
(Thomas, 1994). Similarly, an Alawa man from the Roper River area, Barnaby Roberts, remembers his life as a child and his interactions with white men “shoot ‘em people like kangaroo, like bird. . . all-a-time we go, we go, run away from white man and his bullet” (Reynolds, 2013, p. 116).

When these personal stories are heard together they clearly show how Aboriginal people attempted to survive without civil rights. While the threat of death as a result of massacres lessened during the last century, the threat of removal of children lasted for many more years. These stories show how Aboriginal people struggled to keep prized but easily broken connections to family and community. It is also clear that for Aboriginal families this dislocation and marginalisation is an historical fact but it is also both recent and generational, affecting not one but several generations in many families who are still responding to the challenges which resulted from past policies (Cowlishaw, 1999).

Even when help was offered assimilationist policies meant that support came at a great personal cost to Aboriginal people. For instance in their study of one Australian city’s assimilationist housing policy, Goodall & Cadzow (2009) state:

When Aboriginal families were first offered homes by the Housing Commission in 1962, they were spread out, with one family roughly in every two streets – in a strategy called euphemistically the ‘salt and pepper’ or chequerboard approach. State intervention into Aboriginal lifestyles through housing escalated even more rapidly in 1969 with the ‘Homes for Aborigines’ program. More homes were set aside for Aboriginal recipients, but they were still carefully isolated from other Aboriginal housing, scattering the Aboriginal families widely apart throughout the new suburbs. (p. 198)
It is important to remember that in the contemporary communities participating in this project the parents and grandparents personally experienced policies like the “chequerboard approach” and contemporary communities reflect those past policies which aimed at assimilation by attempting to destroy Aboriginal communities and identity. This is why personal stories from the past are valued in the community; as Jenny pointed out, they educate as well as engage. One such story is that of Charlie Leon, who was a political activist, showman, labourer and elected member of the Aborigines Welfare Board who spent his retirement linking up those “chequerboard” families. In stories like Charlie Leon’s young Aboriginal people can see how new connections between people were formed and how their communities came into being. Aboriginal people like Charlie Leon “began to shape a new form of Aboriginal community despite the best efforts of the Welfare Board and state government to keep people apart” (Goodall & Cadzow, 2009, p. 210).

As Kay from Rua said, “a lot of Koori people move ‘round now” and “we don’t even come from Rua, so the notion of communities has changed” (Interview, Rua). The group at Tolu also stated: “. . . at Tolu we just told stories about what we were interested in and that’s good but we could have stories about early childhood, things about family life or kinship. That is really important because kinship circles are very, very important” (Interview, Tolu). The impact of these events and policies are still felt in communities today so the Elders’ stories are also vitally relevant:

. . . they’re the ones with the wisdom and the knowledge and who give us the advice. They’ll lose their culture if it is not passed down. It is important that the children know that the Elders want to share and pass things on to them. It gives the Elders a say in Aboriginal education and
they learn something about the resources in the school for teaching English. (Interview, Tolu)

**Literacy Practices at School and at Home**

**Oral language development**

In all societies culture is maintained and passed on to each generation with the development of the mother tongue. This development takes place in homes and educational settings without aspects of language being explicitly taught and with no sense that there is a particular order in which language will develop (Eagleson, Kaldor, & Malcolm, 1982; Gibbons, 2006; Painter, 1999). Rather, adults interact with very young children in natural settings and it is through this interaction that young children develop their mother tongue (Painter, 1999). However for many children the experience of school is very different from their home experiences. It is not just the historical events which have impacted on their families and communities and helped to form contemporary Aboriginal identities but also the difference in the use of language and forms of communication in their communities.

In many Aboriginal communities the early socialisation of children is similar to what Bavin (1993) observed as the Walpiri way:

The child learns through direct observation and real-life experience, the responsibility for learning being on the child . . . A Warlpiri adult assumes that children learn by being with adults, watching what they do and listening to what they say . . . The question-answer routine found in some other societies is not part of the interaction . . . such routines tend to be limited to societies with books and pictures . . . (p. 87)
Although many Aboriginal people are now living in urban settings in which there are both books and pictures, not many of the books tell the stories of their people. However, their communities are still built around some of the traditional ties which have defined their culture. There are major differences in the organisation of traditional societies, "Gemeinschaft," compared to modern societies “Gesellschaft” (Cahnman, 1976). The use of language in forming new relationships (Eades, 2013) is central to this model which suggests that in modern societies relationships are contractual and instrumental and are negotiated through language. Relationships in traditional societies, Gemeinschaft are defined by close social ties and a shared history, as in the kinship systems which govern all Aboriginal communities (Mullins, 2007; Sansom, 1982).

For instance, in traditional communities the language used in the “pointing out” and commenting that takes place while walking across the land gathering food or travelling for ceremony (Wigglesworth & Simpson, 2008) can easily be reconciled with the language that might accompany a shopping trip with Nan to the local supermarket. This type of discourse can be defined as language accompanying not constituting a social process (Martin, 1992). The development of a child’s language is therefore strongly correlated to the social context in which it develops (Fivush & Nelson, 2004; Halliday, 1985; Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Hill & Launder, 2010; Painter, 1999; Williams, 1999) and how closely the discourse of the home resembles that of the school.

When living in close-knit communities where the sharing of knowledge, power and control are defined by the kinship system language may be most often used in this way as language accompanying social process (Bernstein, 1990). In modern stratified societies privileged social groups develop orientations to elaborated codes even though it is possible for elaborated orientations to be realised in societies with simple divisions of labour (Rose,
2006). This is a significant issue which relates to educational success and the process begins in the pre-school years when literacy practices are first introduced (Brice-Heath, 1982; Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004; Halliday, 1985; Painter, 1999; Williams, 1999).

**Early literacy practices**

The best way to support the development of reading, Marie Clay (1991) suggests, is similar to the development of oral language as it is a problem-solving activity which develops over time. This problem solving approach to teaching reading, describes the interaction of parents and children reading picture books together before the child is ever expected to read independently. This activity develops both oral language and knowledge about written texts (Clay, 1991; Painter, 1999; Williams, 1999) and may be undertaken with a child of any age and at any stage of literacy development. Diane, from Va, demonstrated her understanding of engaging and supporting an emergent reader:

The way I taught her to read... got all the stuff from the cupboard and all the stuff that this young boy had shopped for then I involved her in it so as I was reading the story she was that child doin’ the shopping. (Interview, Va)

The focus in this type of interaction is not on the development of the child’s skills but on their engagement as they participate in the oral interaction around a written text. This type of shared reading is not a feature of every child’s home life and in some cases school experience and engagement with the reading process may not take place before school, especially in a home where the adults may not see themselves as successful readers (Lokan, 2001; Painter, 1999). The selection of texts is therefore very important in helping young students to make the transition from the oral to the written mode. Moreover, as Munns et al.
(2008) also suggest, parental involvement in the school is, “... an opportunity for parents to develop positive attitudes and orientations to school, and a chance to better align school and home values and priorities...” (p. 113). Learning to read and write can be a very natural development for some children and some even enter school as fluent readers. For others learning to read is a struggle, but the average child usually learns to read independently in the first two or three years of schooling and some in the first year.

Students will more easily deal with the abstractions which are a necessary part of a modern education if there is a natural fit with school. For instance, Williams’ study (1999) of mother/child dyads found that there was a major difference between the two groups he had identified. The mothers were identified as participating in a workplace which placed them in either the Higher Autonomy Profession group (HAP) or the Lower Autonomy Profession group (LAP). He found that the difference between the two groups was not the amount of time spent on book reading with the pre-school child but in the type of language used by the mother in her interactions with the child around the book reading. In the detailed analysis which Williams (1999) provided it is clear that the HAP mothers’ and the school teachers’ talk around the text was similar:

The result is interesting theoretically since it suggests that the HAP mothers and the teachers both seek to extend children’s talk beyond the local and specific instance of the object text to develop a form of literate practice in which explicit linguistic reasoning about written text is valued.

(p. 105)

The social and linguistic resources developed in Aboriginal families and communities are what a young reader will bring to a text, so even though an individual child’s skills as an emergent reader can be assessed (Castles, 2004; Reynolds & Whedell,
what a young reader brings to the text is dependent on the relationship of the reader’s community to the school. The challenges particular texts may provide and whether school is a natural or unnatural setting for learning for an individual child strongly correlates to their oral language development and the discourse of the home (Bernstein, 1990; Clay, 2001; Painter, 1999). Therefore if the discourse of the school is not congruent with the discourse of the home young students will require time to develop their understandings (Smith, 1999).

The first step is obviously to introduce a text into the interaction between the child and caregiver. In the case of many Aboriginal students, speaking Aboriginal languages, creoles or dialects in the home, texts which reflect familiar subject matter or language will support the development of reading. Using local texts, which reflect the linguistic patterns of the local community, can both engage and support students in the development of reading as they resonate with the interests and concerns in the community. Therefore another advantage of producing local books is the engagement of community members. Those who might struggle with their own literacy would be encouraged to read with their children and grandchildren because they would be able to decode and comprehend familiar local stories.

Some of the participants demonstrated comprehensive understandings about the development of reading. The literacy practices in their work places and in their own homes reflected their engagement with reading theory and strategies. When answering the question: “What do you think helps kids to be really good readers?” the group at Va demonstrated their understandings of reading strategies, “If you can get a child to interpret a story out of a picture you can get them to learn to read. Show ‘em how to break the word down; breaking it down into syllables” (Interview, Va), and theories of reading “they can’t just pick it up. . . You’ve got to read to them” (Interview, Va). Their understandings are not surprising
because of the training provided to them in their workplaces, nor is it surprising that there is a resulting impact on the literacy practices in their own homes.

It is also worth noting that Diane’s comments about teaching reading to a young child relate to the story that the group at Va developed about supermarket shopping with Nan. It would be more difficult to involve a child in a text with no story or that offered no opportunities for the child to bring background knowledge to the text. In Aboriginal communities it is also important for many adults to have familiar texts which they can relate to and share with their children. As Paul at Rua commented:

A big advantage for the writers’ kit is to maintain that language that we speak . . . in some of the books that we read to the kids and some of the language that they write . . . it doesn’t go with the story and even tryin’ to read them books as an Aboriginal person, to the kids . . . that’s not really how it comes out . . . it isn’t the way I’d say ‘em . . . I’d probably relate more to a book that has “unnit” and “brother” . . . (Interview, Rua)

The contrived texts developed and widely used to teach reading sometimes fail to provide engaging stories, illustrations or even interesting language. The real work in learning to read is problem-solving with a competent reader as a support. Therefore the difficulty of the text is dependent on what the child brings to the text, the child’s response, as Clay (1991) asserts:

A third approach to a gradient of difficulty accepts the criteria of children’s learning response determining the difficulty level but recognises that what is easy or difficult will vary from district to district, from school to school, and from child to child. (p. 201)
Reading schemes are structured with an expectation that all children will work through levels in a linear manner as their decoding skills develop. However the reading process is a process in which the reader develops several roles (Freebody, 2005) not just the development of decoding skills. Contrived texts often do not provide the opportunities for young readers to problem-solve and fully develop analytical understandings, as the texts are produced with a focus on the development of one role, that of text decoder. Furthermore the development of oral language can be seen as an indicator of educational success (Bernstein, 1990) therefore the socio-cultural and linguistic differences between communities have implications for the teaching of reading and for the use of reading schemes which have been graded without these differences being taken into account.

**Storytelling styles**

Another vitally important aspect of the interaction around a text is how storytelling is situated and practiced in the home culture. Disbray (2008) contends that:

> . . . the way people talk to children and tell stories to them model notions of ‘a good story’ held by their speech community and this influences children’s development of this oral genre . . . this affects the child’s performance in mainstream school settings, particularly in relation to learning to read and write. (p. 58)

The engaging power of authentic stories was confirmed by Kay (Rua, Tape: 1:3:1). Kay was reading one of the *One Mob* books to her sons.

There was one about the emu egg, I’ve got two boys, I got to a part in the book and they just cracked up ‘flamin’ big cake girl’ . . . and they said ‘Mum, read that again, read that again’. It was just so exciting that there
was something in it that they’d actually connected to in that story. (Rua, Tape: 1:3:1)

Kay went on to say that her son, who was in Year 1, was reading another One Mob book in which the child character says, “My mum is Koori so am I” (Me and My Mum). Kay said that, “when he read that you could see the actual feeling in his face . . . reading it in a book was really something that they related to” (Rua, Tape: 1:3:1). The subject matter, familiar themes and connection to family and the local area all contribute to engagement but perhaps most engaging is the use of the local language, in this case Aboriginal English. These are all aspects of a storytelling style which is both familiar and engaging for an Aboriginal child as Kay’s sons demonstrated.

Storytelling styles and the oral language which is central to them have been widely researched (Eades, 2013; Painter, 1999; Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Williams, 1999). The differences between speech communities correlate to both cultural practices and education levels and therefore in multilingual families and communities storytelling may be undertaken in several languages. However when the subject matter and the language choices in a written text reflect the young reader’s own oral experiences it is easier to support and engage an emergent reader. This is of particular importance when the adult interacting with the child is not speaking Standard Australian English in the home and possibly has a low level of literacy.

This disconnection between the home and the school is echoed in some of Kay Mairey’s comments. Kay is a very well-educated woman, but she is acutely aware of the need to use her language in her way, in this case Aboriginal English, as a means of conserving her culture. “It’s not about Indigenous people getting language acquisition but it’s about us using our language . . . as a platform to say well we’re gonna make sure our
kids read and write in terms of who we are as Indigenous people and our culture . . . “ (Interview, Rua). It is therefore of vital importance that Aboriginal stories, told in their languages and in their way, are available in schools as they are now the primary site for the education of Aboriginal children.

Communities and Schools

The participants in this research were aware of the disjunction between home and school and they identified three main challenges. One was to engage Aboriginal students in the reading process and the development of literacy and they suggested this could be achieved by developing culturally relevant local materials. The second challenge that was identified was how to build a bridge between the school and the community and they suggested this would need to be undertaken by a sensitive well-trained person with cultural understandings. Thirdly, by supporting community members to bring an understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal culture into the school, they could at the same time develop their own community members’ understandings about supportive literacy practices and the discourse which is congruent with that of the school.

At the start of this project Pat had been very keen to involve community members but her experiences at Dua and Rua had further developed her views on how best to involve the community and develop local stories.

The community workers just do know, they know. If they’re trained they’ll know how to do it . . . Training up people who haven’t got the mindset of education, or who haven’t got the mindset of the school, how schools work . . . it’s never going to work . . . The community workers are the glue between the community and the school. (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06)
Despite the problems Pat had encountered she still maintained it was essential “to do the protocols” so that as many people as possible in the community could be informed about what she was doing. This meant that when she went to work with a community, “I tell them what I’d like to do, ask them what they think about that, ask them if they think it’s a good idea, ask them can I do it on their country . . . Doing the protocols is good manners”.

(Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06)

Developing trust and credibility were important issues for Pat and for participants in all communities. At Rua, Kay and Paul suggested that developing stories even with a resource or kit available would still require personal support. Mistrust has developed in Aboriginal communities because Aboriginal people were not respected and their stories and art and too often been treated as public property. As a result of these attitudes Aboriginal stories have been taken and used without permission (Bancroft, 1992).

That’s probably the most important thing . . . When people have come into communities a lot of times they come in and take something and then they go away . . . and our people are left with nothing because their stories have been taken . . . for Koori people to know that there’s somebody there that they . . . feel comfortable enough to ring somebody and ask them about how you go about writing . . . (Interview, Rua)

However the challenge is how to engage the community as the group at Tolu said, “That’s probably the million dollar question” (Interview, Tolu). They suggested that you could get involvement by talking, but getting full participation was a greater challenge. However they also suggested that even an informal approach will plant “seeds of initiative” (Interview, Tolu) and at Rua they stated that:
The community writers’ kit needs to be adaptable to each community . . . you need to be able to pick it up and carry it with you and go down to people . . . at the missions, in the park, down on the river . . . It’s all about going to the people and giving them the opportunity . . . (Interview, Rua)

The groups at Rua and Tolu both thought that if there was a good facilitator, a good communicator, who went into the community and developed relationships with people that it might result in participation. The group at Tolu also suggested events like a barbecue, “Give them a good feed. Fill their mooggles up” (Interview, Tolu). They said that what was needed was an event where the pleasure and satisfaction of being involved in their children’s education could be shared (Interview, Tolu).

The legacy of poverty, low levels of education and literacy in the community, are reflected in Paul’s comments. He suggested that the resources needed in the kit might include, “paper and a pen” (laughter) (Interview, Rua). He also went on to suggest that some people might not have the skills to use the tape-recorder . . . and that not every Aboriginal house has a computer in it (Interview, Rua). This aspect of modern life computer use and access to the internet was one of the indicators of disadvantage used by Vinson in his study of disadvantage in Australia (Vinson, 2007). It is important to recognise that, for some students, access to technology and development as a confident user will only take place in the school context. The comments from all the groups in this study suggest that many of the adults are not confident in the use of technology.

For instance the group at Rua suggested that the kit/resource needed to recognise and meet those needs. “It could have a program that takes you through step-by-step. A resource disk” (Interview, Rua). At all sites there was agreement that training was needed in “usin’ these little gadgets” (Interview, Tolu) and that the support should make using technology
easy “and don’t make the menu like you need a PhD to read it” (Interview, Tolu). There was definite agreement that the use of technology was almost as important as an understanding about literacy because collecting stories also meant going out to the community rather than community members coming to a designated site. “You’re not going to get people to come to you, you got to go to them” (Interview, Rua).

Pat commented, “They need to be able to take photos with the digital camera, download them into a computer and print them off. There will have to be some core competencies that will be done in a training program.” (Interview Pat Smith, 22:11:06).

The participants at all sites recognised that the use of new technologies was central to the local production of stories.

**Summary**

The four communities Dua, Rua, Tolu and Va all participated in workshops to develop books for the *One Mob* books project. Developing local books provided the opportunity to collaborate on a project which focused on literacy. It also valued and included members of the local community as custodians and experts in telling Aboriginal stories using their language in their way. The congruence between home and school is strengthened when the local Aboriginal community’s values and perspectives are shared by sharing their stories. Across all sites the importance of student engagement was linked to the importance of local stories that reflected the students’ lives, culture and language. Academic success was seen as important for Aboriginal students but equally important was the maintenance of culture and Aboriginal identity.

The importance of telling local stories in both an Aboriginal style and using Aboriginal English was highly valued. Participants at all sites also made reference either
explicitly or implicitly to a legacy of poverty and disadvantage. This was realised by the poor health and educational outcomes which had affected the lives of many people in their communities. The dislocation and marginalisation that has resulted from government policies and economic realities have particularly affected the cohesion of Aboriginal communities. The legacy of these policies still impacts on the lives of young people today (Biddle, 2011; Reeve, 2012). Aboriginal families are characterised by their comparatively poor health and educational outcomes which have resulted from these policies (Malin & Maidment, 2003; Reeve, 2012; Schwab, 2012; Tatz, 2009a). The Elders in many Aboriginal communities were denied access to tertiary and secondary education and the education which they did receive was often of a poor standard. However it is the Elders who are acknowledged as the gatekeepers of the culture with valuable knowledge to share.

The contemporary Aboriginal communities, which are represented in this case study, also include ties to other communities across Australia. Authentic Aboriginal stories were prized by all the community members who saw their telling as a way of creating community cohesion by linking the present to past generations (Harris, 1990). These links are across time and space as the big story is shared by Aboriginal communities. Developing Aboriginal cultural identity through telling and sharing personal stories was accepted as a natural traditional and yet contemporary way to share Aboriginal culture and language with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in schools.

In the final chapter I look at the engagement of Aboriginal students and the importance of relationships in an intercultural project like the production of local books. Schools and teachers are now required by National Professional Standards for Teachers (NSWIT, 2012) to identify with the local Aboriginal community and to develop knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal histories and cultures. Similarly, the quality teaching
frameworks such as *Quality Teaching in NSW Schools* (NSW Dept of Education & Training, 2003) or the Queensland *Longitudinal Study of Teaching and Learning* (Hayes et al., 2006) which now inform the work of teachers, require teachers to engage all students but especially Aboriginal students. I will therefore also explore the role of community workers in developing a relationship with the community which could support the sharing of stories and the production of books. Producing local books is a way to share the knowledge of the Elders and to enable all Australian students to hear the echo of the Elders’ voices in our schools.

I think a community writers’ kit would definitely be an advantage for any community . . . it’s definitely needed in the schools . . . there’s still a lot of knowledge from our Elders . . . to be taught to the kids, maybe this is one avenue of doing that. We’ve definitely seen it work here . . . and how well the kids responded . . . it was just amazing. I definitely think it’s going to be a very powerful resource and definitely looking forward to using it in the schools. (Interview, Rua)
In close on 50 years of watching all this, I have yet to see anyone sit down, seriously, for a month, or a fortnight at least, and allow local people, in language or through interpreters, to express what they expect or want from this ‘school business’. Until then, we go on gilding our endeavours, and lamenting the results (Tatz, 2009a, p. 96).

In this chapter I summarise the findings of this research and the implications for the teaching of reading in marginalised communities. While reading pedagogy was not the focus of this research there are pedagogical implications. One is that local stories can engage and the other is the importance of relationships in the success of intercultural projects. It is widely acknowledged that there is a strong correlation between engagement with text, the amount of time spent reading and educational success (Exley, 2007b; Martin, 2006; Munns, Martin, & Craven, 2008; Stanovich, 1986; Tatz, 2009a). Indeed the first step in becoming an independent reader is engagement with text and this aspect of the reading process was prominent in the comments made about the production of local books.

The texts that were viewed as engaging were those which shared stories about the local community, both the land and the people. The local stories were seen as providing a way to share the local history and culture, a history which included poverty, dislocation and marginalisation. This sharing of local stories was also seen as contributing to the development of cultural identity and as a way to bring together the youngest generation and their Elders. One important aspect of this cultural exchange was the language used in the texts (Eades, 2013; Tatz, 2009a). The use of local language both facilitated and constituted
a cultural exchange for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers. However it was the Aboriginal readers who were the focus of most of the comments and there was a clear evaluation of the use of Aboriginal English as supportive for young emerging readers.

Educational success was rightly seen as having its basis in the development of reading and it was acknowledged that Aboriginal students needed support to engage with schooling. In this chapter I discuss the relationships between the communities and the educational institutions and what conclusions may be drawn from the data. I also discuss the impact of these relationships on the process of learning. The role of the Aboriginal community workers in developing and maintaining relationships between the school and the community are also discussed as their roles were identified as pivotal in the project of book development. Finally, I discuss the selection and production of texts and the pedagogical implications of using authentic local texts, including the implications for the professional development of teachers.

Much of the data related to issues that were social rather than educational and the references made to these issues were not always explicit. Rather, there was an implicit recognition that an Aboriginal life would often be a life in which poverty, disadvantage and oppression would have been experienced, either personally or through knowledge of the lives of close family members. The development and understanding of Aboriginal identity was clearly linked to an appreciation of the knowledge held by Elders and shared with the community. Writing at this time in the history of Australia meant that many younger Aboriginal people saw the Elders as those, like the Stolen Generations, who had experienced first hand oppressive racist policies which have now been repealed. The struggles to overcome these policies and maintain a cultural identity were seen as a valuable inheritance that needed to be shared. Interestingly, the relationship to land was also foregrounded in the
data despite the fact that many of the Aboriginal people taking part in this project were not traditionally linked to the land in the local community in which they were now living, other than in the sense that all Aboriginal people, as the first peoples of Australia, belong to the land in this continent.

Throughout this research there has also been a strong thread which connects the concepts of land and culture with that of language and story. Story is defined as a cultural artefact which has its roots in traditional culture but which is also flourishing in contemporary Australia. Many Aboriginal voices are now telling their stories their way and these contemporary voices are using their own languages to tell their stories. The use of an Aboriginal language or dialect including Standard Australian English (SAE), which it has been argued is also an Aboriginal language (Eades, 2013; Shnukal, 1985) is an important aspect of the telling. The language chosen to tell the big story, a collective story, of kinship, identity and reconciliation is itself of importance to Aboriginal readers as it both reflects their lives and confirms their contemporary cultural practices. Taken together, these voices help to tell a “collective story” (Richardson, 1990, p. 128) about who Aboriginal people are and, in the context of this project, what they expect from the education system. By identifying and sanctioning Aboriginal cultural practices in the modern world an Aboriginal identity is constructed which has both an historical and a current form.

The inspiration to start developing local books came to Pat Smith because of one young Aboriginal student. Pat found that his interest waned when he was not reading about something familiar to him so she started to write books about his life to engage him in the reading process.

Because with Reading Recovery you have to have books for the kids and I couldn’t find enough books . . . so we just started making books, he’d tell
me about his goin’ fishin’ with his Pop and all of that and we’d just make books about that . . . So I’d just try and stay two or three books ahead of him. (Interview, Pat Smith, 22:11:06)

Even a commonsense knowledge of literature for young children will indicate that familiar themes and repetitive simple language that is close to oral language helps young readers in their transition from listening and speaking their mother tongue to reading and writing it. Young children have already developed their mother tongue by the time they enter school, so they already have a working understanding of how language is constructed. Pat, in her role as a Reading Recovery trained teacher, realised that the themes and language in the reading materials she was using did not reflect the lives of the Aboriginal children in her school. She went to talk with one of her former university lecturers who gave her this sound advice:

. . . He said ‘For God’s sake Pat’ . . . I’ll never forget him, I love him for this . . . ‘there are enough books written by white, middle aged, middle class women . . . for black kids. Let’s not do that . . . (Interview, Pat Smith, 22:11:06)

It was this advice that inspired Pat to go into Aboriginal communities to hear their stories and start making books which would reflect the language and lives of the members. This process led to her recognition that communities could be supported to develop books themselves on a continual basis if resources both human and material were developed to support the process. She believed this would then provide local Aboriginal communities with an ongoing connection to their local school and would give them a voice in the education of their children. Martin (2006) confirms that a project like this is a positive way to develop relationships between schools and communities:
There are a number of ways schools can do this . . . Implementing a range of cross-cultural strategies – such as building Indigenous perspectives into diverse curriculum areas, drawing on the expertise of the Indigenous community, linking with the home and community wherever possible . . . (p. 33)

Engagement

The role of Aboriginal identity is salient and the importance of developing classroom and school climates that support and celebrate this and then reduce school resistance cannot be underestimated (Martin, 2006, p. 38).

Engaging Aboriginal students in reading is more than possible and in fact has been demonstrated since the earliest days of the colony and up to today (Bamblett, 2013; van Toorn, 2006). Furthermore, Martin (2006) suggests that engagement and the confirmation of identity can be provided by “. . . drawing on the expertise of the Indigenous community, linking with the home and community wherever possible, being mindful of Anglo-European bias in materials, and using culturally familiar and relevant resources . . .” (p. 33). The main pedagogical implications of this study therefore relate to the selection of materials. Rather than just being aware “of Anglo-European bias”, seeking instead to use materials with a positive Aboriginal perspective and then using these “culturally familiar and relevant resources” in the classroom (Martin, 2006. p. 33).

School leaders and also classroom teachers need to look beyond their classroom walls and to include their students’ families and communities if they really want to engage. The importance of this is well demonstrated in Pat’s reflections on the teenage boys at Rua,
who were engaged with the *One Mob* books about sportsmen. Pat’s reflections also indicate why an ongoing local book-making project could be of such great benefit.

. . . those kids were the usual Yrs 7, 8, 9 who were on (almost) permanent in-school exclusion . . . they mostly loitered round our room, played with all the technology, showed me how to use it all, and when they weren't punching each other and swearing, were a great asset. They would have been great to have in our group as workshop participants . . . I never thought of it but I should have . . . they would have been learning some things and teaching me plenty!! . . . and their teachers would have been thrilled to have them meaningfully occupied . . . and not in classes causing havoc. They really loved our sport stories and the yarns and of course the raps . . . I think they would have written great stories for the little kids . . . God! I have all these ideas when I've left . . . (Pat Smith, personal communication, 28 October, 2008)

The development of the book-writing project by *One Mob* books was to meet this need to engage that has also been identified by many others. There are other projects related to the teaching of reading and the sharing of culture in Aboriginal communities and also many single texts written and illustrated by Aboriginal authors and illustrators in both English and Aboriginal languages (Abdulla, 2011; Dixon & Duwell, 1990; Kutay, Mooney, Riley, & Howard-Wagner, 2012; Roughsey, 1971). The key difference in this project was the proposed development of a resource to support ongoing local book development. The focus was on supporting local community members to have an ongoing relationship with the educational institutions in their communities by sharing their stories. The project aimed to
support the production of texts which could meet many of the criteria of a professional
production but which also reflected the everyday interests and issues in local communities.

By involving the local community in the ongoing production of books about their
local area the project was providing a cross-cultural strategy which linked the home to the
school and provided an Aboriginal perspective in the school. Unfortunately after the
development of the third series of books the board of One Mob books decided they were not
able to proceed with this ambitious project. As a result the community writers’ resource was
not developed and only an interim report was provided (Appendix A).

**Ending the silence**

While standardised tests will continue to be used by governments and educational
institutions to assess individual students it must be emphasised that there are systemic
problems which continue to contribute to the failure of Aboriginal students (Biddle, 2011;
Connell, 2007; Freeman, 2013; Lingard, 2010; Smyth, 2010; Vinson, 2007). There are
many views on how these problems may be addressed but the data collected in this case
study tell a story which confirms Tatz’s words that lamenting the results will continue until
Aboriginal families are given a voice in the education of their children. While the teaching
of reading is a very complex area which was not the focus of this research, the selection of
texts for the teaching of reading is a ubiquitous and everyday task in all schools. On the
surface it is therefore a commonsense decision enacted everywhere to provide students with
reading material that will engage and educate. More complex are the social and cultural
issues which make some texts of more interest and value to Aboriginal communities and
their children. It is lack of knowledge about Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal aspirations
(Craven, 1998; Denzil & Widin, 2005) which may prevent teachers from understanding, for
instance, why the use of an Aboriginal dialect is both important and educationally sound (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013).

Storytelling styles and language choices used by individual students are learned from their communities. However many Aboriginal children may be in a school where they are the only Aboriginal child or are part of a small minority of Aboriginal children. Local stories help to bring a community perspective into the school along with the language and storytelling style familiar to the Aboriginal children in that community. All the groups in this research were concerned that young Aboriginal people would lose their culture if it was not passed down so it was important that the children knew that the Elders wanted to share. It was also seen that through sharing their stories the Elders were able to participate in Aboriginal education and at the same time they were able to learn about the resources in the school for teaching English (Interview, Tolu). The importance of the Elders’ contribution to forging contemporary cultural identity cannot be overstated.

“That whole gap” that the Elders fill (Interview, Rua) is one that has resulted from “The Great Australian Silence (Stanner, 1969)” Riseman, (2012) maintained about Aboriginal history in Australia. This is in part because many of those who could share this history did so orally within their own families and communities but not often in writing. However the main reason is that the wider white society did not want to hear these accounts. As Ngaire commented: “All we learnt was Captain Cook” (Interview, Va). Riseman (2012) refers to the work of the anthropologist WEH Stanner who named the absence of Aboriginal people from Australia’s popular consciousness and history as the ‘Great Australian Silence’. As Riseman (2012) contends:

Since the 1970s both non-Indigenous and Indigenous historians have worked to document Indigenous contributions to Australia’s history. This
rise of Aboriginal history, though a fraught process, has been one of the
great strides of Australian historiography. (p. 36)

Kay Mairey suggests it is not only members of the wider society but also Aboriginal
people, especially young people, who do not know about Australian history. This is why the
Elders are referred to so often and why they are accorded such importance and as Kay said,
“they’re the ones who keep us connected to identity and our culture” (Interview, Rua). The
two interconnected issues of identity and engagement are the most important when
discussing Indigenous youth and school retention. As Schwab (2012) notes:

In terms of those 16-year-old early school leavers, I suspect most have not
drifted out or fallen prey to factors of risk, but rather they feel marginalised
and alienated from school and have found it to be largely irrelevant to their
daily lives. Perhaps we should think less about how to legislate them back
into the classroom and worry more about how to support their engagement
with learning and their transition as young adults into adult society. (p. 15)

One step in the process of the transition of young people to adult society is to
connect with adults from their own community who can help them make that transition in a
way that is consistent with the traditions and values of their community. Some Indigenous
students at Toronto University in Canada “described their early schooling as being woefully
deficient of any Aboriginal content, a situation that supports the stereotypical idea of a
vanishing race” (Restoule, 2005, p. 125). A much more positive picture was provided of
their post-secondary experiences at the university. Two of the aspects that were identified as
critical to their success were courses presented with an Indigenous perspective by
Aboriginal faculty who also demonstrated community care and feelings in classes.
These factors resonate with the findings in this research. For many Aboriginal children, especially in urban environments, neither of these might be in place. For this reason a connection with language and culture through the texts students will encounter at school could provide at least a starting point for developing an inclusive curriculum with an Aboriginal perspective and it would be possible to develop another project which facilitated this. Prior to this project Pat had worked in several communities making books with both children and adults. This project was different because Pat was trying to develop strategies to help communities share their local stories on a permanent basis and she hoped that this would also “help kids learn to read in their little local school” (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06).

Institutions and relationships

Pat related a story which she was told by someone from an Aboriginal community. It referred to white people as seagulls that swooped in to communities to carry things away. The sense of injustice expressed in that humorous story indicates that any discussion of the alienation and marginalisation that Aboriginal students experience in schools or in the wider society must start with an acknowledgement of the racism that is at its base and that still exists in our society (Dodson, 1994). Some non-Aboriginal people, especially in this post apology era, might feel that being Aboriginal no longer singles out individuals or communities for discrimination but this perspective is not shared by many Aboriginal people.

As school communities are now focussed on developing the educational outcomes of students from a culturally diverse range of backgrounds, schools and teachers are attempting to engage students in both the classroom and the school. Teachers are now required to
demonstrate their professional competence by meeting *National Professional Standards* (AITSL, 2012) which include an understanding of Aboriginal students’ needs and ways to meet them. Furthermore, in most states Quality Teaching frameworks (Hayes et al., 2006) include a focus on the development of strategies and understandings that will engage and support a diverse range of learners. The theoretical stance which informs these definitions of quality teaching is that “the social, cultural and cognitive are inextricably implicated in student learning” (Alton-Lee, 2003, p. 34). Teachers are therefore attempting to engage and support Aboriginal students by developing quality teaching, which includes the use of narrative as part of the teacher’s repertoire.

However, because there is a national testing regime, pressures are also placed on classroom teachers to ‘teach to the test’. International evidence of the impact of national testing regimes shows that there could also be an impact on a project like this. Au (2008), following Bernstein, argues that:

As teachers teach the tests, shifting knowledge content, knowledge forms, and pedagogies towards that contained within the high-stakes tests, the day-to-day and moment-to-moment realities of classroom interaction, of pedagogic discourse as it is concretely communicated between human beings, are transformed as a manifestation of the evaluative rules in practice. In doing so, as the immediate expression of the pedagogic device, the test-influenced pedagogic discourse thus selects and distributes knowledge, identities, and consciousness as a translation of dominant socio-economic power relations external to pedagogic discourse itself. In this way, we can see how high-stakes tests function as a relay for race and class-based inequalities. (p. 645)
While there is less evidence from the Australian context, which as yet does not have any onerous consequences for ‘failing’ standardised tests, as is happening in other countries, there are still concerns about the narrowing of the curriculum and its consequences: “. . . fears have been expressed by Australian educators that this narrowing of the curriculum as a result of high stakes testing may also be an issue in Australia (Ewing, 2011)”, (Polesel, Dulfer & Turnbull, 2012, p. 11). Therefore any discussion of the pedagogical implications of this research must be contextualised in a discussion of the characteristics of the schools in which Aboriginal children are educated. It is well established that most Aboriginal children live in socio-economically disadvantaged areas so their schools are also characterised by a higher than average number of early career teachers. Singh (2007) notes that, “there is a wide variation in the quality and provision of support that is given to beginning teachers” (p. 344).

In the report The Experience of Education: The impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families. An Educator’s Perspective (Dulfer, Polesel, & Rice, 2012) the authors offer a response to the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test from one teacher in a remote Indigenous school:

We ignore it and it doesn’t impact on us because all our students fail because they are Indigenous students from a remote community and English is their second language and they do not have sufficient skills in English to be able to show their true potential on the tests. (Dulfer, Polesel, & Rice 2012, p. 30)

Requiring students to sit a test in what amounts to a foreign language with the resulting failure cannot send a positive message to the students or their communities and of course this is a school with exactly (?) the students who all teachers are especially mandated
to engage. Teachers are required to administer these tests, so young and inexperienced teachers will find situations like this very challenging and perhaps overwhelming. Teachers usually enter the profession because they are motivated to work with young people so failure to meet the needs of Aboriginal children should not be laid at their individual classroom doors.

Teachers are also often worried about intercultural exchanges as Hayes et al., commented in their study “a number of teachers since the study have told us they are nervous about this dimension in case they get it wrong” (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 75). Getting it wrong is very easy in a busy school where email may be the preferred means of communication for most staff but to work with Aboriginal communities, cultural information and training must be paramount and this is not quickly achieved. Another important aspect of the relationship between the Aboriginal community and the school is that the school will often have a priority regarding Aboriginal students which could be anything from painting a mural to increasing retention. It is important that this priority does not override the wishes of the community members who might not always share the views of school staff. For some communities, “The Great Australian Silence” (Riseman, 2012) may mean that they are keen to tell stories about their local area and these may involve contentious issues, ranging from land rights to relationships with the police.

However “that whole gap” (Interview, Rua), that Aboriginal perspective about Australian life and history to which Kay Mairey refers, can only be filled by the Elders and it is their voices that schools should seek to have heard in their classrooms. Welcoming the community into the school and acknowledging their perspectives and priorities is one way in which Aboriginal students and their families could start to expect that their language and culture will be accorded the respect already given to others. For instance, any school
community would have been delighted by the goal of the group at Tolu who said they wanted “local culturally appropriate readers . . . that will enhance Aboriginal literacy in primary and secondary schools” (Tolu, Tape: 1:5:1). School leaders need to address the issues of language and subject matter and their relationship to identity and engagement and lead their staff in understanding why stories like *Wanja, Pet Crabs* or *Firewood and Rabbits* are not only acceptable for use in a school but necessary. Authentic texts like this are able to reflect back to Aboriginal students that their language and culture are valuable and recognised. Presenting Aboriginal life using the words and stories of the local community was the key to engagement according to participants at all the sites in this study.

The conditions that will confirm Aboriginal identity in the school and support engagement have been identified repeatedly both in this country and by other Indigenous people (Simpson & Clancy, 2005; Restoule, 2005). The presentation of an Aboriginal perspective in educational institutions is the smallest of steps but one which would be appreciated by Aboriginal communities (Martin, 2008; Nakata, 2010; Restoule, 2005). In the absence of Aboriginal staff an Indigenous perspective can be provided through the choice of authentic texts like those produced in this project. Some Indigenous Canadian students requested language courses as this “was seen as a significant step forward in acknowledging and validating the cultures and knowledges of original peoples” (Restoule, 2005, p. 126). Echoing this request Kay Mairee said, “. . . The stories need to be told in the voice of the people, in the language of the people . . . ” (Interview, Rua). Furthermore it was not even adults but Kay’s very young sons who responded so positively to hearing their mother read a book which was written using their language, Aboriginal English (Interview, Rua, Tape: 1:3:1).
While the stories told and the texts produced in this project are in themselves able to educate a thoughtful reader, schools need to build an ongoing relationship with their own local community if educational outcomes are to be improved. As Aboriginal culture has been maintained through oral transmission mediated by kinship relations, it is totally in keeping with traditional culture to share stories and to use narrative to educate the young. As Ngaire commented: “... How are we supposed to make non-Indigenous people aware of our culture if we do not share it?” (Interview, Va). Schools could therefore confirm respect for the cultural knowledge held in their local communities by formally inviting community members to develop their stories for use in the school. Also in keeping with Aboriginal traditions was the collective nature of story development at each site. Traditionally, individuals within communities were responsible as either the owner or the custodian of a site or story but the whole community was also involved at different levels in maintaining a site or sharing in public versions of a story. As Uncle Terry said, so long as the person speaking out is “someone that knows” (Rua, Tape: 1:2:2) it will be acceptable to the community.

The relationship between schools and Aboriginal communities therefore needs to be approached very sensitively by non-Aboriginal people, like me, as from the earliest days of the colony, promises of education for Aboriginal children have always been offered at a great cost to the Aboriginal communities involved (van Toorn, 2006). Many of today’s Elders did not have the educational opportunities of other Australians (van Toorn, 2006) and unfortunately this exclusion continues today (Lokan, 2001; Tatz, 2009a). In remote schools, but also in socio-economically disadvantaged urban schools (Biddle, 2011; Reeve, 2012; Vinson, 2007), Aboriginal students are under achieving compared with other Australian students. Moreover, during this recent period schools have also perpetrated myths about
Aboriginal communities either by not telling their stories at all or by telling lies, like that of Aboriginals as a “vanishing race”, based on unscientific racist ideas which focused on skin colour and racial purity (Dodson, 1994).

Today’s Elders were adults long before Mabo, Wik or the Apology and some of the oldest would also have been adults before the 1967 referendum, and the final repeal, in 1973, of the “White Australia” policy when race was finally disregarded as a factor in the selection of migrants (Australian Government Department of Immigration and Border Protection, n.d.). In short, most Aboriginal Elders grew up and lived as adults in a society with laws based on the unscientific notion of “race”. Ours is a society which used this concept to discriminate against Aboriginal people in every possible way. Despite public acts of reconciliation like the apology, this heritage of injustice and exclusion still impacts on the participation in education of Aboriginal children today, and not only in the later years of schooling. As Biddle (2011) notes:

Perhaps the most policy-relevant finding with regards to preschool is that those children who have a carer who felt they were discriminated against because of their Indigenous status are significantly less likely to be attending preschool. Formal, mainstream education has the potential to be alienating for Indigenous students and their families and the analysis presented in this paper gives circumstantial evidence that ongoing discrimination is a further cause of disengagement from formal education.

(p. iv)

Given this intergenerational impact of past racist policies it is vital for the school to make contact with the local community and to find ways to engage students and community members with the community of the school.
For the school and teachers it is wise to follow Pat’s example and make contact with the Elders, “The bosses”, in an attempt to discover which families make up the “the mob” or “mobs” in their local area (Sansom, 2006). Aboriginal people have a unique understanding of what it is to be a person within an Aboriginal community (Sansom, 2009) and these understandings can be realised by “the colloquial expressions ‘mob’ and ‘boss’” (Mullins, 2007, p. 32) as they reflect the kinship systems which operate in Aboriginal communities across Australia. To understand those relationships requires more than a quick phone call or an email, it requires a polite and possibly lengthy wait before being allowed to meet with Elders or share the information requested, if at all. As Paul said, “It’s about being patient in a lot of communities. Like my pop, if he didn’t know you he wouldn’t let you inside . . .” (Interview, Rua).

The nuances of the social interactions in Aboriginal communities will not always be apparent to non-Aboriginal people who do not fully understand the relationships between the Aboriginal people in the group or the subtleties involved in their interactions. For instance, Eades (2013) points out that using expressions like “might be” or “this is just what I think” (p. 67) are used to distance the speaker from their own suggestions or ideas, as to put forward one’s own ideas too forcefully is confronting and may be seen as self-aggrandizement or “big noting”. Understanding and respecting Aboriginal culture supports the confirmation of Aboriginal identity and is engaging for Aboriginal students. It is now the responsibility of all teachers and school leaders to address these challenges as the first step in improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. It is every teacher’s responsibility to understand their learners and the context in which they are learning as Darling-Hammond (2001) contends:
The interrelations between subject matter knowledge and knowledge of learners and pedagogy make it virtually impossible to think meaningfully about teaching and content without considering learners and context. (p. 17)

**The role of community workers**

The community workers just do know, they know. If they’re trained they’ll know how to do it . . . Training up people who haven’t got the mindset of education, or who haven’t got the mindset of the school, how schools work . . . it’s never going to work . . . The community workers are the glue between the community and the school. (Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06)

During the course of this project Pat developed the realisation that the Aboriginal community workers were the ideal people to implement a resource which would help to develop local stories. Many did not have tertiary qualifications as the criteria for their positions were related to their ability to communicate and engage the local Aboriginal community and their knowledge of the culture. It is interesting to note that in the state of Victoria support roles have been reviewed and changed since this study was undertaken. Now in the new Koori/Aboriginal officer role their title includes the word “Engagement”, as engagement in schooling and literacy is now a nationally agreed challenge, as demonstrated from the new National Professional standards for teachers and the quality teaching frameworks adopted across the country.

However it was precisely this aspect of the community worker’s role, the ability to engage and communicate with the local Aboriginal community, that Pat had recognised would make them the ideal people to develop relationships with their communities and to produce local stories:
I figured out that no matter what I did I was not going to get community people to come regularly to our sessions. I’ve got theories about that, I think life gets in the road of doing regular things, particularly with the endemic poverty, lack of opportunities grandmothers minding kids...

(Interview, Pat Smith, 1:11:06)

How to engage the community, according to the group at Tolu, is “the million dollar question” (Interview, Tolu). Schools and education systems across Australia are focused on trying to engage Aboriginal students in schools (Munns, Martin, & Craven, 2008) and understanding how to engage Aboriginal students is now also a focus in preservice teacher education and accreditation. By producing local books Aboriginal community workers are in a position to support the work of the school and their goals for Aboriginal students. Moreover, extending the Aboriginal community worker’s role to include the development of local stories would seem to be both a natural progression in engaging both individual students and the community and an obvious extension from their existing work in building relationships between the community and the school.

Aboriginal cultures have developed and changed alongside the mainstream culture but without any interest or respect being paid to those changes for most of that time (Goodall & Cadzow, 2009; Gould, 2008; Merlan, 2007). Learning an Aboriginal language, something very few non-Aboriginal people have done, could provide some understandings, as would reading accounts of culture and history but for most people these cannot replace getting to know someone from the local Aboriginal community. Aboriginal workers are again the best people to facilitate an intercultural exchange as they have bicultural understandings as their roles mean they are working with both teachers and school communities as well as the local Aboriginal community.
Understandings about issues within the community necessitate a patient and thoughtful approach and can only be of help to the school community. However for Aboriginal workers there is a tension between the school community and the Aboriginal community, a lack of congruence between the home and the school that they also have to address. As the group at Tolu suggest, if something goes wrong it’s easy for people to jump on one person. The group at Tolu was also very aware that having the community engaged was not the same as having community members actually participate in a project (Interview, Tolu). This tension between wanting to participate in the mainstream and being wary of any extension of government, such as the education system, is a legacy of past policies and practices and this still impacts on the education of Aboriginal students today (Biddle, 2011; Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

Pat Smith’s very early experiences in visiting communities exemplifies the process of getting to know a community and shows how skillfully the Aboriginal workers can facilitate the development of a relationship.

Whatever was on in the community, if the AEWs (Aboriginal Education Workers) would take me, I mean I had to get their trust first, the three girls, the three women . . . looked me over. I didn’t get out to the mission the first day, or the second day or the first . . . visit or the second visit either. It was about the third visit when she said to me one morning, ‘Do you want to come out to the mission with me?’ They checked me out as well . . . not in a ‘right I’m checking you out’. It’s just a subtle . . . here’s another white woman . . . (Interview, Pat Smith, 22:11:06)
The role of the Aboriginal community worker’s role is vital in building trust and explaining issues and priorities in both worlds. This is the place where the clash between Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft, the past and the present (Biddle, 2011) can be resolved with skilful negotiation and the building of understanding. It is the responsibility of all Australian teachers to meet the needs of all their students but all teachers will continue to need support and professional development in their workplace to do this. Therefore, given the present situation it can be seen that there is a lot of work for an Aboriginal community worker to do at both sites.

Furthermore there is a widely expressed desire in Aboriginal communities to educate children in the mainstream system which is equalled by the desire to maintain and continue their own culture and language (Harris, 1990; Restoule, 2005; Scollon & Scollon; 2001; Tatz, 2009a). Finding this balance is a challenge for community leaders, both in Aboriginal communities and in the wider society. Internationally, Indigenous people have not found the balance satisfactory as demonstrated by the continuing loss of culture, land and language (Merlan, 2007; Shnukal 1985; Schmidt, 1990). It is in this context that the Aboriginal worker is relied on by their employer, a school system, to develop contacts with the Aboriginal community. While it is admirable that there is an active attempt to develop relationships with the Aboriginal community there are also an unequal power relationships that challenge the Aboriginal worker.

For instance, in the school community the role of the Aboriginal worker is clearly seen to be a role of working with the community but as the Aboriginal workers are usually not as well qualified or paid as teaching staff they do not have an equal role in the business of the school. Similarly, in the Aboriginal community, because they have a role working for an education system, there may be some community members with whom it may be difficult
to communicate effectively (Biddle, 2011; Reeve, 2012). With this in mind, towards the end of this project Pat offered the participants the opportunity to undertake a “Certificate IV in Training and Assessment”. The focus of the training was their production of local books and provided the participants with a qualification recognised by the wider society for work that directly related to maintaining their own culture and language through the sharing of stories.

Pat negotiated with both the providers of the training and the relevant education systems and then used money from supporters of One Mob books to provide the training at no cost to the participants. Pat’s email to education executives sets out her understandings of what the training would do for the participants and as she was successful in gaining their support for this, it may be assumed that the value of this training was recognised.

The benefits to be had from this initiative are extensive and long term. These AEOs will have far more confidence, classroom skills and presentation skills once they have completed Cert 4. I’m sure there will be opportunities in the future where you will have presentations or programs you want delivered into the community, particularly the local Aboriginal community, and you will have well trained local Aboriginal staff to do just that. (Pat Smith, personal communication, 24 January, 2009)

As the Aboriginal community workers are well aware of the priorities of the school, as well as the relationships and issues in the community, their understandings usually position them as trusted members of both communities. At all sites, it was suggested that the person developing local stories should be known to the community “better someone they feel comfortable with and can go to, and if things go wrong you can blame them” (laughter) (Interview, Tolu), and that there needed to be a “network of support . . . having those
valuable people on board to be able to give you the direction and that to take the writers’ kit and the stories to where they need to go” (Interview, Rua). Through the development of local books, Aboriginal workers have a culturally acceptable way to help teachers to realise what the local community can offer to the school. Their role is vital in supporting teachers because, as Hargreaves (2000) suggests, “Teachers are having to learn to work with more diverse communities, to see parents as sources of learning and support rather than interference . . .” (p. 172).

Pat said she was “guided by what they were telling me” (Interview, Pat Smith, 5:12:06) and what she was being told was that to make local books resources and training would be needed. There was a request that the support should make using technology easy “don’t make the menu like you need a PhD to read it” (Interview, Tolu). It is not surprising that so many of the participants asked for support with technology as “Computer use/access to internet” is an indicator of disadvantage (Vinson, 2007) and by definition most of the Aboriginal people in these roles have experienced social and economic disadvantage just because they come from Aboriginal communities. Aside from support or training with book production itself and the use of relevant technology, the Aboriginal community workers have, in their existing roles, all the important knowledge and understandings to support the development of authentic local stories. They have bicultural knowledge, understanding of Aboriginal language and history and personal relationships with members of the local community, but most importantly they can provide support for both teachers and community members as they are able to develop the trust of both communities.
Selection and production of texts

While it is generally agreed that a focus on a teacher’s professional learning is the most effective way to support the learning of all students (Aubusson, Ewing, & Hoban, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2001; Hargreaves, 2000; Hayes et al., 2006) the choice of texts to be used in the teaching of reading is often based on commercial availability rather than a strong theoretical basis. Most children learn to read in the early years in primary school and there is much support for the view that the development of reading is a problem solving activity which takes place as students develop reading roles, including decoding, by attempting to read increasingly difficult texts (Clay, 1991; Freebody, 2005; Gee, 2000; Gerot, 2000; Jenkins, Stein, & Wysocki, 1984; Kalantzis & Cope, 1993; Krashen, 1992; Painter, 1999; Williams, 1999). However understandings about the development of reading will still vary across sites, especially as regards the selection of texts used to teach reading. Most primary schools have well resourced libraries which purchase and provide both information texts and quality children’s literature but the decisions about the purchase of texts for classroom reading are often left to a wide variety of teachers or groups in the school. These reading materials are purchased in multiple copies for use in guided and modelled reading sessions in the classroom and for students to take home for independent practice. The selection of these texts often excludes quality children’s literature in favour of schemes which provide multiple copies of levelled texts.

The problem is that these contrived texts do not take into account the socio-cultural and linguistic differences between young readers (Bernstein, 1990; Unsworth & Williams, 1990). Also they do not usually provide opportunities to explore meanings and problem solve as they are often simplified, literal texts which as a result do not challenge or engage young readers. When schools purchase sets of readers or reading schemes it is the publisher
that chooses the subject matter, genre and language and as these are commercial enterprises it is obvious they will be focused on engaging the largest number of students possible. It is therefore obvious that students from already marginalised communities will find their alienation further reflected by the materials that they come into contact with in the first years of school. This is at a time when texts are meant to reflect the language, culture, interests and lives of children. Sadly for Aboriginal children they often do not.

There is an incongruence between the home and school for some Aboriginal children, which is realised in discourse as well as language and social relationships. In some cases the differences are so marked that the cultural identity of Aboriginal children is constantly challenged (Alton-Lee, 2003; Biddle, 2011; Moses & Wigglesworth, 2008; Reeve, 2012; Tatz, 2009a). The importance of reflecting familiar subject matter in early reading material is of vital importance. Firstly, as all adult readers understand, it is our prior knowledge of the world which enables us to engage with a character or plot, so the reader or viewer needs to be able to make connections with the text if it is to engage. Furthermore, this connection with familiar subject matter is exploited by emergent readers in their attempts to become fluent decoders (Brice-Heath, 1982; Clay, 1991; Freebody, 2005; Tatz, 2009a) Most adult readers do not read every word when reading (Smith, 1999) but similarly to the predictive text that now aids text messagers, they use their knowledge of familiar subject matter, structures or vocabulary to aid prediction about the text and therefore of the meanings it is making. In the case of emergent readers, pictures often but not always support this ability to predict.

There is an understanding across the Aboriginal communities in this study that engaging Aboriginal students is vital and this is also reflected in the policies and frameworks in education systems. At the level of choice of text one factor may be a lack of
understanding. One way to provide appropriate texts for schools is to create local texts, something which teachers already undertake as a classroom activity. However a rich resource is being overlooked if the local Aboriginal community does not participate in the making of local books and the sharing of local stories. “The point we want to make here is that one of the major functions of a discourse system is to give a sense of identity to its members” (Scollon & Scollon, 2001, p. 260). By inviting Aboriginal community members into the school a two-way exchange (Harris, 1990) may be facilitated between the local school and the local community as has happened in some remote community schools like Yirrkala and Yipirinya (Harris, 1990) where the community participates in bilingual book production using the local languages.

For non-Aboriginal teachers like me, one of the greatest benefits of a project like this is the ability to bring Aboriginal voices and authentic texts into the classroom to share with all Australian students. Because of the history of injustice, racism and poverty many wonderful stories have not been shared with the wider community because the Elders were not literate or, like Paul’s Pop and many of the other members of the groups at these sites, they did not trust non-Indigenous people because of their past experiences. These experiences of older Aboriginal people and the perspective they provide are important for all of us to hear in the spirit of Reconciliation. While the stories produced in the One Mob book project all share a background of injustice and poverty, the way the stories are told allows readers of all ages to interact with them as they are not didactic and most use humour to engage the reader. The stories are important for all Australians and collectively the stories share the same themes of resilience and survival in the face of injustice, poverty and violence.
“Whatever happened 200 years ago, I’ve got over that. All I’m worried about is getting through today, ready for tomorrow . . . Sorry’s not gonna do anything” (Dua, Tape: 2:2:1). Knowing that two hundred years later, Aboriginal people are still amongst the poorest and most disadvantaged in our society provides an Aboriginal perspective on the issue of land rights, let alone Australian history. Families from all linguistic backgrounds struggle to engage their children with many of the oversimplified texts which are sent home from school and for emergent readers, especially Aboriginal emergent readers, this must be a key issue (e.g. Lokan, 2001; Munns, Martin, Craven 2008; Tatz, 2009a). Some of these issues may be addressed through teacher professional development but to develop a thorough understanding of Aboriginal history and culture the local community is a natural starting point and building a relationship with local community members is the best way to develop an Aboriginal perspective on local issues.
Summary

*Where from here?*

Brand new earth is what a decade needs.

This next decade we must take it
to a politically fight harder

This next decade we must produce
our young to crash blacks
who are white practicing acts.

This decade we got to stop
catering off white poison
powers and poison loves.

This decade we got to stop
poisoning in continuum

We’ve got to have greater better
manners towards old people

Love fully we’ve got to arise with violence
to overtake violent emotions.

This decade we must educate academics
we got to not question but
cause actions about answers.

This year let’s all communities
respect and remember

Our creative fighters.
This decade here won’t give
us what we want, so we
Must force the bad expressions.
This decade will be a try to
fix it years for whites
Sure they will seek out their struggles.
Sure we’ll get those young and old upholding
Australian’s dreams to be true blue
But here in the start of the decade
we as blacks are still not given
Truthful traditional cultural land bases
To work on or for. This decade we as
Aborigines must freedom our freedom.
Then after this decade we blacks
Must not state again, but push
The actions in practices and make each
day smile in wintry love respect.
The decade will be a caged times Blackfellas.

(Fogarty, 2012)

This story of this research began with Lionel Fogarty’s plea to Australian educators
to ‘teach us’. His plea was published in 1990 and it is therefore fitting that over twenty
years later we should again listen to what he has to say about what the next decade will
bring. It is interesting then to reflect on the fact that “Teach Us” was addressed to non-
Aboriginal people but in “Where from Here?” he is talking to his own Aboriginal people about the action they should take, “This decade we must educate academics we got to not question but cause actions about answers.” So now the action “we”, the non-Aboriginal teachers and academics, are prompted to take is to listen and respond to Aboriginal people. Lionel Fogarty is an eloquent spokesperson for his community and this case study has presented a chorus of voices which accord with his.

While individual teachers cannot right the wrongs of the past or bring about the changes which would return the Aboriginal people to their traditional lands, they can and should listen to their stories. It is through these stories that they can develop the empathy, understanding and respect for Aboriginal culture and language that will support Aboriginal children in their local schools. The stories are also valuable for non-Aboriginal children because they provide an insight into both traditional Aboriginal culture and contemporary Aboriginal lives.

Experience, the starting point for all stories, whether it be part of an author’s own life happenings or the observed and vicariously felt experience of others, is then shaped by language. The vocabulary and language patterns of true literature are harmonious with and attuned to the initiating experience, and are expertly and cunningly crafted by the author’s skill and aesthetic sense. (Saxby, 1993, p. 57)

By listening to Aboriginal people’s stories we are given the privilege of sharing their experiences. Moreover these personal stories are told in the language and in a style used by Aboriginal people within a tradition of storytelling which has developed over millennia so the reader is able to interact with a living culture by bringing their own understandings to the text.
Aboriginal stories, especially dreaming stories, are too often presented without a cultural or linguistic context, let alone a discussion of the inferential or symbolic meanings of the text (Martin & Rose, 2008). In his discussion of literature Maurice Saxby (1993) talks about the important interactive relationship between the author and the reader and foregrounds the literary qualities of the stories produced in this project:

Literature, then, is a two-way interactive process. The reader brings to the text – both verbal and visual in the case of illustrated books – his or her perception of real life experiences then takes from the text what the author and/or illustrator has to offer; but in proportion to the reader’s previous experience and literary environment. So enrichment from reading is a spiraling process. Each new book that is assimilated into the reader’s experience provides new insight that can be brought to bear on the next book read – provided the book is true literature and has something worthwhile to offer. Disembodied basals and carefully tailored reading schemes are usually exercises merely for the sake of exercise and lead the reader nowhere. (Saxby, 1993, p. 60)

Discussion of the relationship between the author and reader is vital if teachers are to understand why “disembodied basals and carefully tailored reading schemes” are not suitable material for engaging students, especially Aboriginal students. Furthermore, those schemes not only fail to reflect the lives of Aboriginal students but also certainly do not reflect the language or storytelling style. These are vital aspects of reading; what the reader brings to the text and also what the reader takes away. In approaching a text Paul says, “Koori kids seem to respond better to the way they hear language being spoken at home than
the way it’s being spoken at school . . . they tend to struggle with it a bit more at school because that’s not how they hear it at home . . . ” (Interview, Rua).

In a genuine two-way exchange (Harris, 1990) reading authentic quality literature written from an Aboriginal perspective using Aboriginal English is an education for non-Aboriginal readers at the same time that it confirms the identity of Aboriginal children. Furthermore it supports students to develop literacy because the use of language patterns, which are familiar from students’ oral language, are presented in a written text. Teachers need to be supported to focus more strongly on engagement in reading and to focus not on the teaching of reading but on the development of self-motivated readers. Moreover, that understanding needs to be supported by an acceptance that most Aboriginal students are learning English as an additional dialect and that when they enter the school or pre-school they are developing both language and bicultural understandings. Shifting the pedagogical focus from reading instruction to engagement with reading could be made by a more careful selection of texts which can instruct, engage and support through the use of Aboriginal language to tell Aboriginal stories in an Aboriginal style: “A big advantage for the writers’ kit is to maintain that language that we speak . . . (Interview, Rua).

Because of policies which have marginalised and oppressed Aboriginal people, a culture of silence has developed and many issues which matter to Aboriginal people have not been part of the discourse of the school. The relationship to land and tradition and the language or languages which are used in the community were and are all important issues for Aboriginal people. This case study provided an opportunity to hear how a legacy of poverty and disadvantage has shaped the lives and views of contemporary Aboriginal people and how important it is to them to maintain their cultural identity which has been forged by these experiences. At the same time there was an absolute agreement that Aboriginal
children should be encouraged to engage in their education and it was strongly suggested that to hear and read about the life they experience at home in the language of the home was a positive way to engage young Aboriginal students.

It is up to schools and the institutions which support them to continue to try and develop relationships with communities. It is this aspect of schooling which can be supported by a well trained community worker who can help to build bridges between the school and the community and can help individual parents, carers and teachers to work together to tell their stories and to engage and support their children. One way to do this is through the production of local texts, as this type of joint project is a genuine metaphor for Reconciliation. When a text is produced by members of the local Aboriginal community and then selected by teachers to engage students in reading, the stories of Aboriginal people, told in their own words are introduced into the lives of all the children in that class. This enables a real cultural exchange to take place as the stories are honoured in the Western tradition of the dominant culture when they are published and shared. Moreover, as well as sharing the subject matter, the language and style of the story are integrated into students’ understanding of English and one of its many varieties and Aboriginal students have the positive experience of hearing their home language used in the school.

This study can never be exactly replicated as it is itself a story told by many voices over space and time, and this is its strength. Those individual voices have told a story that resonates with many others told by Aboriginal people and those who have listened to them. In this sense the findings of this research could be easily replicated by anyone willing to listen to Aboriginal people as it is their collective story which is being told. While many changes have been made it is still important to continue to listen to contemporary Aboriginal voices as well as Aboriginal voices from the past that have continued to call for education
for their children. It is time to listen again to the words of the late Oodgeroo Noonuccal from *My People*, first published in 1970. This was written before Mabo, before the apology, but unfortunately it is still a timely message for everyone who professes an interest in the education of Aboriginal students.

*The Teachers*

For Mother, who was never
taught to read or write
Holy men, you came to preach:
‘Poor black heathen, we will teach
   Sense of sin and fear of hell
   Fear of God and boss as well;
We will teach you work for play,
   We will teach you to obey
Laws of God and laws of Mammon…’
And we answered, ‘No more gammon,
If you have to teach the light,
Teach us first to read and write.’

References


Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) NAPLAN. Retrieved from http://www.nap.edu.au/naplan/naplan.html


Fredericks, B. (2013). ‘We don’t leave our identities at the city limits’: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in urban localities. Australian Aboriginal Studies Journal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1, 4-16.


Partington, G. (1998). “In those days it was rough”. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and education. In G. Partington (Ed.), *Perspectives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education* (pp. 27-54). South Melbourne: Thomson Social Science Press.


“One Mob” Readers:

Some of the following titles from the above series are cited in the thesis. For ethical reasons, because the authors of some of these titles are quoted in the interviews under pseudonyms, I have not identified the authors individually.

Series 1, 2003
Titles in this series are:
- In the bush
- Me and my Mum
- What we count, then and now
- Having fun at school
- Me and Priscilla get ready
- In Redfern
- The emu egg
- Ms Johnstone to the rescue
- Locked out
- The Min Min
- All the questions you ever wanted to ask Adam Goodes

Series 2, 2004
Titles in this series are:
- An Indij sport report The Preston Campbell addition
- Michael O’Loughlin inside the Sydney Swans
- All about Jada
- Nan and Dad and me at the zoo
- Pet crabs
- Raps 4 big fullas
- Raps 4 little fullas
- Wanja one smart dog
- Our rooster, Jack
- Teachers guide series two: Indij readers for little fullas,
  For big fullas

Series 3, 2007
Titles in this series are:
- What I wanna be
- Our Aunty Sharon
- Fat head
- Bush tucka, good tucka
- Little fullas rap at the games
- Firewood & rabbits
- Dreamtime at the ’G
- Lake Mungo our story
- An Indij Sport Report: XV111 Commonwealth games Melbourne
Appendices

Appendix A: Interim Report

**Researching the Development of a Community Writers’ Kit & Series 3 Literacy Resources**

Robyn Ewing and Kathy Rushton
University of Sydney

_The only way we are going to survive is to come together as one. Our children have to learn to put it together with their cultural background. If they don’t, they’re lost (7/11/06)._ 

**Introduction: Background and Purpose of the Project**

Indigenous literacy levels have long been of great concern in Australia. While according to international benchmarks (eg PISA) when compared with other western countries most Australian students are high literacy achievers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students do not perform at the same level. In addition, many ABTSI students experience difficulty during their education and, consequently, are more likely to leave school early. Many fail to pursue further formal educational qualifications and find this lack of education an issue when pursuing satisfying employment possibilities. A long history of racial discrimination, inadequate funding of appropriate education programs and a lack of understanding of the complexity of the issues have all contributed to this alarming situation.

Current literacy research (eg Cambourne, 2006; Louden et al, 2006) coupled with research about quality pedagogy (eg Education Qld, 2000; NSWDET, 2003; Lingard & Hayes, 2005) demonstrates that cultural relevance, links with prior background knowledge and engagement are vital factors if children are going to learn to read. Indigenous and non-Indigenous students alike need opportunities to read and engage with Indigenous stories. Literacy success correlates highly with self-efficacy and often leads to increased achievement at school and opportunities for higher education.

“One Mob” is a not-for-commercial profit cultural organisation that has developed and published contemporary authentic Indigenous reading materials, “One Mob” Series 1 and “One Mob” Series 2 and related resources, for the past thirteen years with the intention of:

- impacting significantly on Indigenous literacy levels and academic outcomes for Indigenous students in Australia;
- promoting and supporting Indigenous authors, arts and artists;
- celebrating storying and storytelling; and
- contributing to Reconciliation.
All authors and illustrators are Indigenous Australians. Three genres feature in the two series: narrative ‘yarns’, biographical recounts and poetry raps. To date the materials have been adopted by more than 10% of Australian schools with 20 titles currently in circulation.

In addition, in 2006, “One Mob” launched a project aimed at developing both a Community Writers’ Kit (CWK) to help build the capacity of Indigenous communities to develop culturally relevant reading books alongside its third series of literacy resources. As the project brief (2006, p. 1) states:

*There is a need for a story-writing guide for Indigenous communities to record their stories and develop them into desk-top published booklets for local use that will encourage an interest in reading. Giving community workers and teachers the resource to develop interesting, local stories will encourage reluctant readers into reading because the stories will have relevance to the students.*

Pat Smith, the “One Mob” founder, Director and CWK Project Leader expressed the need for the CWK as practical because development of the first two series had been extremely *hands on and labour intensive to produce a story and it’s only one place at a time* whereas a kit would *help kids learn to read in their little local school* (Interview, 1/11/06). In developing the project brief a wide group of stakeholders were consulted, including:

- Indigenous elders and parents in the relevant research contexts
- Departments of Education and Training
- Primary English Teaching Association
- Aboriginal Education Consultative Group

Without exception, stakeholders were encouraging and confident of the educational value of such a project.

When complete the CWK will include a manual, DVD, website help and software to facilitate both the writing and book production process. A professional development program will support the resource. Teachers, Aboriginal Education Assistants and local community members will be able to use these resources to develop their own stories for publication and classroom use.

**Anticipated Project Outcomes**

- The Community Writers’ Kit including manual, DVD and software
- Increased titles of books to provide more variety
- Increased knowledge, self awareness, confidence and participation of Indigenous school students and their parents
- Increased knowledge and understanding of Indigenous perspectives for non-Indigenous students and their families
- Community capacity building for each research site
- Recognition of the participants’ roles in the development of the CWK and series three books
- Certified professional learning course
- Presentation at the 8th World Indigenous Peoples’ Conference in Melbourne in 2008
- Various conference and journal articles
The Researchers

Associate Professor Robyn Ewing and Kathy Rushton, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney were invited to be academic partners and research assistant to research the project. Their brief was to observe and document the development of the CWK and series 3 literacy resources in order to record their evolution ethnographically, provide advice as critical friends and also to evaluate the project and the resources that were developed. This would enable the identification of the factors which build Indigenous literacy and a community’s capacity to develop culturally relevant texts. Ultimately other culturally diverse community groups that wished to develop culturally meaningful texts could use the process and would have access to the CWK.

Ethical considerations

Permission was sought from all indigenous community group members in each context and all data collection methods were negotiated with the project participants. It was envisaged that up to 10 community participants in each context would work on the project with Pat Smith, the Founder and Director of “One Mob”. Each participant would receive a small honorarium to be involved in the development of the CWK. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Sydney Ethics Committee.

Funding

The research component of the project received $55,000 funding inclusive of GST.

Stages of CWK development

Four stages were envisaged at each research site:

- Meetings and discussions with elders and other community members
- Working with participants to develop stories
- Setting up text production
- Focus group discussions/interviews with participants about the CWK process

All stages of the process were to be videoed and audiotaped.

Research contexts

Initially, “One Mob” chose four discrete and distinctively different contexts to work with community groups to develop the CWK.

In late 2006 a decision was made to extend the project and visit a fourth site in August 2007.

Methodology

The researchers used an ethnographic approach. Although not able to be present at each research site they were part of the first two days at one site and visited some of the other sites. Most of the sessions with the AEAs and other participants were both audio and videotaped and field notes were
Interim Findings

Each site was different but in all cases it was imperative to build a trusting context in which participants were prepared to take risks and share their knowledge, experiences and understandings. Each site is described separately below.

Dua

The CWK Project commenced Monday 27 February, 2006 at the Dua site. This particular site has been the most challenging to date largely because community volunteers were not regularly able to be involved and there were a number of crises occurring at the school at the time of the project. Each session was different and sometimes other issues from the school overflowed into the small meeting room – for example, working with a child excluded from the classroom for difficult behaviour. An opportunity for some students to interview a highly influential Elder who had been involved in the Freedom Ride in the 1960s was arranged and this led to some discussions about lack of formal education for many older Aboriginal Elders and the after effects of the stolen generation policies. The most enthusiastic Elder sadly passed over during the project. Several curriculum consultants were also able to be involved.

As the founder of “One Mob” commented:

At first I thought there’s something the matter with our model . . . I figured out that no matter what I did I was not going to get community people to come regularly to our sessions . . . life got in the road of doing regular things particularly with the endemic poverty . . .” (Interview, 1/11/06).

Nevertheless this context demonstrated clearly that at times a range of difficulties can get in the way of the development of a CWK in a particular community and the process itself may not be the problem.

Rua

Fewer issues within the Rua school community meant that the sessions in this primary school were not disrupted and there was an extremely positive atmosphere during each session, evidenced in the video and audiotapes.

The principal released two Koori educators, Kay and Paul, to work on the project. Nevertheless it was still early days in the development of the process and Pat Smith felt that she was:
still treading water . . . I sort of jumped straight into ‘this is how I do stories’

instead of doing all that rich tapestry, discussion and talking . . . laying down

the groundwork that communities, that people do when they’re telling

stories . . . (Interview, 1/11/06).

Despite the feelings of the Project Coordinator, the participants were extremely positive about the process and have already shared it with a range of other schools and AEAs. At the focus group discussion several key moments were highlighted:

If we hadn’t visited the old people’s home we wouldn’t have known

or heard those stories from the old people. Their experience is so
different to ours . . . they’re the ones who keep us connected to our

identity and culture . . .

Both Kay and Paul acknowledge strongly the role of the Project Coordinator and how much they had learnt in the development of the stories:

. . . she (Pat) gave us the confidence . . . she instilled in us the belief

that we could actually come up with things and do things . . . our people (Kay)

need people like Pat, who respect us and respect our culture . . .

She definitely has been priceless in her sharing of knowledge and her

wisdom (Paul).

Several Rua participants presented at an Aboriginal Studies Association Conference.

In summary, five stories have emerged from the research sites.

Tolu

We explored the extent and the depth of the experience and knowledge that the AEAs and ACLOs had . . . we valued the local knowledge, the cultural knowledge and the experience of their lives.

At Tolu the Project Coordinator worked with Aboriginal Education Assistants and the Aboriginal Community Liaison officer to develop four stories. The focus group with the Tolu participants talked about the importance of children learning about their own culture and history and sense of place but also how critical it was for the Elders to pass down their culture, have a say in Aboriginal education and learn something about the resources in the school for teaching English (interview with Tolu participants, March, 2007). They also provided important advice about how to initiate the CWK process in a community:
By the time Pat arrived at Tolu she was much more confident with the process she had developed and felt it was more systematic. She had focused on a more structured, step-by-step style including daily lesson plans with warm ups and ice-breakers. The participants from Tolu have already presented on their involvement in the project to teachers at a nearby school. These comments from the focus group demonstrate how much enjoyment of the process is critical for the participants:

*I just loved every minute of it . . . I love the talking bit, I don’t like the writing much . . . I’d be only too happy to be involved in any sort of writing workshop that is going to help our children in education especially in the literacy area . . .*

**Va**

Discussing the lack of confidence exhibited by participants at each research site, Pat commented:

*. . . that’s a thing I’ve had to overcome in each group . . . so I decided the way round it was to do confidence building things . . .*

She chose activities that were fun but built confidence and self esteem at the same time and they were activities incorporating drama that she thought the AEAs could in turn use with their students.

By the time she reached the Va context she felt the process worked well and she was able to use some of the Tolu work as exemplars:

*I was able to refine what I did at Tolu exploring what they knew, what their experience in life was about. At the centre of the workshops was this bio that they all put together. After we explored them orally we put them down in point form, their dreams, their goals, their families, their experiences in life. None of it was scary.*
Preliminary Outcomes

To date, all those who have participated in the CWK project have used their knowledge in the development of local stories and the sharing of the process. There are ten books in publication. The participants in each context have made important suggestions about how to develop community involvement while acknowledging that it will be different in each context. A range of components that must be part of the resource itself have been identified. Kay’s comment in the Rua focus group discussion provides a very valuable summative comment at this point in the process:

*It’s not about Indigenous people getting language acquisition but it’s about us using our language as a platform to say, well we’re goin’ to make sure our kids read and write in terms of who we are as Indigenous people and our culture . . . This is not the end it’s only the beginning . . . we look forward to what comes next!*

* For ethical reasons some words have been removed and pseudonyms have been used in the presentation of this Interim Report.
Appendix B: Human Research Ethics Committee Approval

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<th>Completion Date</th>
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<td>May 2006</td>
<td>2009</td>
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**SECTION 1**

**Researchers current contact details**

**Chief Investigator**
- **Title**: Prof
- **Name**: Robyn Ewing
- **Department or Full postal address**: Faculty of Education and Social Work
- **Phone 1**: 13846
- **Email**: robyn.ewing@sydney.edu.au

**Co-Investigator / Student Researcher**
- **Title**: Ms
- **Name**: Kathleen Rushton
- **Department or Full postal address**: Faculty of Education and Social Work
- **Phone 1**: 13846
- **Email**: kathleen.rushton@sydney.edu.au

Please copy, paste and complete table for additional researchers.

**Number of Subjects**

**Location where the project was conducted**

Melbourne, Sydney, Preston

**Please advise if any publications resulted from this study**

A PhD thesis referred to in a number of publications.

**Was the approval subject to certain conditions? Have these conditions been met?**

No, applicable.
Please provide details of any unanticipated issues that have emerged in the course of the project. For example, serious or unexpected adverse incidents, or effects on participants.

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Have the approved procedures for confidentiality and security of data been followed? Please give details. Please describe the current arrangements for the storage of data

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SECTION 2

Please provide brief details on the outcomes or benefits resulting from the research and any further avenues of research, which may have opened up as a result. The Committee is particularly interested in your comments on ethical issues.

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Appendix C: Permission to Display Images

From: [infob@i.com.au]
Sent: Friday, 11 April 2008 10:58 AM
To: Kathleen Rushton
Subject: Permission to Display Images to Students

Dear Kathy,

permits the Faculty of Education at the University of Sydney to use images and text on its lecture/tutorial webpage and for any other educational purposes. The images/graphics are on our webpage. To access the graphic you need to follow a link then type in the username and password.

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Kind regards

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*For ethical reasons some words have been blocked out in the presentation of this Permission to display images.
Appendix D: Interview Questions

Community Writers’ Kit Draft Interview Questions 9 January 2007

1. What do you think helps kids to be really good readers?

2. Do you think reading stories about local people and places will help kids be better readers? Why?

3. Is it important to have people from the community, especially Elders, involved in making books? Why?

4. What is the best way for someone to get community members involved?

5. Is it important for the organiser to be a member of the community or could anyone do it? Why?

6. What do you think a Community Writers’ kit should have in it?

7. What sort of training, if any, would be needed for someone to use the Community Writers’ kit that you are thinking of?

8. Would you like to make any other comment about the Community Writers’ Kit, your participation in the workshops or anything else?