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Indigenous Values Informing Curriculum And Pedagogical Praxis

by

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M.Ed (UTS); B. Ed (UTS); Dip. Ed. (UTS)

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Deakin University
February, 2007
I certify that the thesis entitled

**Indigenous Values Informing Curriculum and Pedagogical Praxis**

submitted for the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy**

is the result of my own work and that where reference is made to the work of others, due acknowledgement is given.

I also certify that any material in the thesis which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by any university or institution is identified in the text.

Full Name  Shayne Thomas Williams

Signed  …………………………………………………………………………

Date  …………………………………………………………………………...
I would like to advise Indigenous readers that the following material contains references to Indigenous people who are now no longer with us. Their words continue to inform our fight for equity and social justice.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of

my nephew’s family
  Joanna,
  Keithy John
  Brenda-Lee
  and
  Glenn Jnr

my father
  Thomas Henry Williams, OBE

my sister
  Clara Mason
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and pay tribute to the following people:-

members of my family:
my Mother, Iris Boronia Lillian Williams (nee Callaghan)
my Father, Thomas Henry Williams, O.B.E.
my eldest Sister, Clara Mason (nee Williams)
my twin Sisters, Brenda Longbottom (nee Williams)
Beverly Simon (nee Williams)
my Aunt, Ellen James (nee Williams)
my Brother-in-Law, Leo (Sonny) Mason
my Grandmother, Emma-Jane Callaghan (nee Foote/Foster)
my Aunt, Alice Ardler (nee Callaghan)
my Uncle, Harry Callaghan
my Aunt, Ruby Leslie (nee Williams)
my second Cousin, Aunty Vera Holten (nee Smith)
my second Cousin, Uncle Leeton Smith
my second Cousin, Aunty Rita Scott (nee Holten).

my wife
Ruth Williams
Your belief in me has kept me strong and positive.

my son and daughters
Hugh, Shannon, Emma-Jane and Rebecca Williams
It is with my children’s cultural future in mind that this thesis has been written.
It is as much a part of my children’s cultural heritage as it is mine.

my Goumbaiggir mentor
Uncle Len Silva

my supervisor
Associate Professor John Henry
Your knowledge and courage of commitment to the advancement of Indigenous Education is truly exceptional. Your unique insight made all the difference in helping me feel comfortable with academic study. I sincerely thank you for all your advice, support and guidance without which I could not have completed this thesis. You understood and encouraged my cultural position and dedication to Indigenous cultural sovereignty. You have my deepest respect and admiration. As we say ‘you’re deadly brother’.

my co-supervisor
Wendy Brabham
I cannot overstate how pivotal you have been in providing me with a deep sense of cultural comfort. Your responsiveness and eagerness in guiding me and assisting me has been instrumental in encouraging me to succeed. The feeling of cultural warmth that you have achieved with the Institute of Koori Education and student residences is incomparable. Wendy, you are a strong Koori advocate for our people.
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ABSTRACT

As an Indigenous research study into the cultural quality of Indigenous education this thesis focuses on the proposition that mainstream education marginalises Indigenous learners because of its entrenchment in the Western worldview. The thesis opens with an analysis of the cultural dynamics of Indigenous values, the politics of Indigenous identity, and the hegemonic constraints of West-centric knowledge. This analysis is then drawn upon to critically examine the cultural predisposition of mainstream education. The arguments proffered through this critical examination support the case that Indigenous learners would prosper culturally and educationally by having access to educational programmes centred within an Indigenous cultural framework, thereby addressing the dilemma of lower Indigenous retentions rates.

This research study was conducted using a qualitative Indigenous methodology specifically designed by the researcher to reflect the values and cultural priorities of Indigenous Australians. Collective partnership was sought from Indigenous Australians, whom the researcher respected as Indigenous stakeholders in the research. Collegial participation was also sought from non-Indigenous educators with significant experience in teaching Indigenous learners. The research process involved both individual and group sessions of dialogic exchange. With regard to the Indigenous sessions of dialogic exchange, these resulted in the formation of a composite narrative wherein Indigenous testimony was united to create a collective Indigenous voice.

Through this research study it was revealed that there is indeed a stark and deep-seated contrast between the value systems of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. This contrast, it was found, is mirrored in the cultural dynamics of education and the polemics of knowledge legitimacy. The research also revealed that Australia’s mainstream education system is intractably an agent for the promulgation of Western cultural values, and as such is culturally disenfranchising to Indigenous peoples. This thesis then concludes with an alternative and culturally apposite education paradigm for Indigenous education premised on Indigenous values informing curriculum and pedagogical praxis. This paradigm specifically supports independent Indigenous education initiatives.
NOTE OF RECOGNITION

This thesis is the result of a collaborative effort. In recognition of this I acknowledge the outstanding contribution made by all the Indigenous stakeholders and non-Indigenous participants who directly engaged in the research. I thank all of you for giving generously of your time and your knowledge. I express my esteem for all the Indigenous stakeholders who are unequivocally co-owners of this research. I feel humbled by the trust you have shown me in yarning with me about our cultural business, and for sharing with me your thoughts and ideas about our education. I sincerely hope that each of you feel a strong sense of connection with this work. It is a thesis written in honour of our unity and our cultural sovereignty. I likewise respect the valuable contribution of all the non-Indigenous participants. Your dedication and strength of commitment to Indigenous education is deserving of particular acknowledgement. Educators of your calibre are our strongest allies in our struggle to realise culturally appropriate educational opportunities. I very much appreciate the wisdom of your experience, and your insight into the machine of education.
INDIGENOUS CULTURAL PREFACE

Ever-present in our consciousness as Indigenous Australians is a deep felt sense of pride in our identity. It is our identity as Australia’s first peoples that characterises our cultural distinctness relative to the rest of Australia, and it is through our identity that we assert our social, cultural and political autonomy. In a very real way our identity is our last frontier in terms of our resistance. It is precisely because identity is so pivotal to us that I, as a matter of cultural responsibility, begin by affirming the cultural identity of this work. First and foremost this thesis is a medium for Indigenous knowledge; it is a thesis for us mob. With this in mind the text has been intentionally written in a conversational style; a style that I believe respects and supports our cultural orality.

As for research, bitter experience has exposed research to us as a tool for the distortion, misinterpretation and misuse of our culturally sacrosanct knowledge. Because of this we now require to know up-front who is conducting research on us, about us, and why. From this comes an Indigenous protocol whereby researchers are under obligation to identify themselves to the Indigenous peoples they hope to engage in their prospective research. In accordance with this protocol I am absolutely under obligation to clarify my identity as an Indigenous Australian. Identifying who I am and where I come from is a cultural ethic that I strongly advocate and deeply respect. I have therefore included an Indigenous Identity Profile of myself on the following pages as a cultural prologue to my actual thesis.

Throughout the text I use the term Indigenous in preference to Aboriginal. I am aware that the term Indigenous is most often used to denote both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures of Australia. As an Aboriginal Australian it would be culturally inappropriate of me to presume that the cultural voice of my thesis is also that of the peoples of the Torres Strait. As a matter of cultural respect I have limited my use of the term Indigenous to Aboriginal Australia only. I do, however, hope that my thesis will also hold significant cultural meaning for Torres Strait Islander peoples. My motivation is to contribute to the advancement of educational services for both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and indeed Indigenous peoples throughout the world struggling to reclaim their cultural sovereignty.
INDIGENOUS IDENTITY PROFILE

Myself - Shayne Williams
Community: La Perouse, NSW

My sister - Clara Mason
(maiden name Williams)

My Father’s Family:-

My Father - Thomas Williams, OBE

My father was born in Sydney in 1922. He lived the early part of his life at what was commonly known as the Aboriginal Camp at Salt Pan Creek, in Southern Sydney. Dad later became well known throughout Australia for his involvement in Indigenous Affairs at the national and NSW state level.

My Grandmother - Dolly Williams
(2nd marriage Harrison, maiden name Anderson)

My Grandmother was born at Cummeragunja in the Moama District of NSW in 1905. My Grandmother’s parents were Hugh Anderson, who was born at Rushworth Diggings which lies on the border of the traditional lands of the Ngurelban (Ngooraialum) and the Bangerang peoples of mid-west Victoria, and Ellen Anderson born at Five Islands, Wollongong, NSW, which is located in the traditional lands of the Dharawal.

My Grandfather - Thomas Williams Snr

My Gomilaroi Grandfather was born at Coonamble, NSW. My Grandfather’s parents were Thomas and Betsy Williams of the Gomilaroi peoples.
My Mother’s Family:-

**My Mother - Iris Williams**  
(maiden name Callaghan)

My mother was born in Sydney in 1922. At the time of her birth Mum’s family lived on the Aboriginal Station at La Perouse. Mum is a well known Dharawal Elder of Sydney.

**My Grandfather - Athol Callaghan**

My Grandfather was born in 1884 in the Macleay Valley district on the mid-north coast of NSW, which is located in the traditional lands of the Dhungutti. My Grandfather’s parents were Harry and Ellen Callaghan of the Dhungutti peoples.

**My Grandmother - Emma-Jane Callaghan**  
(2\textsuperscript{nd} marriage Cook, maiden name Foote, also known as Foster)

My Dharawal Grandmother was born on Frenchman’s Beach, La Perouse, Sydney in 1884. My Grandmother’s parents were William Foote and Kate Foote (later known as Foster then Saunders). My Grandmother was a well-known Aboriginal midwife and health worker.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCING THE STUDY

1.1 Conceptualising the Research – A Personal Preamble

When we Indigenous peoples get together conversation usually begins with yarning about family; about kinship; about culture; about country. I can’t rightly recall a time when this hasn’t been so. “Where’s your mob from Bro?” How often have I heard this question, indeed how often have I asked it. This is, for us, the cultural way of getting down to business. We rarely discuss anything without yarning about our mob first. It is certainly why I’ve opened this thesis with my Indigenous Identity Profile. Telling about identity, however, is just our conversational start point. When we have particular matters to discuss we bring what’s on our mind into the conversation through story. This process of ‘storying’ is not simply a matter of stating the bare facts as is common in Western forms of communication. In this case, with this thesis, it is about me creating a holistic picture of my research. This means detailing all the factors that define the environment of the research, including my thoughts, feelings, motivations and visions. This is our way, this is my way, and so, having already related my cultural identity, I move on now to introduce you to the background of how I conceptualised my research.

Long before I ever contemplated the idea of enrolling in a doctoral programme I had spent a good deal of time pondering the interchange between Indigenous peoples and Western forms of education. When I actually sat down and purposely tried to recall how my thoughts on education developed I realised that my qualms about education have actually been with me since I was a teenager. I remember as a teenager Mum telling me a story about how Dad had been denied the award of dux at his primary school simply because he was black. I was not surprised by this story; it seemed entirely familiar. Being unsurprised, however, didn’t mean that I didn’t feel hurt, I did. This story, to me, typified the testimony I’d heard from other Indigenous families, who, like my family, can recount many such stories of marginalism. What happened to Dad and our peoples is omnipresent in my mind; it drives me to continue working for cultural justice in education. In my mind’s eye I went back over my own experiences within Western education and felt over again the shame, the anxiety and the injustice I had felt when I went to school. The more I thought, the more troubled I became.
I now recognise that my unease with mainstream education grew exponentially with my cultural education. As I matured culturally I began to question the cultural worth of mainstream education. At the same time I became more and more conscious of our social and political circumstance. I saw starkly the social and political degradation of our peoples, my family and myself. How could I not? Even to this day the mere look of me can still invoke a racist reaction. The accumulated effect of this experience took me beyond hurt and anger; it led me into a process of introspection that sparked in me a deep interest in the framework of society and the role of education in nurturing that framework. As my thoughts and ideas evolved I looked to mainstream education with a critical eye. I thought about what Uncle Leet had told me when I was young. He said of mainstream education, “it doesn’t teach you anything”. In saying that he was referring to cultural education, he didn’t see any cultural relevancy in mainstream education for living life as a Dhungutti Goori. He was a great believer in cultural education. He educated us in our language, our life ways and knowledge ways. I was lucky enough to have been one of his students.

I come from a large extended family strongly bonded through cultural kinship. I know everyday how privileged I am to have had the opportunity to listen and learn from our family’s cultural Elders. As my teachers they gave me my cultural knowledge. Together they instilled in me a deep sense of spirituality and a heartfelt sense of cultural pride. Of all my teachers my father’s spirit guides me most closely. My father was a quiet and unassuming man, but he was powerfully proud of his Aboriginality. I have never forgotten his profound sense of social justice. He never once acquiesced to the view that we were an inferior race of peoples. Through all of his dealings with non-Indigenous bureaucrats, from mission managers to politicians, he never let anything break him. His spirit and identity were far too strong for that. I remember he always said of politicians, “they always want you to say what they want to hear”. But Dad always said it like it was. Dad negotiated to take me out of school so that I could travel around the nation with him whenever he met with other Indigenous peoples to talk about our land rights and the like. It was his strategy for exposing me directly to the reality of the struggles that our cultures face.

Just like Dad my sister Clara was proud to be Aboriginal. Clara said, “always remember you’re Aboriginal before anything else”. Clara’s words emulated those of
our father who said, “we’re born a blackfulla, and we’ll die a blackfulla”. Their words underpin all my thinking, especially about education, and articulate our sense of living black. Living black is what my brother-in-law Sonny is all about. Sonny said that he didn’t care what work he did as long as he lived as a blackfulla. He always enjoyed himself spearing fish and living off the land. His bond with the sea is the same bond that lives so deeply within me. The sea is as our blood; it runs through the core of our being as saltwater people. To be away from the sea is like sickness to us. This sense of spiritual connection, reinforced in me by Sonny, was equally amplified in the teachings of my mother, a pivotal educator in my life. Mum has always been wonderfully strong about the maintenance of our culture. Through her I have learnt to understand and appreciate the integrity of our culture and the truth of our history. Mum’s practice as a cultural educator has helped me galvanise my thoughts about education in terms of curriculum and pedagogy.

I cannot overstate how focal our spirituality is to us; it is our life guide. Mum’s mother, Nan Callaghan, and sister, Aunty Alice, were deeply spiritual; they taught me how to stay true to my spirit. I carry with me the spiritualism of all my cultures. I remember how I used to see Aunty Vera on Sundays, and how she would share with me her Dhungutti knowledge. Aunty Rita Scott too would tell me stories of my great Grandmother, Granny Callaghan. Aunty Rita recalled how they would line up behind Granny Callaghan to face our ceremonial mountain and learn our life ways by copying her dance. Uncle Leet, Aunty Vera and Aunty Rita are ever present in my life as cultural guides. Guiding me also is my Aunty Ruby, a strong Gomilaroi woman, who taught me so much about survival. As a young woman Aunty Ruby was taken from her family under the pretence of paternalistic government policy and pushed into domestic service (Read n.d). Aunty Ruby might have been taken but Grandfather Williams never lost sight of where she was. Aunty Ruby didn’t ever stop to feel sorry for herself; she kept going no matter what. Aunty Ruby taught me to be staunch in my identity as a blackfulla.

To be honest it would take many more pages to fully chronicle all my other cultural teachers who have, over the course of my life, shaped my being. My purpose in writing briefly about my heritage is simply to give an impression of how dynamic my cultural education has been, and continues to be. It is because my cultural
education has been so strong that I feel the cultural chasm that exists between Indigenous education and Western mainstream education. For me this chasm is most stark when I think about our spiritualism, but I see it also in social and political terms. You see I grew up on a government controlled Aboriginal reserve in metropolitan Sydney. When I was born ours lives were still governed by the impositions of a mission manager. It wasn’t until 1967, when I was 7 years old, that some change started to take place. That’s really not that long ago. The ‘that was then this is now’ attitude holds minimal currency with me. When I think about education I remember the social, cultural and political repression that our peoples and my family have endured. The culturally oppressive policies and practices of past governments’ and missionaries still permeate into our present.

It was required of us that we reject our life ways and knowledge ways. The resistance of our forebears against such crushing oppression is to me beyond admirable; it is heroic. It makes me all the more humbled to have been advantaged with a cultural education, and it demonstrates clearly to me just how determined our forebears were to keep our cultures and identity alive. It is a founding factor in my position on cultural sovereignty and Indigenous education. To appreciate the tremendous hardship that our forebears faced in safeguarding our culture you need look no further than the operations of missions like La Perouse where I grew up. La Perouse wasn’t so very different from any of the other missions our peoples were confined to. We were all paternalistically viewed as puerile and condemned as primeval relics of the past; purposeful only as human curios. In the case of La Perouse it was particularly so. Our location on the shores of Botany Bay and our accessibility in being situated in Australia’s largest city made us an ideal tourist attraction. During the late 1800’s to mid 1900’s many tourists made the trip to La Perouse just to see ‘the natives’.

At La Perouse as far as the missionaries were concerned the only permissible aspects of our cultures were those that generated revenue. Members of our community were allowed to make and sell artefacts such as boomerangs, but weren’t encouraged to revere anything else of our cultures’ (La Perouse: the Place, the People and the Sea, 1987). Successive mission managers made it their business to keep us in check. As Mum wrote, “they had this thing about us, that we were uneducated and we didn’t
know that much about living” (La Perouse: the Place, the People and the Sea, 1987, p.17). We were deemed assimilable provided that we eradicate from our consciousness our cultures. Growing up and learning about our history was emotional business. I have always had tremendous pride in our survival, but I have also felt anger. In the comfort of my family and community I felt self-assured and secure in my Aboriginality. I knew through our social circumstance that the wider community viewed us as different, but the negativity of that difference was never more apparent than when I went to school. I learnt quickly that the legacy of colonialist thinking was alive and well, and pervaded education.

School was an alien and uncomfortable place that I was compelled to go to. I saw no worth in going to school; it was for me a place created for white people. I felt barely tolerated. The teaching fraternity in the schools I attended assumed that as an Aboriginal my only merit lay in a supposed cultural predisposition toward a sporting prowess. Any prospect that I could have academic interest or potential was simply disregarded as highly improbable. Coupled with the aggression openly foisted on me by non-Aboriginal staff it’s a wonder that I matriculated; yet I did, despite them. School held nothing for me in terms of my own cultural development. It did not strengthen me in my identity as an Aboriginal person, nor did it provide me with any sense of acceptance in the wider Australian society. Schools did not have Aboriginal Education Assistants, or Aboriginal Studies courses and never acknowledged Indigenous aspirations. I left school at the age of seventeen with a reinforced notion that we were shunned as citizens of Australia. For many Indigenous people of my generation and older, education was characterised by alienation. School for me was one of the most suppressive and constraining experiences of my life.

I returned to education as an adult through Tranby Aboriginal Co-operative College. I immediately felt the contrast between my early schooling and the culturally affirming environment of Tranby. At Tranby my Aboriginal identity was reinforced. I felt as though I belonged. At school we would stick together in order to feel safe; we feared being one out. Tranby on the other hand felt socially and culturally safe. Without that feeling I don’t think I would have re-started my education. At the time I went to Tranby I was still suffering from the recent loss of Dad. I needed direction in my life. I wanted to gain skills so that I could contribute to our fight for social
justice the way Dad had done. I wanted to honour him by following in his footsteps. I also wanted to prove to my non-Indigenous detractors that their characterisations of me as an Aboriginal were inexcusably fictitious. From Tranby I moved on to study at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) where I completed a Diploma and Bachelors degree in Adult and Community education, and a Masters degree in Adult Education. My success at Tranby gave me the confidence to enrol in the Aboriginal Program in education that UTS had by that time developed.

Near the end of my studies I became an academic with a metropolitan university. As an academic I gained valuable insight into the myriad of issues that impinge on Indigenous educational achievement, and further insight into the educational experiences and cultural aspirations of Indigenous learners. It became clear to me that the values I reflected in my teaching influenced the relationships I had with my students. As an Indigenous lecturer my starting point was always to make an immediate connection with my students through kinship and history. How well my lectures went paralleled directly with how effective I was in Indigenising my teaching approach and my curriculum. The differing and specific social and cultural backgrounds of my students presented me with a diverse mix of Indigenous peoples. This, however, was never an obstacle for my teaching practise because I sought to unify my students by focusing on the commonalities that exist in our histories, our cultures, and our social experiences. My time as a lecturer helped me to realise more completely just how oppositional Westernised curriculum and pedagogical praxis is for Indigenous students.

Not surprisingly, the majority of my students recounted similar schooling experiences to myself. All of my students were adult and in the main chose to return to education in order to gain knowledge and skills useful to their own communities and families. Many of my students believed that they had located a course that was culturally relevant. It was, however, far less culturally sustaining than I would have liked. Any orientation toward Indigenous culture was, in my view, superficial. For me it was not, and is not, enough to simply decorate the place with Indigenous iconography. To be frank I found the whole experience of academia rather stressful. It was painful and distressing to see Indigenous students struggle in what is essentially a foreign system. It always seemed to me that a gulf existed between
what the students wanted and expected educationally, and what they actually got. The cultural aspirations of the students, in my view, ran second to the number crunching need to prove that the programme was succeeding. Through my academic experience I learned just how important it is to critically reflect upon what is being taught, why it is being taught, and how it is being taught; in other words, critical reflection on curriculum and pedagogy.

I thought too about the educational experiences of my children, and the children in my extended family. As a parent and uncle I became very concerned about our children’s cultural integrity. I can see that changes have taken place in schools. Aboriginal Studies units have now been introduced and greater attention is being paid to local Indigenous communities. Despite this, I still don’t perceive any significant change in the reported educational experience of our children. Our children still appear to be esteemed more for their sporting ability than their intellectual capabilities. Ethnocentrism is less overt now, but that does not mean that it doesn’t exist. Indigenous children are still very misunderstood at a cultural level. Because our family’s kids do not live a tribalised existence they are assumed to be Westernised, but this attitude is ill-informed. Indigenous students are expected to compete and perform according to Western dictates, even though they disdain this for fear of being shamed. I am unable to see any shift toward building their cultural self-esteem. Like me, they haven’t gained any meaningful cultural affirmation through the mainstream. The strength of their identity has come through family.

As an educator I conducted myself according to the cultural principles I had learnt growing up black. By being true to my identity I found that I always stood outside the system. I was never really comfortable and I sure didn’t fit the mould. NAIDOC, sure; flags, yes; black, yellow and red posters, absolutely; but it takes far more to make education Indigenous. What I saw was a system ensconced within its own culture. I asked myself how do we ensconce our education within our own cultures? I looked to the matter of infrastructure. In education, in terms of the classroom, infrastructure is curriculum. But the success of curriculum hinges on the praxis of teaching, and that’s pedagogy. Whatever system of education we have, at the end of the day it can only be as good as the curriculum and pedagogical praxis that supports it. I then asked myself what is it about our cultures that sustains our
identity? The triad spheres of living: the social, cultural and political must surely be underpinned by values. I then realised that our social, cultural and political values provide constancy in our identity. It therefore seemed logical that if education is to have an Indigenous identity it needs the informing strength of our values. By February 2002 my ideas came together into what became a proposition for research.

1.2 Synthesising a Proposition for Research

Synthesising a proposition for research began for me with distinguishing a concern that I thought would be academically researchable. By meditating on the polarity between my cultural education and mainstream schooling I was able to visualise my anxieties about Indigenous education, so this was an obvious place to start. It was completely apparent that I was most conscious of our cultural sovereignty and educational autonomy. It therefore seemed reasonable that these issues combined should define the broad thematic concern, or sphere of interest, for my research. My next move was to shape these issues into a hypothesis, which is basically a theory, from which a specific problem for research can be identified. I had to condense and channel all my thoughts and feelings, which was by no means easy. In the end it came down to me introspectively questioning why I felt so pessimistic and sceptical about Western education. In the back of my mind I kept going back to reports that I had read that tell us that despite the considerable effort that has gone into redressing Indigenous educational disparity, sustained Indigenous educational participation, particularly beyond the compulsory years of schooling, continues to be problematic.

When I juxtaposed the problem of Indigenous engagement with education against the thematic concerns of cultural sovereignty and educational autonomy several poignant questions came to mind. I asked myself why is it that many of us settle for only a rudimentary level of education; is there something blocking our educational path; is our reluctance to continue with education a form of resistance to Western education; and if that’s the case, why shouldn’t we have a culturally founded alternative educational choice? In thinking about probable answers to these questions I revisited my own educational experiences. This is where my stance on Indigenous identity and my conjecture about Indigenous values came to the fore. In weighing it all up I concluded that many of us continue to feel disenfranchised from, and disillusioned with, Australia’s mainstream education system. This led me to theorise that we
cannot unquestioningly embrace an educational enterprise that blatantly promotes a value system that is entirely oppositional to our Indigenous worldview. My hypothesis unfolded for me: mainstream education marginalises us because of its entrenchment in the Western worldview.

My hypothesis prompted me to construct four key contentions that would enable me to shape the direction of my research. I concluded that:

- because of its fixity in the Western worldview Australia’s mainstream education system is not structured to advance learning programmes that expressly affirm our culture and promote our Indigenous identity
- Australia’s mainstream education system can really only offer programmes that are assimilationist in nature because their programmes are anchored within the Western worldview
- the dichotomy that exists between Indigenous values systems and the Western value system substantiates a need for alternative Indigenous education initiatives that offer a genuine cultural choice for Australia’s Indigenous peoples
- genuine cultural choice in education means access to an educational structure founded within our own worldview and underscored by our own values.

In effect the first two key contentions directed the focus of my research towards an exploration of the social, cultural and political machinations of Australia’s mainstream education apparatus. By taking this direction I established the ground from which to dispute the alleged neutrality of mainstream education by arguing that Western values are promulgated right down to the classroom. Not surprisingly the disposition of the mainstream classroom arose as a major point of interest for my research. I was moved to consider the prospect that mainstream classrooms are predisposed towards the constriction of Indigenous cultural identity because they decontextualise Indigenous knowledge. I therefore built into my research the notion that the values entrenched within mainstream education counter Indigenous family and community efforts to ensure the integrity of our cultural identity. In sweeping all of this together I saw a need to widen my research to encompass the issue of how non-Indigenous society characterises us. I saw the relevance of looking into
characterisations of our cultures that have us cast as primitive and/or exotic when our life ways are tribal, and less Aboriginal when they are not.

Having set the foregrounding informational parameters of the research I then reassessed my research hypothesis from the perspective of a problem in need of resolution, hence the other two key contentions. As a case in support of independent Indigenous education initiatives these contentions sat nicely with the thematic concern of the research. They harked back to the solid and undividable relationship I see existing between cultural sovereignty and educational autonomy. From my perspective Indigenous independent education viably redresses the preconditioned nature of mainstream education by creating an amenable climate in which to foster Indigenous cultural sovereignty. My finalised proposition for research was unveiled: we Indigenous Australians are more likely to feel de-marginalised within education when we have access to education programmes that are entrenched within our own worldview. The only job left to do was to decide on the specific approach I would take in relation to the research proposition. I simply synthesised my ideas about Indigenous values and identity to arrive at a study into how Indigenous values can inform curriculum and pedagogical praxis, as shown in the following visual synopsis.
1.3 Establishing the Indigenous Context and Identity of the Research

Once a proposition for research has been synthesised the proposition has to be set within a context. This means that the proposition needs to be rationalised in terms of the concept of the research and the presuppositions from which it is intended that the research be understood. In addition, when research is conducted as an Indigenous endeavour protocol advocates that the proposition should also be grounded within an Indigenous identity (Williams 2001; 2005). Both context and, in my case, identity are pivotal in transitioning the research proposition from a generalised notion into a focused field of inquiry. Context and identity together reach beyond perspective by helping to disclose the core nature of the research. In thinking about how best to elucidate this I was reminded of a very apt metaphor offered by eminent culturalist Raymond Williams (1989). In a piece written about film Williams took an allegorical look at the lens of a camera as if it were an eye that saw not only what was immediately visible but also saw the non-visible viewpoint that gave meaning to what was being seen. To me this metaphor characterises well the effect of context and identity. Combined they are the lens of my research.

It would, of course, be easy for me to simply say to you that the lens of my research is Indigenous, but to me that seems insufficient and in need of elaboration. This is why I find the lens metaphor so applicable; it really helps me to explain to you the mind’s eye of my research. You see it is from within my own worldview, an Indigenous worldview, that I perceive, analyse and interpret everything. All my thoughts and feelings get filtered through the metaphysical knowledge that defines who I am as an Indigenous person. This is my sense of spiritualism, and it is this that empowers my research. My research has to me a cultural and a socio-political life. There is an energy to my research that is a mix of my sense of Indigenous spiritualism, my sense of Indigenous identity and my sense of Indigenous socio-political positioning. This positioning, I think, was fittingly captured by non-Indigenous academic Anthony Moran when he stated, “the indigenous of Australia have never signed treaties to relinquish their rights to the land, nor have they ever agreed to relinquish their sovereignty” (2002, p.1024). So it is my social, cultural and political sense of Indigenous being that is the lens of my research, and it is our spiritualism, collectivism, autonomy and sovereignty that provide its focus.
Having clarified the essence of the context and identity of my research I am now able to move on to rationalising my research as a legitimate field of inquiry. Perhaps the best place to start in this regard is with statistics. Statistics are relatively handy in that they often provide a crisp snapshot of a given situation. As pure data though statistics can be read from differing viewpoints. Interestingly, Indigenous educational participation illustrates this rather well. For instance, figures released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] from the national census held in 2001, show that 115,465 Indigenous students were enrolled in both primary and secondary schools, which represents a substantial increase on the 1991 figure of 72,249 (ABS 2003, pp.1-2 of 6). Likewise the number of Indigenous students recorded as enrolled in vocational education and training numbered 58,000 (ABS 2003, p.3 of 6), whilst tertiary enrolments amounted to 7,342 (ABS 2003, p.4 of 6). This brought the total number of Indigenous students within these categories to 180,807 for 2001. When compared with the 2001 census population count of 410,003 Indigenous Australians (ABS 2001b, p.1 of 9) Indigenous educational participation doesn’t look too bad.

Since the 2001 national census further encouraging figures have been released. According to data collected through the annual National Schools Statistic Collection census the national Indigenous primary and secondary school population rose to a total of 125,892 (National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2003, 2005, p. 26), and again in 2004 to 130,447 (ABS 2005, p.27). This means that in the period 2001 to 2004 a further dramatic increase has taken place in the national Indigenous primary and secondary population of 14,982 students. As for vocational education and training, figures collated through this sectors annual census show that in 2001 enrolments were 58,046, peaking in 2002 at 59,763, then falling in 2003 back to 58,087 (National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2003, 2005, p. 153). Annual national higher education statistics too show enhanced enrolment figures with 8,988 Indigenous students reported in tertiary programmes for 2003 (National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2003, 2005, p. 159). This represents an overall increase of 1,646 students on the 2001 ABS figure.

At face value these statistics certainly demonstrate that Indigenous educational participation is on a healthy increase. Undoubtedly it would be reasonable to

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conclude that the variant strategies implemented to redress Indigenous educational disparity have had a constructive impact. My question, however, is do the above statistics really show accurately all that’s happening in Indigenous education? Without wishing to be unduly pessimistic I do query the front message implied by these statistics. I take heed of statistical disclaimers such as that published by the ABS (2001a), who make it clear that their census data is not irrefutable by citing, as a determining variable, inconsistencies in interpretations of and claims to Indigenousness. The Department of Education, Science and Training likewise advise that the statistics they rely upon need to be considered with reference to a range of variables (National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2003, 2005). Notwithstanding this, or indeed any other factors that may have impacted on the above statistical findings, a more in-depth inspection of official statistics does reveal a more sombre image of Indigenous education.

When the above figures are broken down the statistical picture begins to change. It becomes apparent that problems with Indigenous educational participation do still exist. Starting with the 2001 ABS school enrolment figures, aggregated these show that 68% of students were enrolled at the primary level, 26% were enrolled at the junior secondary level, with only 6% enrolled at the senior secondary level (National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2001, 2002, p.31). The low percentile for years 11 and 12 suggests that many Indigenous students leave school by year 10. On the other hand the 2003 senior secondary statistics show a 16.5% increase in Indigenous year 12 numbers, but when translated into grade progression ratios things look less promising. Indigenous students still have not reached parity with non-Indigenous students in progressing through to year 12 (National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2003, 2005, pp. 26-29, 150-151). As reported “…three out of ten of the year 10 cohort of Indigenous students leave school compared with one out of ten non-Indigenous students” (National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2003, 2005, p. 29).

That many Indigenous students continue to withdraw from schooling by year 10 was similarly reported at the state level. New South Wales Premier Morris Iemma, relying on the results of a recent New South Wales Department of Education review,
told my local area newspaper that, “…only 36 per cent of Aboriginal students in Year 10 go on to Year 12, compared with 68 per cent of all students” (Grafitti 2005, p.38). Exacerbating this is the likelihood that Indigenous senior secondary school students are unlikely to gain a competitive UAI, an achievement score used to induct students into tertiary study (National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2001, 2002, p.47; National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2003, 2005, p.41). Similarly 57% of Indigenous students undertaking vocational or tertiary study enter their respective programmes with a prior education level at or below a year 10 standard, with 32% holding no formal qualifications whatsoever (National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2001, 2002, p.72 & 89). These are significant factors not immediately obvious when looking purely at enrolment figures.

Aside from the issue of retention, problems with literacy and numeracy standards as well as absenteeism still attract significant attention (National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2003, 2005). On the whole it would seem that there are a number of factors that negate the optimistic impression of increasing enrolment figures. Even with all that has been done, and continues to be done, it still appears unlikely that in the foreseeable future Indigenous engagement in education will attain parity with that of the non-Indigenous population. Indeed Brendan Nelson, the former Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training, admitted as much. It wasn’t so long ago that he wrote, “…accelerating Indigenous educational outcomes is proving elusive”. He noted that, “overall, we are slowly moving forward but at a pace that means that educational equality is some way off for Indigenous Australians…” (National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2003, 2005, p. iii). Personally I find this somewhat troubling given that the current National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy [AEP] has been in existence since 1989, some seventeen years.

As the official government guideline that drives all that is done in the name of Indigenous education the AEP sets out 21 goals that prioritise and promote our presence and involvement within mainstream education. Moreover, the policy directs that our histories and our cultures be acknowledged and respected. In 1998, nine years after the policy was first introduced, it was stated that the policy’s
“primary objective” was “…to bring about equity in education for Indigenous Australians by the turn of the century” (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP)...1998, p.3). Six years on from the turn of the century equity remains unrealised. My purpose though in pointing all this out is not to deride what has been done to date. Rather my intention is to demonstrate to you that the current circumstance of Indigenous education is such that it remains worthy of further critique. The current circumstance of Indigenous education certainly suggests to me that there is merit in re-visiting and exploring, perhaps from a different angle, the question of alternative independent forms of education as one strategy in addressing the issue of Indigenous educational disparity.

In the main my impetus for re-visiting the notion of independent education stems from my personal reflections on education. My confidence that independent education is a strong strategy to look at was however boosted through reading the parliamentary reports on Indigenous education and training, and the AEP. The overall message I gained from reading these documents is that there is an accepted direct and unequivocal correlation between Indigenous inclusiveness and Indigenous educational success. Of particular interest to me were the organisations heralded in the latest parliamentary report for their educational successes. All of the organisations showcased operate under strong Indigenous influence, and are focused on Indigenous needs. Former Federal Minister Brendan Nelson termed them, “…lighthouses for others to show them the way” (National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2003, 2005, p.iii). Indigenous involvement at all levels, and culturally inclusive curriculum are recurring themes. The point that respect of Indigenous identity furthers Indigenous educational success coupled with the point that upward trends in Indigenous enrolment figures belie the full picture of Indigenous educational participation creates, for me, an interesting picture.

My Indigenous eye tells me that the government concedes that it is altogether necessary to uphold our Indigenous identity in order to secure Indigenous educational success. It is to me an unqualified recognition that our identity is not something that we will relinquish. To me this not only establishes a solid basis from which to argue in favour of independent education, it also suggests that a more critical exploration of the socio-cultural framework of Australia’s mainstream
education system is in order. By taking a social, cultural and indeed political point of reference I find myself better positioned to carry out a study based on my research hypothesis. My aim is to give greater focus to a crucial cause that I believe precludes the attainment of consistent and sustainable outcomes in Indigenous educational participation. It all harks back to the development of my concern about our values. From the standpoint of my Indigenous lens I maintain that there is a stark and deep-seated contrast between the value systems of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia, and that this contrast is mirrored within mainstream education. When we enter mainstream education we bring with us social, cultural and political values, which collide with the Western value system.

In terms of my own schooling I found that the values I held were the antithesis of those I encountered in the mainstream. I can’t imagine that it wasn’t, and isn’t, the same for many other Indigenous peoples. It was therefore with great interest that I read the observations of non-Indigenous educator Gary Partington who noted that, "for Indigenous students, the school is the principle border along which their culture and the dominant culture meet, and it is marked by rejection and oppression” (1998, p.20). I was impressed with the accuracy of these words, rejection and oppression is exactly what I felt. Not only was this daunting, it was for me marginalising. There was always a danger that we would feel pressured into denying aspects of our value system in order to succeed. It must be remembered that for many of us the school environment is the place where we come face-to-face with Western culture, often for the first time. As Indigenous spokesperson Peter Buckskin says, “the imperative to achieve reconciliation requires us to look at the counter values that underlie our education and training system and that constitute a major impediment to the achievement of educational equality for Australia’s first inhabitants” (2002, p.162).

In order to better explain my position regarding the values orientation of mainstream education I would first like to briefly refer to the work of French intellectual Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu, together with his colleague Jean-Claude Passeron (1990), emphasised the impartiality of education by arguing that all education, that is “pedagogic action”, takes place within a “cultural arbitrary”. Whilst Bourdieu & Passeron in the main applied this concept to social class structures I have found it equally applicable in illustrating the arguments I submit regarding socio-
cultural/socio-political structures. One of the most thought provoking contentions in the work of Bourdieu and Passerson (1990) is that all pedagogic action is embedded within a “power relationship”. It is, for me, a logical line of reasoning. When I think about the process of education and the teacher-learner relationship I find no difficulty in agreeing that it does involve both an underlying worldview and a power relationship, no matter how latent they appear to be. These fundamental concepts form the core of the approach I have taken in arguing that Australia’s mainstream education system is not neutral, but rather embedded within a particular “cultural arbitrary” or as I see it a cultural reality and rooted in particular relations of power.

The thinking of Bourdeiu and Passeron (1990) is very much a part of what is often termed the critical tradition. To a great extent the theoretical views of the critical tradition have been very informative in helping me intellectualise my Indigenous eye. As prominent critical theorist Peter McLaren says:

> Theorists within the critical tradition examine schooling as a form of cultural politics. From this perspective, schooling always represents forms of social life and is always implicated in relations of power, social practices, and the privileging of forms of knowledge that support a specific vision of past, present, and future. (1995, p.30)

It is through reading the work of critical theorists that I have come to understand all the more that schooling takes on the business of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990; Williams 1981). Non-Indigenous academic Ian Stewart reiterated as much when he stated that, "schools and educational institutions are neither neutral nor value free. As instruments of state policy and control, they embody the decisions made by a wide range of people in the political, economic, social and cultural arenas of our society” (1989, p.248).

It would, of course, be easy to argue that my concerns are ill founded from the point of view that culture is not the business of educational institutions, but rather the business of family. I believe, however, that this thinking is fundamentally flawed. Within Australia the Western cultural formation dominates. All aspects of society, including education, operate according to the precepts of a Western worldview that is informed by Western values. As non-Indigenous academic Barry Osborne attests, “our Westernized cultures have come to dominate variously by force, by legislation, by infiltration and even by seduction. Over time as we have come to dominate - we have pushed indigenous and other minorities to the margins” (2001, p.41). It comes
as no surprise to me to learn that mainstream education, particularly at the macro level, is concretely and irretrievably located within the Western worldview. My reason for highlighting this point is not simply a matter of mere criticism on my part. This point is foremost in demonstrating that mainstream education is at the most fundamental level quintessentially a foreign entity for us. Somehow, we are expected to find space and fit into an education system that is quite frankly not of our “cultural arbitrary”.

That we have to find space and fit into an education system not of our own cultural reality means that we must also contend with knowledge constructs and an ideology not of our own cultural reality. This is perhaps exemplified most plainly in non-Indigenous misconstructions of our identity and our cultures. Non-Indigenous academic David Hollinsworth (1998) reiterated that we continue to be subject to Western characterisations that portray us as ‘exotic’ and ‘primitive’. We are beleaguered by images that cast our identity and cultures as static, and therefore extraneous to modern Australian society. To a great extent this archaic line of thinking found credence through the discipline of anthropology. Indigenous academic Colin Bourke (1998) duly points to early anthropology as spawning rudimentary images of us. These images, in my opinion, have been used to justify our suppression. Non-Indigenous Australian’s are still remarkably naive about us (Hollinsworth 1998), and will continue to be so unless they are exposed to the unsanitised version of Indigenous dispossession. For too long Australia’s nationalistic imagery has been reproduced through a censored history that has failed to recognise the magnitude of our domination.

Because Western forms of knowing pervade within Australian society we accept that we need to acquire aspects of Western knowledge, but we do not wish to do so at the expense of our identity and our own knowledge ways (Buckskin 2001; Buckskin 2002; Iverson 1985; Snowdon 1982). Our educational aspirations have always been centred on a demand that education programming give prominence to our identity and cultures (Buckskin 2002; Rigney 2002; Williams, White & Stewart 1993). As much as I defend these demands I am pessimistic about their full realisation within the mainstream. How can it be otherwise? Whichever way we turn we are confronted by the Western worldview, and challenged by its values. Assimilation is
a force that we contend with every day, in every aspect of our lives. As Raymattja Marika, one of Australia’s most respected Yolngu educationalists, poignantly testified, "Yolngu [Aboriginal] have to demonstrate that we have continued to hold onto our values, otherwise we lose ourselves in this ever-changing world and are accused of being a Balanda [white]” (1999, p.3 of 9). In making this statement Raymattja Marika reminds us of just how strong this force of assimilation is.

The cultural quality of education we receive has long been of paramount concern to me. It is interesting though that whilst the possible infusion of our cultures into mainstream programming has produced a plethora of documentation there seems to have been minimal attention given specifically to the issue of values. There are several articles that take up the issue of values directly, for example: Bourke 1979, 1998; Byrnes 2000; Buckskin 2001; Collard et al. 1994, Iverson 1985; Snowdon 1982, but overall values are usually only vaguely mentioned. Non-Indigenous academics Colin White and Gerard Fogarty (1994, 2000-2001) have attempted to quantify our values through research using the Schwartz values survey. My first response to such surveys is that they tend to rely upon Western cultural fluency. Whilst they might reveal useful data they are not, in my view, appropriate for encapsulating the cultural metaphysics of Indigenous values. Fogarty and White (1994) acknowledge as much in noting that there is a possibility that values may not hold the same meaning for non-Indigenous Australians as they do for us. To me the only people who truly understand the inference of our values is us.

The issue of cultural context remains utterly pivotal to me. It is precisely why I ended up conceptualising my own interpretation of an Indigenous research methodology for this study. This methodology, which I designed as a reflection of our values and cultural priorities, drew upon unstructured methods that afforded in particular potential Indigenous contributors to the research the requisite cultural space in which to establish my cultural credibility, and locate themselves culturally within the research. As it happened I invited fellow Indigenous Australians, which I considered stakeholders in the research, to discuss with me their perceptions of our values, their views and experiences of mainstream education, and their thoughts on how best to develop an education structure that articulates our cultural needs and aspirations. Non-Indigenous educators too, experienced in teaching us, were invited
to discuss their impressions of mainstream education, and the feasibility of developing a curriculum and pedagogical structure that reinforces our identity and our cultures. As a distinctly Indigenous undertaking my research represents a unique study into a subject that is material to the future of Indigenous education, but which remains hitherto under explored.

My research is framed within our struggle for control and ownership over our education. Underpinning this struggle is our right to real self-determination and self-governance. My research is therefore ingrained in our fight for Indigenous cultural sovereignty, and wholly committed to the securement of our educational autonomy. Indigenous academic Lester-Irabinna Rigney (2002, p.75) has made a compelling call for “Indigenous jurisdiction of Indigenous education”. My research takes up this call. As Lester-Irabinna Rigney poignantly stated:

> The status quo is no longer acceptable. Nor is the spectacle of Indigenous failure. No longer is it justified for the magnifying glass in the sun to be focused on the so-called ‘Aboriginal deficit’. Rather, robust analysis and critique of educational systems, structures, and jurisdiction must be interrogated for their role in inequality. (2002, p.79)

Through my research I present a case that I feel justifies the need for Indigenous independent education initiatives. It is, from my viewpoint, a matter of choice. Are we not entitled to have equal access to a comparable platform for our own education; an education located within our own cultural reality?

### 1.4 Structuring the Research as a Thesis

What you have read thus far foreshadows the path for the rest of this thesis as a continuation of our Indigenous story of identity and education. In Chapter 2 I begin by providing a definitional groundwork for this story by analysing the terms culture and values, as they are key terminologies relevant to this study. This definitional analysis imparts an informative backdrop for a grounding appraisal of our values, worldview and identity. Chapter 3 then continues the story of this thesis with a critical examination of the politics of our identity and the hegemony of Western knowledge. I move on then in Chapter 4, to scrutinise the social, cultural and political terrain of mainstream education as a precursor to examining the dynamics of curriculum and pedagogical praxis vis-à-vis the sociological predisposition of the mainstream classroom. With Chapter 5 I look closely at the position of our Indigenous identity, firstly in terms of education, then secondly in terms of research,
since research is the tool for the validation of knowledge, and knowledge ultimately is both the content and the product of education. These chapters together form a grounding narrative for the research.

Chapter 6 is where I get down to the business of the research. I open my account of this business with an explanation of my philosophisation of the Indigenous research methodology developed specifically for this study. I then progress into a discussion about the realisation of this methodology at the level of practice. In Chapter 7 I recount the experience of the non-Indigenous participants involved in the research, whilst in Chapter 8 I communicate the collective voice of the Indigenous stakeholders invested in the research. Having completed my presentation of the informational outcomes of the research I move on in Chapter 9 to synthesise these outcomes with the informational content from the grounding narrative, in order to articulate a case in support of Indigenous independent education. Chapter 10, the final chapter, draws the story of this thesis to its ultimate goal, which is the development of education as an Indigenous enterprise. This final chapter proffers a counter-hegemonic Indigenous education paradigm in support of Indigenous independent education initiatives. I then close the journey of my thesis with a concluding statement that I hope will stay in the mind of the reader.
CHAPTER 2: CULTURE, VALUES AND INDIGENOUS IDENTITY

2.1 An Anatomy of Culture and Values

By now you will have most likely noticed my predilection for the terms culture and values. My reliance on these terms probably hasn’t fazed you; after all, we all use these words routinely as part of our every day language. Yet despite their apparent banality neither term, when it comes down to it, is particularly easy to understand. Take the case of culture. Over time, this seemingly straightforward word has actually broadened from its original singular definition into a term that now entails several meanings. The word value is even more complicated. As a phenomenon that traverses economics, psychology, philosophy, anthropology and sociology an agreed consensus of meaning seems highly implausible. All of this might seem somewhat pedantic, but it is actually quite relevant. As a thesis dedicated to understanding cultural difference from the perspective of values it is entirely necessary that these terms be scrutinised. It is, however, not enough to simply provide a snapshot definition, as one might hope to find in a dictionary. Rather, it is necessary to offer a more comprehensive anatomy of both terms. Since values are a sub-formation of culture it seems entirely appropriate to begin with culture first.

So, what do we mean when we refer to culture? In an effort to answer this question I have looked to the work of two well-respected authorities on the concept of culture, Chris Jenks (2005) and Raymond Williams (1981, 1983). Jenks and Williams alike have authored studies dedicated entirely to culture. In their respective volumes, both coincidentally entitled ‘Culture’, they successfully demystify the coexistent meanings of culture. In the complementary publication ‘Keywords’ Williams abridged these coexistent meanings of culture to:

(i) the independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development...(ii) the independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general...(iii) the independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity. (1983, p.90)

As a crisp synopsis Williams’s reading of culture provides a useful start point in helping me to explain not only how I have come to conceptualise culture, but also how the application of certain interpretations of culture have led to biased perceptions of us and our identity as Indigenous peoples.
Etymologically the word culture originated from the Latin word ‘cultura’, meaning cultivation; to cultivate, to grow (Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology 1996). It is through this sense of growth that the meaning of culture transitioned from its original application as an agricultural term into an explanatory descriptor for facets of the human condition (Jenks 2005; Williams 1981). This image of growth comes through distinctly in point (i) of Williams’s account of culture, in that culture is said to be a process of development. Growth in this instance represents “cultivation of the mind” (Williams 1981, p.11). In his four-point typology of culture Jenks (2005, p.11) reiterates this, though somewhat more expansively, by noticing that the term culture is used not only to denote the intellectual or “cerebral” growth of humans as individuals, but also growth in a societal sense. At the individual level this particular meaning refers to a “general state of mind”, linking with concepts such as accomplishment, ambition, virtuosity and perfection, whereas at the societal level culture as growth focuses on the “intellectual and/or moral development” of society as a whole.

The idea of culture as growth at first seems entirely safe especially since no human society is static, or any human being for that matter. We all learn and we all respond to new forces in our lives, both individually and as a society. There is, however, a fundamental difficulty with culture being synonymous with growth because of the affiliation that has been forged between growth, civilisation and progress (Jenks 2005). Again, this may not seem particularly remarkable, but it is when you understand the connotation of civilisation. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (2001, p.261) tells us that civilisation is, “an advanced stage or system of human social development”. It is precisely this notion of advanced that makes culture as growth far more convoluted. Culture in this sense is something to be strived for and attained, something that once attained will refine making a person more cultured or civilised. As Jenks confirms, “all of these uses of culture, as process, imply not just a transition but also a goal in the form of ‘culture’ itself; it is here that hierarchical notions begin to emerge such as the ‘cultured person’ or ‘cultivated groups or individuals’ and even the idea of a ‘high culture’…” (2005, p.8).

Culture, under this interpretation, is thus enmeshed with social stratification. Are you familiar with axioms like ‘how civilised’ or ‘how cultured’ or ‘we’re a civilised
society’? These seemingly harmless expressions actually carry in them an underlying message that implies superiority. It is a message that has been recognised by Jenks who wrote that culture in this regard sanctions, “…ideas of socialization as ‘cultivating’ the person, education as ‘cultivating’ the mind and colonization as ‘cultivating’ the natives” (2005, p.8). As you will read more fully in Chapter 3 this culture-civilisation-progress equation has seriously undermined our Indigenous identity. This idea of culture as civilising and as an acquisition of civilisation gained considerable momentum during the 1800’s (Jenks 2005; Williams 1981). It emanated from the work of early evolutionists and the pioneers of anthropology who adopted the ideal of the civilised individual and moulded it to the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin (Jenks 2005). Early evolutionists determined that human societies could be rated along a continuum, with literate societies, most notably Britain, ranked at the top and Indigenous societies at the very bottom.

To understand my use of the term culture I turn your attention to contemporary anthropology and sociology, since it is primarily through these fields that the meaning of culture was rewritten as an emancipatory term (Jenks 2005; Williams 1981). In point (ii) of his synopsis of culture Williams (1983) explains this particular meaning for culture as a description for the whole way of life of a peoples. Jenks draws a useful distinction between early anthropology’s view of culture by noting that it rested on “absolutist” belief, whereas this more contemporary view of culture suggests a relativism that engenders “…particularity and situation-specific meaning of all aspects of culture and social action…” (2005, p.34). This sense of culture liberates culture as a divisive term. It opens up culture as a designation that allows for an egalitarian parallelism that accepts plurality and difference in a non-comparative way. Each distinct human society can be considered uniquely as a culture. In effect this interpretation of culture is a complete contradiction of the first meaning. It is precisely this meaning that permits our status as civilised members of a civilisation. This is the meaning I draw upon whenever I refer to ‘our cultures’.

The whole way of life interpretation of culture is dynamic in taking as culture not just those aspects of life connected with the construction and production of art forms. It takes in the whole substance of social being (Jenks 2005; Williams 1981). This brings into culture the conscious and sub-conscious structures of human existence,
including those of the psyche, such as values, which can then be appreciated as cultural structures. There is, however, an interesting sociological slant to this meaning of culture that ponders the notion of a sub-division between what can be deemed purely social as opposed to what can be deemed purely cultural (Jenks 2005; Williams 1981). This line of reasoning was captured well by noted British sociologist Tom Bottomore who said, “by culture we mean the ideational aspects of social life, as distinct from the actual relations and forms of relationships between individuals; and by a culture the ideational aspects of a particular society” (1962, cited in Jenks 2005, p.120). This differentiation has in fact been extremely useful to me in parting the social constructs of our cultures from the ideational constructs of our cultures when voicing our core values, as you will read in 2.2 of this chapter.

The third understanding of culture confines culture to a specification for the intellectual and artistic body of work of a society (Jenks 2005; Williams 1981, 1983). This account of culture can be related to the idea of culture as growth-civilisation-progress, and the idea of culture as a whole way of life. When culture as the intellectual and artistic body of work of a society is fused with the idea of growth-civilisation-progress culture is once again embroiled in selectiveness. Only certain expressive forms are deemed truly cultural, usually because the expressive form involved has been designated a level of prestige that accords it status as pure art. Pure art in turn is conceptualised as ‘high culture’. A good example can be found with opera and classical music, which are commonly differentiated from other forms of music and revered as ‘high culture’. The same thing happens with dance. Classical ballet gets separated out from other forms of dance because it is judged as art, so it obtains status as ‘high culture’ (William 1981). As for painting European styles of artwork readily make it as ‘high culture’ whereas Indigenous art gets labelled primitive. Even literature gets divided along the lines of classic versus pulp.

Chris Jenks commented that the notion of culture as the intellectual and artistic body of work of a society, “…carries along with it senses of particularity, exclusivity, elitism, specialist knowledge and training or socialization” (2005, p.12). Culture as the intellectual and artistic body of work of a society is less restricted when related to the whole way of life perspective. The constraints of exclusiveness are greatly nullified, so that all forms of human expression qualify for recognition as culture.
Expressive forms, that would otherwise be written off as ‘low culture’ such as folk dance, pop and rock music, all manner of crafts and so on can be considered on an equal footing with all other expressive forms within the domain of culture. Difference is not held up as a reason for comparison, or a reason to grade and rank intellectual and artistic work according to some narrow, usually West-centric, scale of aesthetic and/or cerebral excellence. Instead difference is seen as situation specific. This opens the way for our Indigenous body of intellectual and artistic work to be freed from the shackles of suppressive tags like primitive, exotic, native, simple or ancient. Our art, for example, can become just art, not primitive art.

Culture then is a complex term that retains multiple meanings, all of which are still utilised within modern day speech. It is, to me, important to have some familiarity with these variant meanings for two fundamental reasons. Firstly, when you understand that the term culture can be applied in a selective and oftentimes discriminatory manner, it is possible to then realise the concept of culture as a focus for critique, especially when extrapolated to the notion of hegemony. Secondly, when you understand that the term culture can be conversely applied as an egalitarian term, it is possible to then appreciate culture as the foundation from which to assert our cultural sovereignty and Indigenousness free of the organ of the Western worldview. Having addressed the question of what I mean when I refer to culture, I can now look to the substance and function of culture on the basis of the whole way of life outlook. My focus in this regard is specifically values because values, in my view, constitute a core mechanism of culture. Values, or value [the singular form of values], as far as I am concerned, inform and perpetuate a society’s worldview. They lay at the very heart of our socio-cultural cognition.

As with culture, values are not easily pinned down through brief definition. Even a limited read of values literature brings out comments like: “value, I conclude, eludes formal definition” (Allen 1993, p.5); “values have been defined and redefined for more than a century; the very concept has continued probably since the beginning of philosophy” (Gross 1985, p.11); “the study of values cannot be confined to a single discipline…” (Williams 1979, p.19) and “understanding human values is a never-ending process…” (Rokeach 1979, p.ix). It is abundantly clear that the study of values is very far from straightforward. One thing is certain, there is definitely a
long history to the study of values entailing many discrete lines of inquiry (Encyclopedia of Sociology 1992; Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology 1994; Outhwaite 1994). As with culture perhaps the best place to begin is with the etymology of the word. Accordingly we find through the Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology (1996) that the word value derives from the old French word “valoir” meaning “be worth”, and also the Latin word “valere” meaning “be strong, be worth”. From this we can see that value is clearly intertwined with worth.

Typically when we think about worth we think about the value that something tangible holds like a house or a car. The physical object in question is said to hold value or worth (Encyclopedia of Sociology 1992). Value in this regard is economic because the object of value is thought of in monetary terms. Value, though, is far more than merely economic. Take an item like a family heirloom, it may or may not have monetary value, but it does have sentimental value or worth in a familial sense. Value too, can be attributed to aesthetic phenomena like sunsets, ocean vistas and so on (Allen 1993). In these circumstances value is psychological. Similarly, value is implied in measures of right or wrong or “…specifications of goodness and badness” (Allen 1993, p.4). Here value could be regarded as philosophical. But that’s not all; value is also inherent in culture as a whole way of life. Think about Australia Day. Every year, around this particular day, phrases like ‘our national values’ ‘Australian values’ or ‘the values of the Australian people’ are regularly aired. Plainly, there is a sense of value as characterising national ethos. In this instance value is sociological and/or anthropological.

That the study of value straddles so many disciplines makes anatomising values extremely convoluted. In terms of my study clearly I can omit any discussion of value as economic. Philosophical conceptions of value too, which centre on more abstract preoccupations with matters of right and wrong, and good and bad, are likewise not immediately relevant to my study. That leaves psychology, anthropology and sociology. Here there is no easy delineation between disciplines because values are as elemental to human cognition as socio-cultural functioning. There is even less differentiation to be found between sociology and anthropology as both disciplines are concerned with the social constructs of human life. Sociologist Feliks Gross attempted to unravel this by pointing out that, “a psychologist studies
individual values, whereas a sociologist and an anthropologist consider social values, shared values, and their effects (1985, pp.19-20). Gross also noted that, “a sociologist and anthropologist describes, analyses the structure of values (“what is”), attempts to answer questions of how they are structured, how do they work, and what is their function in a society” (1985, p.19).

In reflecting on the context and identity of my study I feel a very deep sense that my study is not anthropological. I digress for a moment to clarify this. Anthropology is “the study of humankind, including the comparative study of societies and cultures and the science of human zoology and evolution” (Concise Oxford Dictionary 2001, p.56). Sociology, on the other hand is “the study of the development, structure, and functioning of human society” (Concise Oxford Dictionary 2001, p.1362). The difference, in my view, is not subtle. Given this, as far as it is possible to do so, knowing the interchange between anthropology and sociology, I have fixed on the sociological. Interestingly, from within the discipline of sociology there is significant diversity in the theory of value. It is not my intention to chronicle these variant schools of thought, or for that matter become embroiled in questions over the merit or otherwise of the theorists I refer to. I do not align myself with any one school of thought, I have merely extracted from the sociological literature on values I’ve read, that which assists me in substantiating the interconnection between the cognitive internalisation of values, socialisation, and socio-cultural unity.

One of the most noted, and now controversial, sociological theories entailing values emanated from the work of Talcott Parsons. Together with his colleagues, Parsons (1951a, 1951b) advanced a functionalist school of thought, which centred on his ‘general theory of action’. Through this theory Parsons sought to explain the stable continuance of social order in terms of cognitively embedded referents that orient individual action to coincide with socially founded behavioural predispositions (Parsons 1951a, 1951b). These cognitive referents, determined by Parsons as values, were seen as elemental to the cohesive functioning of society. This is, of course, a snapshot interpretation of a very convoluted theory. My interest in this theory though is limited to what values are and how they function. In that regard Clyde Kluckhohn, a colleague of Parsons, clarified value as, “…a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable
which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action” (1951, p.395). Steven Hitlin and Jane Allyn Piliavin (2004, p. 362) in their review of values literature noted that this definition has been “most influential”.

Parsons believed that, “…all values involve what may be called a social reference” (1951a, p.12). Parsons (1951a, 1951b) and Kluckhohn (1951) alike stressed the social predisposition of values through the concept of value orientations, which they saw as directing an individual toward, “…the observance of certain norms, standards, [and] criteria of selection…” (Parsons 1951b, p.59). This notion of values as socially referred is interesting, and leads me to consider Parsons (1951a, 1951b) more contentious assertion that values are inculcated from the time that we are born through the process of being socialised into our respective cultures. Parsons said, “the value-orientations and other components of the culture, as well as the specific accumulated objects which make up the cultural tradition in the form of skills, knowledge, and the like, are transmitted to the on-coming generation” (1951b, p.18). The idea that we take on, from birth, the values of the social formation we are born into implies that values are deeply internalised, lasting and probably implicit as much as explicit in that an individual may not necessarily consciously refer to a value before action.

The other, much debated, functionalist observation was that “it is primarily by the transmission of their values that cultures perpetuate themselves” (Kluckhohn 1951, p.412). I found this point particularly relevant because our cultures have perpetuated despite extensive decimation. Kluckhohn also stressed that, “it should be emphasized that cultural distinctiveness rests not merely-or even mainly-on value content but on the configurational nature of the value system, including emphases” (1951, p.412). I note, however, that the functionalist position on values has been heavily criticised because of the weight attributed to values “…as the central integrating mechanism”, of society (Outhwaite 1994, p.694). Because of the existence, especially within Western societies, of various sub-cultures, i.e. political action movements and alternate life-stylists to name but a few, it could be seen that functionalists tended to over-read society as more homogeneous than is in fact the case. It was also suggested that individually “…values may be accepted pragmatically rather than normatively” (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 2000, p.373),
stimulating scepticism over the emphasis placed on the unconscious absorption of values.

Despite the criticisms that denounce the functionalist position on values as too deterministic (Hitlin & Piliavin 2004) I nonetheless feel something can be gained from their work. Functionalists may well have given too much credit to values as a social adhesive, but they did confirm values as instrumental in social function. They also verified that all human societies have values, and that all human beings internalise these values. Apart from the functionalist definition of values the other most common definition of values according to Hitlin and Piliavin (2004) was that offered by Milton Rokeach, a noted authority on values, who concluded that:

A value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence. A value system is an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of relative importance. (1973, p.3)

What I find interesting about this definition is the notion of values as enduring, which suggests to me that values cannot be easily manipulated. Hitlin and Piliavin accordingly noted that, “Kluckhohn emphasized action; [whereas] Rokeach saw values as giving meaning to action” (2004, 262).

Robin Williams, a colleague of Rokeach, gave a rather useful explanation of values when he said that, “in the enormously complex universe of value phenomena, values are simultaneously components of psychological processes, of social interaction, and of cultural patterning and storage” (Williams 1979, p.17). Williams pointed out that, “values always have a cultural content, represent a psychological investment, and are shaped by the constraints and opportunities of a social system…” (1979, p.21). Williams (1979) and Rokeach (1973, 1979) both point to values as a specific and strong form of belief that transcends phenomena like attitudes which tend to be far less stable and more open to change. In discussing what values are Hitlin and Piliavin (2004) also refer readers to the work of another authority on values, Shalom Schwartz. Schwartz claimed that:

There is widespread agreement in the literature regarding five features of the conceptual definition of values: A values is a (1) belief, (2) pertaining to desirable end states or modes of conduct, that (3) transcends specific situations, (4) guides selection or evaluation of behaviour, people, and events, and (5) is ordered by importance relative to other values to form a system of value priorities. (1994, p.20)
Hitlin and Piliavin (2004) also usefully noted that in the theory of value there has been some emphasis given to the interconnection between values and ideologies.

The association between values and ideologies has been explored in great detail by Feliks Gross. Gross explained that values are, “…generalized cultural data that are either measures or guides of our behaviour or goals” (1985, p.72). He noted that, “in empirical terms [values] exist not independently, but only within a social context, as an articulation of a shared ideology” (1985, p.72). Gross sought to explain the function of values, saying that they, “…integrate society by means of various forms of social control, legitimacy, and symbolism”, “supply the sense of direction and pattern of conduct”, and operate as, “a motivating force and mobilize individual and social action” (1985, p.72). He argued that values are vertically or hierarchically structured wherein dominant or core values sit at the top of the vertical structure since they affect and inform all other values, whilst derived or subordinated values occur in the middle stratum, with ancillary values placed at the base (Gross 1985). In considering Gross’s theory concerning core or dominant values I found a logic that drew me to conclude that all human societies have and maintain a set of core or dominant values that remain entrenched within a culture’s worldview.

I have of course only referred to a sample range from a vast volume of material available on values. In anatomising values my aim has simply been to draw together the sociological views of values that I found relevant to how I perceive the presence and function of values within our Indigenous cultures. What I have discussed is enough, I think, to give you an appreciation of my perspective. From the functionalists I extracted the notion of values as cognitively internalised, socially orienting referents. These referents I believe are instilled within us through a learning process based on social habituation and individual experience. I also gained from functionalism a sense of the social nature of values; that is how values guide and channel our conduct as social individuals, and operate to help ensure social stability. From Rokeach (1973, 1979), Williams (1979) and Schwartz (1994) I developed a greater appreciation of the psychological aspect of values as part of our belief structure. From Gross (1985) I found credence in the argument that human societies maintain core values that are hierarchically prioritised. These core values
not only retain social, cultural and psychological primacy, they also create difference between societies reflecting ideological orientations.

2.2 Indigenous Values, Worldview and Identity

In opening their article on Indigenous family values Dean Collard, Stewart Crowe, Maria Harries and Cheryle Taylor made a proviso that whilst they, "...believe that there are universalities in Aboriginal family values...they do not wish to claim any cultural authority to speak for people beyond the south west of Western Australia” (1994, p.114). In following their example I too reiterate that I make no claim to be speaking on behalf of any cultures other than my own. So, before getting down to the business of discussing our values, our worldview and our identity I wish to clarify at the outset that I am reflecting upon our cultures from the viewpoint of my own life experience as an Indigenous person, and that of the extended family kinship network to which I belong. It is my viewpoint that underscores this section of my thesis. In visualising my viewpoint as an Indigenous lens you could say that this section has been written from the inside looking out, not from the outside looking in. I have not sought to draw extensively upon literature to substantiate academically what I know from within the psyche of my cultural being. The literature I have referenced has been selected on the basis of its merit as confirming testimony.

I am sure some would think it a mistake, indeed even offensive, to attempt to universalise otherwise distinct cultures. In looking to give voice to our values I am not disrespecting our cultural diversity, I am seeking to accentuate our unity. I have no intention of providing an archaic catalogue of all the values held by all of our cultures. My focus is solely on our core social, cultural and political values as these are the values, in my estimation, through which we maintain our sense of connectedness as the Indigenous peoples of Australia. So what are these values? Well, from the viewpoint of my Indigenous lens I see our core social value as collectivism, our core cultural value as spirituality and our core political value as autonomy. These core values are to me the social, cultural and political expressions of our worldview. In thinking about our values I see them as organised similarly to Gross’s (1985) pyramidal concept of values structure, as diagrammed on the following page. I have used the term subsidiary for values other than our three core values because these values both contribute to and supplement the core values. In
my view there is a cycle of mutual reinforcement between our core values and our subsidiary value, as per the second diagram shown below.

**INDIGENOUS CORE VALUES**

This is the hierarchical priority of our values based on Gross’s values pyramid. Because we prioritise most highly our core values they are situated at the top of our values pyramid. Our subsidiary values are situated immediately beneath as they are the values that contribute to and supplement our core values.

Within the framework of the pyramid I see our core values: collectivism, spirituality and autonomy, working to energise each other in a cycle of mutual reinforcement. Beneath the top layer of the pyramid I see our subsidiary values working in unison with our core values to reinforce the meaning and importance of our core values.
In giving voice to our core values I would like to begin with collectivism as the social expression of our worldview. So what is collectivism?, and how it is different to individualism, the antithesis of collectivism? Harry C. Triandis, a Professor of Psychology, who has studied both collectivism and individualism noted:

In individualist cultures most people’s social behavior is largely determined by personal goals that overlap only slightly with the goals of collectives...When a conflict arises between personal and group goals, it is considered acceptable for the individual to place personal goals ahead of collective goals. By contrast, in collectivist cultures social behavior is determined largely by goals shared with some collective, and if there is a conflict between personal and group goals, it is considered socially desirable to place collective goals ahead of personal goals. (1990, p.42)

This explanation, I feel, encapsulates the basic difference between collectivism and individualism. I agree with Triandis that “perhaps the most important dimension of cultural difference in social behaviour, across the diverse cultures of the world, is the relative emphasis on individualism versus collectivism” (1990, p.42). Without doubt collectivism absolutely dominates my life, and my thinking. It has been instilled in me ever since I was born.

Galarrwuy Yunupingi, a Yolngu man I respect deeply as an Indigenous cultural leader, said, “every Aboriginal person is related either through kinship, or through land boundaries which overlap into other people’s country, or because the Great Ancestors have moved from one place to another to create that relationship” (1996, p.5). For me these words resonate with deep meaning. These words not only talk to me of our collectivism, they tell of the reciprocal energy that exists between our collectivism and spirituality, and highlights for me why we value autonomy. Non-Indigenous community development consultant Jill Byrnes (2000, p.7) in her article entitled ‘A comparison of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal values’ claimed that the difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia derived from the contrast between “mainstream Australian culture” as a capitalist, and therefore “individualist” society, and “traditional Aboriginal culture” as a “subsistence” and therefore “collectivist” society. Whilst I find her somewhat anthropological approach a little disconcerting Byrnes nonetheless conveniently publicises one of the leading differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures.

Byrnes (2000) is entirely right, Indigenous cultures are collectivist, though perhaps she was too quick to confine collectivism to ‘traditional’. Before addressing more
fully the collectivist v individualist issue I digress, as there is some clearing up to be done with regard to this notion traditional. I come from the eastern part of Australia. Often it is presumed because I come from this area that I have no recognisable culture left within me because my life, to the unknowing eye, looks on the surface to be not dissimilar to any other urban dweller. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although this matter is discussed further on it needs introduction here because these uninformed presumptions lead to seriously misguided notions that suggest Indigenous values no longer exist, especially in our part of the country. To quote Indigenous educator Paul Hughes, "we do have a long history and over that time we developed a social structure and attitudes to life that exist today. Even in the Aboriginal people of a highly urbanized area such as the east coast of New South Wales these traditional values and attitudes exist" (1987, p.5). Paul Hughes may well have said this 19 years ago, but it is as accurate today as it was when he wrote it.

The wide-ranging, extended familial, kinship and community networks typical of Indigenous cultures have been fairly well documented both nationally and internationally. There is a temptation to cite lengthily such references, however I will refrain from doing so, as it is, in my view, more pertinent to attest to how collectivism is for us. I found in the words of Dean Collard et al. a concise expression of our collectivism:

The Aboriginal system is organised as a system of kinship and relationships – kinship being loosely defined as a confederation of family groups or a large group of kin related people. Kin does not necessarily mean blood relation. The nuclear family does not have the same meaning as it does for most non-Aboriginal people – it is just part of a much larger and stronger system of relationships and obligations. (1994, pp.116-117)

This is a Noongar voicing of Aboriginal collectivism. Even so, I feel cultural connection with this voice; it mirrors my own cultures. When we talk of family, we don’t just focus on mother, father, brother, sister, grandparent, uncle, aunt and cousin. We scope relationships well beyond that. It is hard for us to fathom family in a typically Western way. In my own life kinship is not just my biological family, kinship is more, and probably best explained through example.

In my family we are taught to know our extended biological ties. We go deeply into this, covering 4th and 5th cousins and the like. This is, however, just one aspect of kinship. We are also taught about the families we are tied to through marriage, or the
birth of children. A good case of this in my life is being taught to know the families of my brothers-in-law. These families are not biologically linked to me yet I have a kinship with these families because of my sisters’ marriages. In the same vein, I have connection with the families that my cousins have married into. Collectivism though isn’t just about big family; it also means that I have aunts and uncles who are not my biological kin, but because they are senior people they are my aunts and uncles. I remember when I was young how I would go down south with my sister Clara and brother-in-law Sonny. We would stay at Nanna’s place. Now Nanna Bella wasn’t my biological grandmother, but she was nonetheless my Nan through our kinship network. I regarded Nanna like a grandparent because she was a senior woman, and I was taught to respect her as such. Nanna was a cultural teacher and knowledge holder; her status was venerated through kinship.

Kinship operates in a socially specific way. In reflecting upon her life Barbara Shaw, a Kaditch woman from the region of Alice Springs, said that:

We’re organised differently in our community - we don’t ‘own’ our children...My brother and his wife have a big share in my child. Their son and my son are like brothers who have two houses, and they can eat and sleep in either house. It’s these sorts of cultural things that we often get criticised for, but they are our salvation and we’d be crazy to let them go. (cited in Skyes 1993, p.125)

This is so for me. I grew up parented not only by my actual parents. I was also brought up and taught by my aunts and uncles, my older cousins, whom I called aunt and uncle, as well as my elder sister, Clara and her husband, Sonny. I know my eldest niece and nephews just as though they are my own sister and brothers. My mother is not just Mum to my sisters and I, other nieces and nephews, and even my own children sometimes refer to her as Mum. Moreover, the non-biological relationships that I have described remain a focal aspect of the collectiveness of our mob. These relationships are often described as honorary in the Western sense, but they’re not merely a matter of politeness; they are obligatory cultural expressions of respect in accordance with the rules of kinship.

Even though Jill Byrnes focuses on what she terms ‘traditional culture’ she recognises that, “a high value in Aboriginal society is placed upon building relations; a great deal of time is spent sharing information and news about relations, and discussing relationships themselves” (2000, p.7). This is certainly true. When I meet
up with another Aboriginal person the first thing we do is yarn about family. Depending upon what region we come from this yarn can become quite detailed about who is tied to whom. We do this in order to find out if we have any links that make us kin in a culturally collective sense. For instance, if I go up the mid north coast of NSW and meet someone I haven’t met before I say who my great grandparents are so that that person can know who I am and where I fit into country. It’s like a password, it immediately tells of my kinship, in this case, my identity as Dhungutti. Colin Bourke emphasised that, “our identity is dependent on numerous relationships with others…it is not based just on tolerance of others, but the experience of self as part of others” (1998, p.176). That’s the way I am, my identity is not individualistic, it is based on who I am within our kinship collective.

That collectivism is part of our lives can be seen in the results of Colin White and Gerard Fogarty’s (1994, 2000-2001) research into the values difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous tertiary students. White and Fogarty (1994, 2000-2001) conducted quantitative studies using Shalom Schwartz’s value survey - a questionnaire that involves rating 56 listed values on a scale of 1 to 7. With the first survey the purpose was to test the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous values to see whether Indigenous values “exhibit value profiles that are compatible with the worldviews attributed to their traditional cultures” (1994, p.396). The second survey was used to test whether poorer Indigenous academic performance could be attributed to values difference (White & Forgarty 2000-2001). Frankly, the scientific manner of this research bothered me. Nevertheless, both surveys confirmed that Indigenous students are oriented toward values like tradition, conformity and security, which are indicative of collectivism. Uniquely in the 1994 survey Indigenous students showed that they valued “honouring parents, equality, politeness and social justice” (Fogarty & White 1994, p.399). Again, this tends to indicate collectivism.

Perhaps the most significant subsidiary values we hold that support collectivism are respect, responsibility, obligation, co-operation, sharing, caring, trust, harmony (Bourke 1979, 1998; Collard et al. 1994), but also, I think, bonding and acceptance. This is, of course, not a complete or prioritised list of all the subsidiary values of Indigenous collectivism. Throughout Australia each of our cultures may well add to
this list, and order it differently. It is also the case that these values per se are not exclusive to Indigenous cultures; other cultures hold them as well. What gives these values an Indigenous essence is the hierarchical priority we attribute to them, and the cultural meaning we attach to them. Take the case of sharing. In a Western sense sharing is virtuous, but not a social imperative (Byrnes 2000). Conversely, in our Indigenous sense sharing is a social imperative; its priority and meaning derive from, and support, our valuing of collectivism. Similarly, responsibility in a Western sense equates with personal accountability, whereas responsibility for us equates with accountability to the kinship collective. Clearly we interpret subsidiary values like sharing and responsibility in a culturally subjective way.

The notion of culturally subjective meaning is a crucial concept, and one that I believe needs to be applied whenever anyone attempts to understand Indigenous spirituality. Spirituality is for me our core cultural value. As with our collectivism, our spirituality has likewise been fairly well noted in national and international literature. Again I am not interested in conducting a review of these references. As an Indigenous Australian I feel that it would be culturally disrespectful to write about our spiritualism as though it were just another academic topic. I believe that our spirituality is profoundly intimate and not something that should be studied in the customary academic manner. I need to emphasise just how uncomfortable we feel about discussing and explaining our spirituality. Too often our spirituality has been ridiculed, belittled, and misinterpreted; too often it has been subjected to scientific scrutiny. I feel strongly that our spirituality has been greatly narrowed and misconstrued through being confined to the realms of religion, or dismissed as primitive belief. For me the best way I can voice our spirituality is to speak from the heart of my own being as an Indigenous person.

As I grew up I was privileged to have been gifted with spiritual knowledge by my cultural teachers. Through the experiences of my learning I was taught to know our spirituality as the energy or life force of our knowledge ways. For me spirituality has never been religious. My spirituality is more my deep sense of being as environment, because of my relatedness to our lands and to the sea. I don’t believe in my spiritualism as though it were a matter of religious faith, I know it as my living truth. For example, my Dhungutti cultural educators guided me to realise and
understand my being as belonging to the land; I learnt to revere and respect my kinship bond with ‘Goodargin’ (praying mantis). Through my Dharawal heritage I similarly learnt my place as a salt-water being; I learnt my kinship bond with ‘Purri Burri’ (whale). Spirituality contextualises my life, it defines who I am as an Indigenous person. I sustain my spirituality through the subsidiary values that were instilled in me like: humility, respect, self-discipline, confidentiality, listening, patience, acceptance, and reverence. This, of course, is a personal reflection. Nonetheless I believe that my words hold meaning for other Indigenous peoples.

There are many different interpretations of our spirituality, many of them anthropological. From all that I have read I felt most strongly a deep affiliation with the words of Galarrwuy Yunupingu. Galarrwuy Yunupingu explained spirituality this way:

> It is like air; we breathe out of it, we live in it, but we do not feel it, we do not touch it. It is there; like I am standing here, like my Ancestors are standing with me. The Ancestors of this land are standing with us. That spirit is still strong all the time. (1996, p.9)

Galarrwuy Yunupingu said:

> I believe the best way for me to talk about Aboriginal Spirituality is for me to talk about the relationship that Aboriginal people have with the land. Spirituality means different things to different people but for me – as a fiercely proud Aboriginal man – it is a simple idea to project and it is all tied up with the land. (1996, p.6)

I believe Galarrwuy Yunupingu captures intuitively our spirituality. Spirituality is all about our lands and our seas. Over and over I have heard Indigenous peoples say ‘the land owns us’; and so it does. There is a tendency to think of our fight for land rights and native title in exclusively political terms, but Galarrwuy Yunupingu’s words makes me realise that it is also a spiritual fight.

It has been my experience that our spiritualism is not something that non-Indigenous Australians easily understand. This lack of understanding oftentimes leads to conclusions that suppose that those of us not living a visibly traditional life are somehow devoid of our spiritualism, that we have lost our oneness with the land and sea. I remember once speaking at a local historical society of our culture, our histories, and our affiliation with our lands and the sea. At question time a person from the audience commented, “but you’re all living like white people now”. Despite all the effort and time I had taken to carefully explain our life ways that person, as well as others in the audience, just could not grasp that I was still
spiritually connected to my traditional land; the very land where they had their meeting. Our lands inform our spiritual psyche. Galarrway Yunupingu saw what I have always seen about the spirit of my country in Sydney:

People in Sydney talk about Ancestors, and about how the whole city has been taken over by non-Aboriginal people. Well fair enough, physically, but the whole land of Sydney is not taken because the Ancestors are there, resisting the foreign interference...You cannot fight that Spirit. You cannot change the Spirit of this country. It is still here. (1996, p.9)

If you understand how deep our spirituality is you will understand why we value so highly our autonomy. Along side collectivism and spirituality, autonomy, in my view, stands as our other dominant core value, in that it is the political expression of our worldview. By political I mean the dimensions of life that traverse governance, lore and economy. In thinking about this I was struck by the importance of the words of Mantatjara Wilson, a senior Pitjantjatjara woman, who spoke of her culture’s government. Mantatjara Wilson said, “…we have forgotten our own government, lost that traditional government that our grandparents held. We should be following that old government! That’s the one we still want to keep” (cited in Sykes 1993, p.17). This to me is a powerful expression of an aspiration for cultural sovereignty. I read in this expression a valuing of autonomy. Autonomy is intrinsic to the survival of our cultural identity. I feel strongly that it is because we value our cultural autonomy that we have been able to resist, since 1788, the onslaught of colonisation and assimilation. Autonomy is the collective and spiritual expression of our right to cultural sovereignty, land rights and native title, social justice, and treaty. It engenders our social/collective and cultural/spiritual pride.

Most often our autonomy is expressed through the assertion of self-determination, but also self-management, empowerment, sovereignty, independence and so on. These are not catchy cause phrases; they exemplify the subsidiary values we hold in regard to autonomy. To find evidence of our valuing of autonomy at the international level you need look no further than the Draft United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (1994). Article 3 states, “Indigenous peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development”. At the national level you will see our valuing of autonomy reflected clearly in documents like the Barunga Statement, which was presented in
1988 by Galarrwuy Yunupingu and Wenten Rubuntja to the Prime Minister of the time, Bob Hawke. It opens, “we the indigenous owners and occupiers of Australia call on the Australian Government and people to recognise our rights…to self determination and self management including the freedom to pursue our own economic, social, religious, and cultural development” (cited in Attwood & Markus 1999, pp.316-317).

Autonomy, though, is a word that tends to ignite alarm in non-Indigenous Australia. Often it is not seen as an expression of our collective-social or spiritual-cultural freedoms; rather it is seen as threatening the “interests of the Australian state” (Roberts 1994, p.259). In this regard self-determination has been limited to the principle of us being allowed to make decisions for ourselves. As non-Indigenous author David Roberts pointed out, “successive Australian governments have rejected the view that self-determination includes the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to decide their political status and the exploration of political options such as self-government and sovereignty” (1994, p.259). Suffice to say, it is clear that our valuing of autonomy is generally not well received in the broader community and too often readily linked, I feel fallaciously, to concepts like segregation or apartheid. Interestingly in the publication ‘Australian compact: What are the core values that all Australians might respect?’ Donald Horne, a noted non-Indigenous social commentator, proposed that we should all commit to valuing, “the unique status of the Indigenous peoples” (2002, pp.21-22). To me this is recognition of our right to cultural sovereignty.

In thinking about our valuing of autonomy I am reminded of people in my own family. I see autonomy in the words of my great uncle Joe Anderson. In his 1933 speech for Cinesound news he said:

It quite amuses me to hear people saying “I don’t like the black man”. But he’s damn glad to live in a black man’s country all the same!…All the black man wants is representation in Federal Parliament…One hundred and fifty years ago the Aboriginals owned Australia, and today he demands more than the white man’s charity. He wants the right to live! (cited in Attwood & Markus 1999, p.73)

Uncle Joe was among many who fought hard for social justice at a time when the paternalistic controls of the NSW Aborigines’ Protection Board were stridently enforced. I also see our valuing of autonomy in the work of my father. At a public
meeting of the Aborigines’ Advisory Council Dad was once asked by a non-Indigenous person, “what was it that Aborigines were really after”; his reply was, “we want to improve the living standards of our people and give them the same rights as whites” (New Aborigines Advisory Council 1973, p.4). Dad was a tireless fighter for our social and cultural rights; and our autonomy.

My Great Uncle Joe Anderson
King Burraga

_Dad receiving the title deeds to Aboriginal Land at Landillo and La Perouse
Throughout his life he served with the:-
Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs
NSW Lands Trust
Aborigines’ Advisory Council
National Aboriginal Land Fund Commission
NPWS Relics Committee
Prisoners Aid Association
Aboriginal Medical and Legal Services
National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (NACC)
NSW Aboriginal State Land Council
La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council
NSW Aboriginal Hostels_

Our core values are to me a cohesive energy in a similar way to our flag, which was designed by Harold Thomas. I believe that our core values complexly interface with the social, cultural and political expressions of our worldview, and shape our identity as Indigenous Australians. Eleanor Bourke, an Indigenous academic, wrote that, “Aboriginal identity and culture is based on a distinctive cultural heritage which incorporates special meanings given to the land and people and is centred on core values” (1994, p.51). It is through these core values that we gain a sense of unity and solidarity not only nationally, but also internationally with Indigenous peoples worldwide. Despite the attempts at cultural decimation our cultures have endured through the overwhelming forces of colonisation, paternalistic government policy and the do-goodism of missionaries. Our core values could not be stripped out of us. Values, as you will have just read, are cognitively embedded within the psyche. It is because of this that we have been able to hold steadfast to our collectivism, our spirituality and our aspirations for autonomy. As a consequence our worldview has largely remained in tact and our identity, to this day, remains defiantly strong.
CHAPTER 3: INDIGENOUS IDENTITY AND THE IMPACT OF HEGEMONY

3.1 The Politics of Indigenous Identity

Ever since our lands were invaded our cultures have had to exist under ongoing pressure from what is fundamentally a foreign culture and worldview. To some this statement might sound like vitriol, but for us it is not, it is the inescapable landscape of cultural domination. I want to share with you my view, and that of my family, from within this landscape. It is a view that is unendingly political. Why political? It’s quite simple, as Indigenous dancer Sylvia Jolanda Blanco-Green said, “…if your Black, life is automatically political…” (cited in Sykes 1993, p.9). The politics of Indigenous identity absolutely defines the social geography of our everyday lives; our very existence. Indigenous social critic Michael Dodson wrote, “since their first intrusive gaze, colonising cultures have had a preoccupation with observing, analysing, studying, classifying and labelling Aborigines and Aboriginality. Under that gaze, Aboriginality changed from being a daily practice to being ‘a problem to be solved’” (2003, p.27). As a problem our identity cannot be anything other than political. It is a politics that I see through three windows: i. suffering; ii. ignorance; and iii. hegemony.

Let me begin by showing you the view through the window of our suffering. Over the years much has been said and written about the horrendousness of our marginalism, dispossession, subjugation and so on. Non-Indigenous author Robert Manne, in his introduction to ‘Whitewash’, noted that, “from the late 1960’s, hundreds of books and articles on the dispossession by dozens of scholars were published” (2003, p.2). He credited a turn around in historical admittance to historians like Henry Reynolds, who was one of several historians who had the courage to redress the Euro-centric bias that had, for so long, characterised the historical myth of this country (Manne 2003). Personally, I am truly appreciative of such efforts as they put into due and proper perspective the truth of our real status as the original, the Indigenous, citizens of this land. Nonetheless as non-Indigenous archaeologist Keith McConnochie summed up historical bias still pervades:

For most of the last 200 years, Aboriginal culture and people have been excluded from the idea of being Australian and have been marginalized, either as a footnote to history or as a problem. Australians have typically seen their history as extending back a mere 200 years.
That is, Australians still see themselves as a nation that has its early history and its cultural roots firmly located on the other side of the world. (2002, p.23)

It is not my intention to re-detail the stories of our histories; the sheer magnitude of all that we have endured is far too extensive to be included within this thesis. In terms of my own family our suffering began with the naivety of Captain Arthur Phillip. In 1787 Phillip received instructions on how he should proceed in coping with us (Reynolds 1996). Shortly after the arrival of the first fleet these instructions were issued as directive. Phillip decreed that his people should, “open an intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their affections, enjoining all our subjects to live in amity and kindness…”(Phillip cited in Egan 1999, p.27). Amity and kindness, it was simply untenable. What amity and kindness can be found in the appropriation of land, or the spread of disease? This is very meaningful for me, not just because I am Indigenous; it is because of my Dharawal heritage. Our Dharawal lands were among the first lands to be intruded upon and procured. Our suffering, my family’s suffering, is not just a chip on the shoulder over someone taking our lands. Our suffering is the consequence of being severed from our cultural sites as the resources for the teaching and practice of our knowledge and our spiritual communication.

Anthony Moran wrote, “…Indigenous societies did not count as historical societies with their own traditions and historically sedimented relationship with the land” (2002, p.1016). It’s perfectly true; our relationship with our lands was completely voided. We were an irritating obstacle to the project of colonial expansion. Indeed “the desire to get rid of them [us] was seen in its most naked form in the massive land-clearing operations from the early 1820’s that continued, for the rest of the century as the colonial frontier spread” (Moran 2002, p.1020). Clearing us off the land wasn’t simply a distant historical happening for us, the aftermath remains omnipresent in our cultural emotion. In my own family Aunty Vera and Mum have both told me of the massacre of Dhungutti peoples. My Great Granny Callaghan, whose Dhungutti name was Bola, was born near Garabaldi Rock, in the Moona Plains area of what is known as the Falls Country on the North Coast of New South Wales. When Granny Callaghan was a young girl she witnessed first hand the killing of our people on our own lands, no doubt because we resisted these massive land clearing operations. Granny told her grandchildren the story of what she had seen.
Geoffrey Blomfield (1986), in his volume ‘Baal Belbora’, documented the massacre of us Dhungutti. Blomfield wrote, “Aboriginal resistance from the Falls Country continued for about twenty-five years and provoked murder, massacre and mass poisonings. These things are branded, burnt into, the race memory of the pitiful remnant of the Thungutti people” (1986, p.6). It is certainly burnt into our memory, but I totally reject the idea that my family is pitiful. Through knowing our experience of atrocity I am able to feel empathy with Peggy Patrick and the hurt she experienced at the hands of non-Indigenous author Keith Windshuttle, who would have the Australian public believe that the massacre of our peoples has been grossly exaggerated (Manne 2003). Peggy Patrick, a senior Gija (Kitja) woman, spoke of the killings in her own family, only to have her story discredited. Peggy Patrick said:

He rubbish my name and he rubbish all my relation that bin get kill. He make big shame for me all over. Make me and my family real upset. We bin bring out hard story what bin happen to blackfella. We talkabout bad story so black and white can be friend when we look at true thing together. Look like nothing change. Gardiya killed blackfella with gun and poison now look like he killing our life making fun of my word. Not worth. (2003, pp.216-217)

Despite all that has been written by way of admission and apologia, authors like Windshuttle certainly ensure that our suffering is kept alive and political through the minimization of the history of our experience. The verity of history is a big issue for us, and a major factor to reconciliation. Unfortunately though Windshuttle’s downplay of our suffering has attracted significant support. As Manne said, “clearly he was singing a song many people wanted to hear” (2003, p.7). Our suffering, though, extends beyond the occupation of our lands and the passing of our peoples; it is equally centred on protectionism and the attendant path of assimilation. In his volume ‘Frontier’ Henry Reynolds (1996) points out, quite rightly, that the maltreatment of our peoples was not wholly accepted throughout the colonial population. “The missionaries and Aboriginal protectors who came to the colonies between 1820 and 1850 were shocked by the bloodshed and outraged by the easy acceptance of racial violence” (Reynolds 1996, p.84). Despite their sympathy and best efforts to protect us, what they did for us was nonetheless bound up in a religiosity that was only marginally less destructive than killing us outright.

Protectionism led to the formation of missions and reserves, places that we were herded onto to either die out or be converted to the white way. These days there are
many references available that attest to this. I prefer, however, to look to the voices of my own community and family. To gain a sense of our suffering in terms of the paternalism of protectionism I start with the insightful words of Uncle Jack Patten, a well-known campaigner for Indigenous rights. In an interview conducted in 1938 he was asked about the Aborigines Protection Act. He replied:

They are not helpful, because they treat us as inferiors, and so they force us into an inferior position. An Aboriginal on a Government Reserve is not taught to be a citizen, he is taught to be submissive, and to accept degradation...The Government Protection Boards do not really “protect” us. They merely humiliate us. The Government laws concerning Aborigines have taken away our freedom, which is our birthright, and have placed us, body and soul, at the mercy of officials, against whom we have no appeal. (cited in Attwood & Markus 1999, pp. 81-82)

Uncle Jack Patten, who was born at Cummeragunja, on the NSW/VIC border, was a well respected member of the La Perouse Aboriginal community and the Aboriginal community at Salt Pan Creek in Peakhurst, Sydney.

I talk about Uncle Jack Patten not just because of his strong and powerful stance against our suppression; I talk about him because he was close to my family, and because I think of him like kin. My Nan, Dolly Anderson, was also born on Cummeragunja around the same time as Uncle Jack. They would have spent their early years together. When Uncle Jack Patten moved to Sydney in the 1920’s Nan Anderson was living back in our traditional lands at Salt Pan Creek with all her extended family, including her parents, brothers and sister. Uncle Jack Patten was known to spend a great deal of time with my family at Salt Pan Creek. In her book ‘Invasion to Embassy’ political historian Heather Goodall wrote that Salt Pan was a “highly politicised camp” (1996, p.225). Heather also referenced Uncle Jack Campbell, who also lived with my family at Salt Pan. Uncle Jack recalled that, “the older men, particularly the Anderson brothers and old Jack Patten, would talk politics ‘all the time’: ‘You’d see them old fellas sittin’ around in a ring, when there was anything to be done. Specially when there was anything to be done with the Aboriginal Protection Board’” (cited in Goodall 1996, p.160).

My Great Grandfather Hugh Anderson openly challenged the injustices of protectionism and paternalism. He wanted independence instead he was bombarded with bigoted judgements and religious preachings. Once when he complained of injustice at Maloga mission the missionary simply dismissed what he had to say as a
“fancied grievance” indicative of a racially based ingratitude (Matthews 1884, p.7). In 1889 he wrote a series of letters to the Riverine Herald entitled ‘A voice from the dying’. Through his letters Grandfather sought to inform the public about the misery of life on Cummeragunja (the new Maloga). In one letter he wrote:

There is no nourishing food for the sick, only bread, meat, tea and dirty black sugar. The people are black outside, and they are getting black insides. We think it a great shame for us to get the worst things when we, the original possessors of this land, ought to get the best if not better than we receive at present. (Anderson 1889)

In 1889 my family left Cummeragunja and established an Aboriginal settlement at Kangaroo Valley, NSW, in the hope of independence; it closed in 1890 having been “starved out” (Griffith 1978, p.11). Independence finally came for my family at Salt Pan Creek on land that Granny Anderson owned, much to the chagrin of the local non-Aboriginal population.

The Salt Pan mob was all about the fight for human rights, land rights and citizens’ rights. As Uncle Jack Patten and Uncle Bill Ferguson said, “you hypocritically claim that you are trying to “protect” us; but your modern policy of “protection” (so-called) is killing us off just as surely as the pioneer policy of giving us poisoned damper and shooting us down like dingos!” (cited in Attwood and Markus 1999, p.82). I feel anguish every time I talk of our suffering, but there would be no talk of suffering if it weren’t for the unbelievable conceit of Euro-centrism; a conceit founded in ignorance. The ignorance that manifested with invasion has remained in one form or another ever since. In the early 1800’s, before Charles Darwin released his influential tome ‘Origin of the Species’, there was throughout Europe a trend in thought that rated human societies along a continuum wherein “…Europeans were invariably placed on the top, with non-Europeans strung out down the chain till savages merged with the more advanced monkey” (Reynolds 1996, p.110). As Henry Reynolds noted, “such ideas of racial hierarchy were carried to the Australian colonies and were widely disseminated” (1996, p.110).

Darwin’s material on natural selection offered theoretical credence to the early trends of thought about racial hierarchy (Jenks 2005; Reynolds 1996). The racial postulators of the time were vindicated. Darwinian theory caught on with gusto and merged well with hypotheses of racial hierarchization. “Darwinian scholars were convinced that the Aborigines were among the oldest surviving races; they were
relics of the early history of mankind, living fossils to be studied, discussed, argued about, patronised and persistently and grossly defamed as a people” (Reynolds 1996, p.116). To be frank the bounty of racist scientific material about us is mind boggling; it leaves me cold. I feel numb with disbelief; it is so hard to conceive of how an allegedly civilized people could be so completely and utterly uncivilised. It took little more than the colour of our skin to justify what was in effect an abominably contemptuous relegation of us as de-humanised and culture-less specimens for scientific study as exotica conveniently trapped in time. All of this ‘science’ was a boon for England because it secured sufficient validation for the appropriation of our lands and the ill treatment of our peoples on a massive scale.

In their remarkably informative study of biological determinism and Indigenous education Associate Professor John Henry and Koorie academic Wendy Brabham (1994) shed significant light on the insidiousness of sciences like phrenology, craniology, eugenics and psychometrics. It was through sciences such as these that the bogus myth of us as racially regressed was perpetuated. Both phrenology and craniology for instance were purposed towards one general activity, the study of the human skull as an indicator of brain size, and therefore intelligence and character. Typical output from such ‘sciences’ included conclusions like, “…judging from the number of their skulls in my possession, I should say that permanent improvement with grown individuals, if not impossible, is a very difficult achievement” (cited in Henry and Brabham 1994, p.26), or, “the smallness of the Aboriginal brain is the cause of all his miserable manifestations of mind” (cited in Reynolds 1996, p.114). The resultant data all end up at the same place, the condemnation of us as ape-like primordial beings incapable of any expression of intelligence and fundamentally evolutionarily inferior to the white races (Henry & Brabham 1994; Reynolds 1996).

The astounding ignorance of these sciences reached new and dizzy heights with the application of eugenics, “the science of using controlled breeding to increase the occurrence of desirable heritable characteristics in a population”(Concise Oxford Dictionary 2001, p.491). John Henry and Wendy Brabham couldn’t have summed it up any better:

Eugenics as applied by the Aboriginal Protection Boards in Australia was directed to increasing the proportion of white blood in each succeeding generation of Koori children. Policies and practices of the Boards from around the 1890’s were therefore influenced by
the eugenics agenda of ‘breeding out the Aborigine’ and thereby improving the breeding stocks of the Australian nation-state. (1994, p.13)

The whole idea of eugenics brought with it measures of pureness of blood. As Michael Dodson poignantly stated we became categorised as ‘full bloods’, ‘half-castes’, ‘quadroons’, ‘octrooons’ and so on (2003, p.26). These were handy measures that the so-call protection boards used to decide who among us was salvageable and who should be cast aside in the hope of death. I know from my own family experience the effect of these measurements.

The categorisation of Great Grandfather, Hugh Anderson, and his family shows the ignorance of blood classifications only too well. Even though Grandfather Anderson’s parents were both Aboriginal he was still categorised as half-caste simply because his skin was slightly lighter, whereas his children were deemed black, the equivalent of full-blood, along with their mother (Treseder 1891). Even as late as 1942 the measurement of blood was scrutinised by the authorities. Mum and Aunty Ellen, who both had children in that year, were called upon to declare on a form provided through the hospital whether their children were full-blood, half-caste or European. Naturally Mum and Aunty Ellen both declared their children full-blood, after-all the parents concerned were Aboriginal. For declaring honestly, and with pride, the Aboriginality of their children my Mum and Aunt duly received departmental letters stating that they weren’t entitled to child endowment for full-blood kids. I cannot tell you how incensed this makes me feel. We never ever measured our blood; we were and are Aboriginal, and proud of it. Mum and Aunty Ellen learnt the hard way that we were not respected or valued.

John Henry and Wendy Brabham (1994) point to the plethora of intelligence testing done in the name of science. In particular they point to the work of Stanley D Porteus, a racial psychologist, who seems to have spent his entire career trying to prove that we, as a race of beings, lacked true intelligence. In one of his many declarations he said, “even a so-called primitive race such as the Australians may be excellently adapted to their own environment and therefore must be deemed intelligent. But at the same time they are certainly unadaptable to a civilized environment” (Porteus 1931, cited in Henry & Brabham 1994, p.43). It goes on and on. The prejudiced posturing of past anthropological investigations meant that
Indigenous cultures were explicitly rated against a Western continuum of so-called intelligence and civility. Of course, it could be said that such ‘sciences’ came and went, and have no bearing in the present day. That conclusion, however, would be quite simply misguided. As John Henry and Wendy Brabham point out, “the ‘truth’ advanced by Morton in 1849 [one of the earliest protagonists of craniology] had had a long run in this country and still surfaces today in white folklore” (1994, p.5).

Why am I going over this? Because the consequence of all this ‘science’ has been a proliferation of views that trivialise, exoticise and subordinate our cultures. As David Hollingsworth rightly noted, “…the most striking and enduring representation of Aboriginality remains that of the exotic and the primitive” (1998, p.194). Chris Jenks too emphasised that such thinking “…is still recognizable within the modern complex of confusions over racism, racial superiority, development and underdevelopment…” (2005, p.32). Quite frankly this ignorance was not left in the past. The next time I encounter the conquering mentality and xenophobic legacy of racist anthropology won’t be the first time. How often have us mob on the east coast been accused of not being ‘authentically’ Indigenous because we do not project a ‘tribal’ imagery?; We hear it year in year out, decade after decade. I am totally incensed by comments that I’ve had to listen to that construe that any Aboriginal person who manages to function in the Western sphere is somehow less-Aboriginal; that we’ve assimilated into some type of ‘honorary’ Westerner; that we don’t carry within us our values, our culture, our identity and our worldview.

Ignorance of us, and our cultures, seems to me to continue to exist because of a lingering historic nostalgia that in effect negates, within nostalgic subscribers, any moral imperative to repudiate the iniquity of past sciences. That ignorance of us still abounds ensures, as far as I am concerned, that our identity remains political. That the politics of our identity can be viewed through the windows of suffering and ignorance tells me that it is also visible through a window of hegemony. Now hegemony is an interesting concept, which was significantly developed by Italian Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci’s hegemony as interpreted by Gwyn Williams is essentially:

an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all tastes, morality, customs, religious and political principles, and
all social relations, particularly in the intellectual and moral connotation. An element of direction and control, not necessarily conscious, is implied. (Williams 1960, p.587)

As you can see from this definition hegemony is a complex term; it warrants discussion at length. This I do in the next part of this chapter, when I look to the hegemony of Western knowledge. At this stage I only want to introduce the concept as the politically and ideologically driven praxis of intruder ignorance about us.

I see a hegemonic will in everything that has been done to strip us our cultures and our identities. I see it in the astonishingly overt control of us in the name of assimilation. Take as an example exemption certificates; we called them ‘dog tags’. In 1955 the NSW Aborigines Welfare Board magnanimously issued my father with such a certificate. These certificates were handed out to Aboriginal people whom the board deemed good enough to enter white society, so long as you got back on the reserve by a set time. From our perspective, in a society where our lives were completely dominated by the dictates of the state, if you got a certificate as my father did it meant being in a better position to help your family and people survive. It meant being able to work and not rely on handouts. If you look closely at the certificate, shown below, you will see Dad is rated half-caste. The ideology here is clear. If they deemed you half-caste you were believed to be less Aboriginal and that would justify letting you out into white society. It was something Dad and many other Aboriginal people put up with as a survival tactic. The irony though was that Dad, in actual fact, had what white scientists would have termed full blood parents.
Hegemony is not something of the past; it still exists today in non-Indigenous protestations against our political resistance, for example our call for treaty. Prime Minister Howard himself said, “I abhor the notion of an Aboriginal treaty because it is repugnant to the ideals of one Australia” (cited in Bradfield 2004, p.170). A state of hegemony was likewise present when our native title rights, as recognised by the High Court of Australia in 1992 and again in 1996, were undermined through Federal Government amendment. As non-Indigenous academic Ravi De Costa said, “there was poorly concealed anger that a progressive judiciary had improved the political possibilities for Aboriginal peoples forever…” (2000, p.280). Moreover hegemony was at work in the debacle surrounding the 1999 attempt to include a contemporary statement as a preamble to Australia’s constitution. As De Costa noted, “…Prime Minister Howard, in a moment of colossal hubris, chose to write the preamble text himself…” (2000, p.279), no doubt out of fear that we would threaten Australia’s ‘precious’ constitution. No wonder we saw it as “a simulation of sincerity” with “no moral sustenance whatsoever” (De Costa 2000, p.279).

Non-Indigenous academic Stuart Bradfield reminds us that, “the state dictates that ‘Aboriginality’ gives way to ‘citizenship’” (2004, p.170). He further notes that, “for many Australians, the articulation of a distinct Indigenous identity challenges notions of ‘one Australia’” (2004, p.165). It’s not a point lost to us. Indigenous social commentator Patrick Dodson rightly said, “everything about us has to be subject and subordinate to the rules, practices and values of the dominant society” (cited in Bradfield 2004, p.174). Our identity obviously creates a good deal of angst within the broader Australian society. It also creates considerable interest and speculative fodder for academia. Nauseatingly for us, a spirited debate is still being waged within the field of anthropology over the definition of Aboriginality. For me, the anthropological fixation with creating a profile of Aboriginality is an esoteric debate grounded in the need to pigeonhole us. Colin Bourke (1998) certainly criticised those non-Indigenous academics that have chosen to promote themselves as experts on our culture and identity. Colin Bourke said:

Some academics, such as anthropologists, have proclaimed themselves experts on Aboriginal cultural matters. They have declared themselves as being on side with Aboriginal people while at the same time displaying the same colonising techniques of their predecessors who stole our land. (1998, p.180)
There can be no doubt that non-Indigenous support of Indigenous resistance is decisively helpful. I for one appreciate such dedication. That said I do nonetheless see a form of ideological hegemony taking place when non-Indigenous people try to define who we are. Take for instance speculation over what is colloquially known as ‘pan’ Aboriginality. Non-Indigenous academic Robert Tonkinson wrote that, “a pan-Aboriginal identity has developed that is now embraced by most Australians of Aboriginal ancestry” (1998, p.294). John Morton, also a non-Indigenous academic, likewise observed that, “it is now routinely asserted that Aboriginality is a discursive construction that is wholly an effect of colonial history” (1998, p.357). Perhaps before accepting ‘panism’ as Aboriginality we should look to how we came to be thought of as homogeneous in the first place. Historically, the term ‘aborigine’ was invoked by the colonisers. It was a convenient label for them. Through its use we were separated out and demonised as savages. Any obligation to bother with recognising our cultural identities was nullified. We as ‘aborigines’ were segregable from the colonial subjugators’ development of their fictitious ‘new world’ identity.

What must be known is that we never relinquished our individual cultural identities; each of our cultures has unique life ways and knowledge ways. Colin Bourke rightly pointed out that we still strongly prefer our own identities, for example regional identities like “…nunga, nyoongah, yolngu, murri and koori…” (1998, p.176). For myself I am Goori on my Dhungutti side, but I am equally Koori through my Dharawal and Victorian heritage, and Murri through my Gomilaroi line. As you can see from the diagram shown on the next page my own Indigenous citizenship has four tiers; it begins with family and clan, followed by tribal affiliation. After these two tiers we broaden our identity by connecting our mobs from the same region together. It is only then that we unify as Aboriginal or Indigenous. Clearly these four tiers of identity take precedence for me before being simply Australian. That said, to simply designate the Aboriginal/Indigenous tier of our identity as ‘panist’ is wholly unreflective of who we are and our worldview. Our mutual Aboriginal/Indigenous identity goes far deeper than merely the experience of oppression and resistance. It is more accurately our collectivism, our spirituality as well as our autonomy.
Reflecting on my identity as an example this diagram shows that at the very least it is not unusual to have four tiers of Indigenous identity before Australian national identity.

3.2 The Hegemony of Western Knowledge

As I mentioned in the preceding section hegemony is both complex and difficult to understand. The term itself derives from the Greek language and originally meant ‘to lead’, though it is now more commonly used as a “synonym for domination” (McLellan 2005, n.p.). That can be seen in the definition that I provided on pages 50-51, which certainly articulates the all-encompassing character of hegemony as dominance. Antonio Gramsci theorised that hegemony as dominance manifests in two forms. In his prison notebooks Gramsci observed that, “these two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of “hegemony” which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of “direct domination” or command exercised through the State and “juridical” government” (1971, p.12). Thomas R. Bates, in his study of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, interpreted this to mean that, “the “normal” exercise of hegemony in a particular regime is characterized by a combination of force and consensus variously equilibrated, without letting force subvert consensus too much, making it appear that the force is based on the consent of the majority” (1975, p.363).

Through Gramsci I have come to understand that hegemony takes a soft form as much as it does a hard form. Hegemony can be subtle, very subtle, that is part of its
nature, and that’s because hegemony often involves the unconscious consent of the dominated (Gramsci 1971). This consent is obtained through the infiltration into the mind of the dominated the ideologies, values and ultimately worldview of those who enact domination (Gramsci 1971). Jenks expressed this particularly well by noting that, “outside the institutional context, hegemonic power is rendered viable and permanent through cultural values, norms, beliefs, myths and traditions which appear to belong to the people and have a life outside particular governments and class systems…” (2005, p.82). That hegemony has a life outside the political sphere doesn’t altogether mean that politics doesn’t play a fundamental role in establishing and maintaining a state of hegemony. As Bates interpreted, “the concept of hegemony is really a very simple one. It means political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularisation of the world view of the ruling class” (1975, p.352).

That hegemony can be subtle doesn’t mean that hegemony isn’t insidious. It is. In looking to our lived experience since the 1788 invasion of our lands a hard form of Western hegemony is clearly visible in the blatant political resolutions that sought to variously eliminate and otherwise constrain us. In its soft form Western hegemony can be seen in the dominant society’s advocacy of strategies like assimilation. More menacingly it can be seen in the hegemony of Western knowledge. The notion that there is a tangible interplay between knowledge and hegemony was furthered significantly by Gramsci who noted, “…it follows that the theoretical-practical principle of hegemony has also epistemological significance…” (1971, p.365). I should note here that epistemology is “the theory of knowledge. Its central questions include the origin of knowledge; the place of experience in generating knowledge, and the place of reason in doing so…” (Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy 1996, n.p.). That hegemony has epistemological significance opened up for me the idea that hegemony can occur within knowledge construction and diffusion and, I would think, within research as a primary tool for knowledge production.

Gramsci asserted that, “the realisation of a hegemonic apparatus, in so far as it creates a new ideological terrain, determines a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge: it is a fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact” (1971, pp.365-366). The creation of “a new ideological terrain” is very compelling for me because
it ties together ideology and knowledge. For a state of hegemony to exist and perpetuate there is inevitably a socio-cultural/socio-political ideology in place that has a central role in ratifying dominance (Gramsci 1971). However, in order to ratify the rightness of ideology, ideology itself has to be validated by something. That something is knowledge. Knowledge as the resource body of information for knowing is thus the resource body for legitimating ideology. So what actually counts as knowledge? Is knowledge absolute? Is knowledge objective? These are the type of critical questions that when examined expose a far deeper side to knowledge. It is through questioning the authority of Western knowledge as fact or truth that I am able to see that a state of hegemony exists in its soft form particularly in reference to the veracity of our own knowledge ways.

To look at hegemony in the context of knowledge I need to begin by asking: does knowledge have a socio-cultural/socio-political identity? If knowledge can be seen in terms of socio-cultural/social political identity it does imply that fact and truth aren’t necessarily absolute and/or objective, rather it opens the way to understand that knowledge may just as likely be relative and/or subjective. This whole issue has in actuality been vigorously debated within the field of sociology (Abercrombie 1980). Sociologist Nicholas Abercrombie (1980) made a very thorough study of the variant schools of thought relevant to the sociology of knowledge. Of the theorists he discussed I found the work of Karl Mannheim particularly interesting. Mannheim, according to Abercrombie, was instrumental in putting forward the argument, “…that a person’s thought is socially located, or socially determined, or a function of a social position…”, and as such, “…is socially relative, partial, or distorted, in that it may be formed by particular social interests” (1980, p.35). Notwithstanding the arguments concerning the philosophical logic of absolutism versus relativism, relativism in terms of knowledge is an interesting concept because it advocates the idea of “conditioned existence” (Stedman-Jones 1998, p.124).

The notion of conditioned existence as espoused through a relativistic school of thought is very interesting to me because it enables me to see knowledge as conditioned by socio-cultural/socio-political identity. Relativism is useful in this regard because it brings into consideration concepts like difference, perspective and diversity (Stedman-Jones 1998). Difference, perspective and diversity are, from my
point of view, relevant to understanding knowledge as potentially hegemonic. What furthers this prospect is an understanding of the concept of subjectivism as “...a theoretical stance deriving from idealism, which emphasizes the subjective character of society and the social relationships of which it is composed” (Walsh 1998, p.275).

All of this leads me to a very major issue: context. Context, to me, implies a condition of meaning, and meaning surely is pivotal to understanding. So if meaning can be relative and/or subjective, understanding can also be relative and/or subjective. Sue Stedman-Jones in her paraphrasing of eminent sociologist Clifford Geertz noted that Geertz believed, “…that the truth of cultural relativism is that we can never apprehend another culture as though it were our own” (1998, p.130).

Into this comes the dynamics of knowledge. Knowledge in terms of meaning and understanding is relative and subjective, in that knowledge itself is not neutral of worldview. Let me give an example from my own experience. Previously I explained that we often feel uncomfortable discussing our spirituality because it is too often misinterpreted. Our spiritual knowledge is concretised as fact and truth for us through the context of our worldview; the context of our socio-cultural meaning and understanding. The misinterpretation we experience results from falsecomprehensions made according to knowledge determinants and delimiters not of our worldview. Another example springs to mind. Western historical knowledge of Kurnell asserts that Kurnell is categorically the birthplace of modern Australia. Our historical knowledge of Kurnell, however, is as the birthplace of the invasion of our lands and the subjugation of our peoples. Now even though there are two histories to be heard here, the Western history through its denial of Indigenous history purports to be objectively true. Clearly in these instances our knowledge has been measured against knowledge strictures not of our own worldview or ‘cultural arbitrary’.

When Indigenous knowledge can be countered and de-legitimated by the sheer dominance of Western knowledge it is utterly apparent to me that an intellectual and ideological hegemony is fundamentally at work. My thoughts regarding knowledge as hegemonic are not new. In 1993 my colleagues and I wrote that, “the relationship between hegemony and knowledge is very close”. Certainly we claimed that our, “traditional knowledge...is continually discredited by cultural hegemony and the positivistic world view associated with the modernisation paradigm” (Williams,
White & Stewart 1993, p.291). Now before I go on to discuss this further I digress for a moment because it is important to make clear that seemingly innocuous words like traditional and mythology potentially embody for us a state of hegemony because of the positivistic worldview favoured by West-centric thought. Our use of such words is oftentimes interpreted in accord with West-centric meanings, and as such assumed to denote and fulfil Western readings that contain and primitivise our knowledges. Our use of such words is however contextualised by the cultural meanings and understandings inherent in our own worldview.

The paradigm of modernisation centres on an ideology that is underwritten by a message of Western superiority that can be linked historically to early anthropology. Chris Jenks observed that the work of early anthropologists on one level constituted a form of “imperialist market research” that was entirely beneficial to the ideology of development (2005, p.95). This ideology Jenks confirmed endorsed a, “clear sense of superiority”, which as he so eloquently put it, “prefigured the intellectually predatory Western mind” (2005, p.95). The union between development and superiority foretold and cemented the superiority/inferiority relationship between the so-called “First World” and the “Third World” (Jenks 2005, p.95). Fundamental to the ideology of development that underscored the modernist project was the concept of ‘civilisation’ and the facticity of ‘science’. Through the ideals of ‘civilisation’ and the ‘truth’ claims of science one worldview became ‘the worldview’ and one knowledge became ‘all knowledge’. Maori academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith couldn’t have put it plainer, “the globalisation of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West’s view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of ‘civilized’ knowledge” (1999, p.63).

There is a perceptible message of superiority underpinning the ideologies that inform ‘civilisation’ and ‘science’. This message of superiority promotes the ascendancy of West-centric knowing by sanctioning the refutation, re-interpretation and fictionalisation of other forms of knowing. Non-Indigenous academic Julie Marcus (1999) illustrates as much in her critical examination of disciplines like anthropology and institutions like museums. In her work ‘Dark smudge upon the sand’ Marcus (1999) exposes the palpable power relationship that exists in the making of Western knowledge. In her critical analysis of her own profession, anthropology, Marcus
(1999) states that, “…the images in which we traffic are pervasive western ‘fiction’ about the nature of the whole world and that as such, they are part of the mechanics of domination” (1999, p.73). Marcus (1999) challenges us to look closely and with a critical eye at the taxonomical classifications promoted by places like museums and the narratives implicit in their displays and exhibitions. These taxonomies and narratives unequivocally assert Western knowledge of the world as universal knowledge of the world.

Why have we been defined within museum narratives as flora and fauna? Why does our history count as pre-history? Why are our ontological understandings mythologized? These are but some of the many critical questions that flood my mind and which expose Western knowledge as hegemonic in its de-legitimising effect on our knowledge ways. I was moved by Marcus’s critical contention that:

…the terror and violence that is found upon the frontier of a profoundly racialised national state had led to the absence of a discussion of the ways in which power is implicated in the production of anthropological, scientific, knowledge of Aboriginal people and cultures. The absence of sustained discussion of how power has shaped anthropological knowledge is crucial to its continued deployment through the texts it produces…Anthropological knowledge is necessarily part of the processes of what has come to be known as the ‘gaze’ of the state, a gaze which in Australia is necessarily colonizing. (1999, p.53)

Indigenous Canadian author Heather Harris attests that, “although there is growing recognition among Western scholars of the value of Indigenous knowledge, Western science-generated knowledge is generally seen as the only valid source of knowledge” (2005, p.37). When our knowledges remain subjugated, however unconsciously, by the universalising ‘fact’ and ‘truth’ of Western sciences what else could it be but hegemony?

Heather Harris said that, “Indigenous knowledge is holistic, rather than reductionist, seeing the universe as a living entity; it is experiential, rather than positivist, contending that experiences which cannot be measured are no less real than those that can be measured” (2005, p.37). This is a very poignant observation because it reminds us that epistemologically Indigenous knowledges are not ‘proof’ based in the same way that Western knowledge is. The concept of proof is an important issue in that in its demand there is a perfect opportunity for hegemony to flourish. Jenks (1995) in his forward to ‘Visual Culture’ made the interesting observation that, “…Western culture is guided by a visual paradigm” (1995, p.1). He contended that,
“this visual fixity is one that is dominant and consistent within our modern, Western cultural cognitions, upheld largely through the agency of scientific practice” (2005, p.161). West-centric knowing could thus be said to be guided by a need to ‘see it to believe it’. Western visuality compresses us in this never ending vortex of having to defend, rebuff, refute and counter-claim just to protect the veracity of our knowing as ‘seen’ through our own Indigenous visuality.

Essentially Western visuality constitutes a specific socio-cultural/socio-political lens just as assuredly as Indigenous visuality does. The issue here for us is the question of how a West-centric lens could possibly constitute a valid interpretive line of sight for Indigenous knowledges. This disjunction between our lines of sight is not of itself hegemonic, but it rapidly becomes so when one line of sight is advanced as more authoritative than the other. In respect to this issue of interpretive lines of sight I found significant the work of Indigenous academic Martin Nakata who for sometime now has worked steadfastly to advance an Indigenous standpoint theory. It is an interesting theory which advocates on the one hand that we need to “…understand the very systems of thought, ideas and knowledges that have been instrumental in producing our position” and on the other hand find our way “…to speak back to knowledges that have formed around what is perceived to be the Indigenous positions in the Western ‘order of things’” (1998, p.4). As I see it Indigenous standpoint theory represents a counter-hegemonic platform for us in our effort to repeal the hegemony of Western knowledge.

Martin Nakata rightly pointed out that Indigenous scholars are very much engaged in the business of negotiating with textual “…representations of themselves, their ancestors and their experiences” (1998, p.4). You can see clearly that this is precisely what I am engaged in here with my study. I couldn’t agree more with Martin Nakata when he wrote, “negotiating these texts is not simply an intellectual process. It is also an emotional journey that often involves outrage, pain, anger, humiliation, guilt, anxiety and depression” (1998, p.4). For me at the very personal level it is an incredibly emotional journey because the textual representations that we are dealing with are oftentimes so vile and so outrageous it shocks us afresh every time we encounter such text. One of the most important recommendations to come out of Indigenous standpoint theory for me is the very real need for us to engage
fully these texts in order to dissect and decode how West-centric knowledge of us came to be constructed and disseminated as fact in the first place. It is a vital first step in the process of re-claiming and voicing our knowledges through our own cultures lines of sight.

What then is an Indigenous line of sight? Perhaps the best way to answer this is through example. On page 3 I wrote, “the sea is as our blood; it runs through the core of our being as saltwater people”, and again on page 38 I wrote, “my spirituality is more my deep sense of being as environment”. These are accounts that are made of my ontology; ontology being “the branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature of being” (Concise Oxford Dictionary 2001, p.996). As I perceive it, it is the meanings and understandings that we derive from our ontology that define and guide our philosophy and ideology, and our epistemological sense of the context and construction of knowledge. It is the philosophy and ideology inherent in our ontology that frames and energises our Indigenous worldview and defines our Indigenous identity. Referring back to the two examples above, when one reads these accounts through an Indigenous lens a sense of essence is transposed that gives Indigenous readers knowledge of who I am as an Indigenous being in relation to the life world in which I am situated. On the other hand, read these same accounts through a Western lens and their whole knowledge context gets distorted.

In West-centric knowing environment, nature and all living things tend to be classified, categorised and ranked into taxonomical schemata that place humans at the top of the chain. Again the ideological message of superiority is omnipresent. The epistemological tone of this is a linear form of knowing. In the philosophical teachings of Indigenous ontology no such rankings exist. We view environment, nature and all living things as being on the one plane. Epistemologically the tone of our knowing is holistic and cyclic. This is of course my own interpretation. As I live it there is a stark and chasmic difference between West-centric knowing and Indigenous knowing. I want to emphasise this point. Take for instance an Indigenous place of ontological significance, often referred to as a sacred site. When I am in a position to share my knowledge of such a space with members of my family for example I do so through a particular line of sight that imparts a specific and culturally apposite interpretation borne of an Indigenous ontology; in other
words borne of a particular Indigenous philosophical and ideological standpoint. There is an Indigenous identity to this knowledge. It is of our ‘cultural arbitrary’.

When the ontological and epistemological foundations of Indigenous intellectualism are denied the academic credibility of Indigenous knowledge is likewise denied. The very real problem we face is one of always having to prove our knowledges as ‘fact’ in the Western sense. In terms of our places of ontological significance our knowledges of space are inferiorly represented through the West-centric lens as reflective of primitive belief. In this West-centric knowing not only confiscates our space, it legitimates it as unused and available for Western consumption. In referring to the discipline of archaeology Keith McConnochie noted that, “many of the events recounted within Aboriginal cultures parallel the stories told by the archaeologists” (2002, p.33). For me it doesn’t matter whether our knowledges parallel Western knowledge or not. Frankly, cross comparison invites hegemony because it is only when our knowledges ‘stack up’ that they are seen as valid. Keith McConnochie makes the point that, “reconciliation may be about the development of strategies for the acceptance of these differences rather than about attempts to argue these differences out of existence” (2002, p.34). Accepting difference is for me the start.

I could go on citing example after example of the differences that exist between our knowledge ways and West-centric knowing. I think though I have already given a reasonable impression of what has happened to our knowledges particularly in terms of history and anthropology. The real issue here is to expose West-centric knowledge as hegemonic and that, I feel, I have almost done, but I do have one other interesting factor to draw your attention to. Anthony Moran (2002) and Julie Marcus (1999) are among several authors who have drawn attention to what I think is the ultimate act of hegemony in this country, the commandeering of aspects of our cultures and our identity as Indigenous. Historically this commandeering can be seen in the actions of white organisations like the Australian Native’s Association and the Jindyworobak movement who appropriated for their own purposes significant aspects of our cultures “…under the assumption that they could be separated from the Indigenous culture that produced them. In fact they could be inherited since the indigenous were deemed a dying race, a myth that remained popular up until at least the 1940’s” (Moran 2002, pp.1032-1033).
In the contemporary Indigenous designs, motifs, symbols and the like abound. This new visualising of Australia’s Indigenous connection is often seen as a positive affirmation of us as vital to the national persona. With some it may well suffice as reparation for the past, for others it may be a way of finding and establishing a uniquely Australian identity (Moran 2002). But to me, when our cultures, are ‘cherry picked’ like this, they are commodified by virtue of severance from the ontological and epistemological context that gives them meaning. Even our Indigenousness has been hi-jacked by particular groups within the Australian community. “The claims of settler Australians for their spiritual connection with Australia...frequently take on a manic defensive quality, because the settler nation cannot drift back through time immemorial within Australia, while Aboriginal communities can” (Moran 2002, p.1029). Our spiritual connectedness to country is belittled and trivialised when it is co-opted so brazenly. ‘I was born here therefore I’m as Indigenous as you are’. This is to us a contemptuous swipe at our identity. It is a blatant way of objectifying the concept of Indigenousness; it is a penultimate act of hegemony.

Anthony Moran insightfully remarked that, “it pays to reflect upon the effects of the state’s construction of Aboriginal identities and the extent to which these have been, and continue to be, forms of control of Aboriginality and Aboriginal claims…” (2002, p.1035). Moran further notes that, “…all settler nationalisms negotiate from a position of power: the nation-state is the reality, and indigenous peoples must find ways to voice their claims within it, usually with some tacit acceptance of the realpolitik of ultimate nation-state sovereignty” (2002, p.1035). In line with Antonio Gramsci’s interpretation of hegemony dominance of the state is clearly not just physical, it is ideological. On page 17 of my introduction I quoted Barry Osborne (2001) who referred to domination by seduction. Seduction is an interesting word; it takes us back full circle to the beginning of this story of hegemony, to the issue of consent. Consent I would say is not simply a matter of willing conscious choice. Consent as an action of hegemony is often the result of constant overt but also equally covert acts of badgering. “This is who you are”; “this is good for you”; “this is the way it really is”; “this is what we’re going to give you”; these are all phrases that I’ve heard and which express to me our living reality under Western Hegemony.
CHAPTER 4: EDUCATION, CULTURAL REPRODUCTION AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF KNOWLEDGE

4.1 The Sociological Terrain of Mainstream Education

In the preceding chapter I explored the notion that knowledge has a socio-cultural/socio-political identity. This chapter extends that notion by looking into the socio-cultural/socio-political identity of education. Perhaps the best place for me to start is with an affirmation of education as an organically human process. As I see it we are all engaged in education in one form or another whether we realise it or not. That’s because education at its most basic is simply the traffic, the to and fro of knowledge in whatever form it takes. When we dispense advice to our children, when we show them how to do something or tell them about something we are in effect teaching in that we are communicating knowledge, albeit in an informal sense. Likewise when we pursue a hobby, watch a documentary or read a book we are actually learning in that knowledge is being communicated to us. There are many teaching-learning interchanges in our everyday life. These interchanges encompass all the incidental and/or residual teaching-learning encounters that occur as part of our everyday life experience through to the informal and formal educative programmes that we enter either by choice or by legislated requirement.

In thinking over the many conversations I have had over the years about education it occurs to me that most often when we go to talk about education what immediately springs to mind is not so much the incidental, residual or informal forms of education so much as formal forms like school, TAFE and university. These formal forms of education are otherwise identifiable as institutionalised education. With regard to this chapter it is principally institutionalised education that is my central focus in terms of what I want to say about education, cultural reproduction and the commodification of knowledge. In general terms I have found that for the most part many of us tend to be fairly ambivalent about institutionalised education, if anything we incline most often toward the positive. On the whole most of us appear to think of institutionalised education as a must for our betterment in a societal sense, hence superlatives like ‘you need a good education to get on’ or ‘education is necessary to success’ and so on. We might appreciate that such institutions fall under the jurisdiction of the state, but I wonder how many of us really stop to consider further
what that might imply? How many of us actually think beyond the popularly known ideals or physical setting of institutionalised education?

In Australia there is an expansive system of institutionalised education that encompasses all the public and private schools that we see in our suburbs, as well as our TAFE’s and universities (Henry et al. 1988). Colloquially this system is known as the mainstream. If I were to delve into the specifics of the term mainstream I would undoubtedly encounter variant delimitations on what the mainstream actually comprises. At the very least those education institutions directly owned, operated and/or controlled by the state appear to form the core of any understanding of what mainstream education is, so it is these institutions that I am referring to when using the term mainstream. It is after all principally these institutions that the vast majority of Indigenous students attend, or it is the programmes, policies and the like that are reflected in these institutions that are cited as benchmarks for community based Indigenous education. Whilst both Federal and State governments are involved in the overall provision of mainstream education in Australia it is actually the State governments that take direct responsibility for the day-to-day functioning of mainstream education institutions (Henry et al. 1988; Print 1993).

Involvement in formalised education in Australia is mandatory. Schooling is legislated by the state to commence by the age of six (Five to Fifteen 1993), though children generally begin formal schooling by the age of 5. Once introduced into the system learners more or less methodically progress through the sequence of grades of primary and secondary school until, at the very least, they have passed the compulsory age parameters for schooling set by the state. These rules apply regardless of whether a child is involved in home, private or public schooling. One way or another all Australian children are legally obliged to attend some form of sanctioned formalised education. For the most part having such an obligation barely raises an eyebrow, but for me it is a very worrying prospect when I consider the sociological terrain of mainstream education. My worry stems from knowing mainstream education as a Western construct. On this basis I contend that all learners involved in mainstream education are exposed to and expected to take on knowledge and values that reflect a Western worldview. This means that our
Indigenous children from a very early age are compelled into learning knowledge and values that are in the main oppositional to our worldview.

How I arrived at the above contentions has much to do with my belief that all forms of education are manifestly sociological, and therefore ideological. As I noted in my introduction I found academic corroboration for this belief in the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1990). Before I go on to discuss this I’ll just make a quick point of clarification. In Chapter 2 I explained the variant meanings of culture, pointing out the distinction that is sometimes usefully made between what is strictly social and what is strictly cultural. In using the term sociological here I am sweeping the social and cultural together in accord with the idea of culture as a whole way of life. The political, and for that matter the economic, are essentially constituent of this. Having made this emphasis I want to begin by reiterating that I find myself in agreement with Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) in respect to their argument that all education takes place within a cultural arbitrary; cultural arbitrary to my mind being a socio-cultural/socio-political reality. Just as I reasoned in Chapter 3 that knowledge is neither objective nor neutral in the sense that it is conditioned by socio-cultural/socio-political existence I reason too that education has a socio-cultural/socio-political conditioned existence.

To explain this concept of conditioned existence I need to first give a more detailed impression of what I have extracted from the educational theory of Bourdieu and Passeron. I need to do this because some of their contentions inform significantly the way that I have come to understand the sociological matrix of mainstream education. The first thing to know about Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) is that they regard all educative exchange as pedagogic action. They assert, “all pedagogic action [PA] is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power” (1990, p.5). Now that might sound rather confronting but to my way of thinking it is in essence a statement of the power relationship that exists in educative exchange by virtue of the nature of the interaction between teacher and learner. Let me use an example. When I teach my child something I am not teaching from a neutral standpoint. I am firstly teaching from the perspective of the cultural arbitrary, the cultural reality, to which I belong and I am secondly asserting the
authority of that cultural arbitrary to my child. All educative exchange involves a teacher-learner relationship and that suggests a power relationship, however latent.

If a teacher-learner relationship is essentially a power relationship then it seems logical that all pedagogic action involves what Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) term pedagogic authority. Bourdieu and Passeron claimed that, “the idea of a PA [pedagogic action] exercised without PAu [pedagogic authority] is a logical contradiction and a sociological impossibility” (1990, p.12). They contended that, “because every PA [pedagogic action] that is exerted commands by definition a PAu [pedagogic authority], the pedagogic receivers are disposed from the outset to recognize the legitimacy of the information transmitted and the PAu of the pedagogic transmitters, hence to receive and internalise the message” (1990, p.21). Therefore my child, as the receiver of the knowledge I impart, can be seen as accepting the pedagogic authority of myself as a pedagogic transmitter as well as the pedagogic authority of my knowledge. For Bourdieu and Passerson the follow on contention is that, “insofar as it is invested with a PAu [pedagogic authority], PA [pedagogic action] tends to produce misrecognition of the objective truth of cultural arbitrariness because, being recognized as a legitimate agency of imposition, it tends to produce recognition of the cultural arbitrary it inculcates as legitimate culture” (1990, p.22).

The whole notion of pedagogic authority is very interesting. When I apply this concept in reference to institutionalised education within Australia I see that the state, through its power to sanction formalised education, but more especially through its control of mainstream education, categorically asserts its pedagogic authority. What is particularly disconcerting about this realisation is that in doing so the state not only appears oblivious to the limitations of its own cultural arbitrariness, it actually seeks to oblige acquiescence to its pedagogic authority as the nation’s legitimate pedagogic authority. As I see it mainstream education, as a sociological construct of the dominant West-centric social order, projects a pedagogic authority that promulgates a Western worldview. Generally speaking the nation state of Australia is usually described as a democracy, but it is also according to the CIA’s write-up in their online World Factbook (2006), “an enviable Western-style capitalist economy”. This then gives a clearer picture as to the cultural arbitrary and therefore pedagogic authority of mainstream education. On this basis I am stating that the
social, cultural and political terrain of Australia’s mainstream education system is identifiably embedded within a Western capitalist cultural arbitrary.

When we enter into the mainstream education system we enter already enculturated into our own Indigenous cultural arbitrary and recognise, I would think intuitively, Indigenous pedagogic authority. Knowing this begs the question of what happens when the pedagogic authority of our own cultural reality clashes with the pedagogic authority of mainstream education. From the perspective of my Indigenous lens what I am looking at is quintessentially culture conflict. In looking to further substantiate this I again found the theoretical assumptions of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) entirely relevant. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) made an interesting distinction between what they term primary and secondary pedagogy. As I see it primary pedagogy is the pedagogy of family and community, the first pedagogy we encounter. We carry in us the knowledge, values, norms, standards and so on that we have acquired through this primary pedagogy when we encounter a secondary pedagogy, usually the pedagogy of institutionalised education. That of itself is unproblematic when the cultural arbitrary of primary and secondary pedagogy are either the same or complimentary, but it is entirely problematic when it is not.

Wendy Brabham and John Henry observed that, “… children of families with cultural and economic allegiances to the dominant cultural formation of Australia’s nation-state enter a schooling culture which functions to serve the same cultural and economic interests” (1991b, p.18). It is an observation that follows along a similar line of thinking to that of Bourdieu & Passeron who assert that:

the specific degree of productivity of any PW [pedagogic work] other than primary PW (secondary PW) is a function of the distance between the habitus it tends to inculcate (i.e. the cultural arbitrary it imposes) and the habitus inculcated by the previous phases of PW and ultimately by primary PW (i.e. the initial cultural arbitrary). (1990, p.43)

In effect learners whose primary cultural arbitrary is a Western capitalist cultural arbitrary enter mainstream education more culturally advantaged than say an Indigenous learner because the system they are entering is of their own cultural arbitrary. In other words the sociological predisposition of mainstream education is such that we are in effect culturally disadvantaged from the outset. One of the points Bourdieu & Passeron make in regard to the secondary pedagogic work of schooling
is that it tends to ignore the primacy of primary pedagogy by “…making the school career a history with no pre-history” (1990, p.43).

I must say though that the theoretical work of Bourdieu & Passeron is rather difficult to fathom and can certainly come across as rather scientific. I think, however, it is important to try and work through such difficulties in their work because the essence of what they say gives a very insightful impression of the sociological nature not only of education in general but of institutionalised education in particular. Critiques of Bourdieu and Passeron like that offered by critical education theorist Henry Giroux (2001) point out the limitations in their thinking because as Giroux noted they have tended to paint a fairly rigid picture of education that fails to address adequately issues like resistance. Henry Giroux also noted a distinct limitation in the work of Bourdieu is his presumption that, “…the cycle of reproduction appears unbreakable” (2001, p.98). Notwithstanding the merit such criticisms genuinely have, I do have to say that I actually see mainstream education as culturally intractable. It stands to reason, given the cultural arbitrary of the dominant social order, that mainstream education is locked into reproducing cultural qualities that do not diverge significantly from the interests of Western capitalism.

One of the overarching themes in the work of Bourdieu & Passeron (1990) is cultural reproduction. Raymond Williams (1981), who has studied at length the concept of cultural reproduction, acknowledged the role of education in cultural reproduction. Williams claimed that, “it is then reasonable, at one level, to speak of the general educational processes as a key form of cultural reproduction…” (1981, p.185). Realistically, it is not unreasonable that education would function in the interests of cultural continuance; institutionalised education is after all a sociological construct, so it is only logical that it would have a sociological function. When we return to the concept of education as an organically human process we can appreciate that even incidental, residual and informal education is purposed towards enculturation. Take for instance the educative processes of family, clearly they are purposed toward socialising the child into a particular cultural arbitrary. What makes the matter of cultural reproduction in reference to institutionalised education more convoluted is the action of objectifying knowledge through education as though it were not culturally conditioned, when, as I have argued, it clearly is.
Raymond Williams observed that, “it is characteristic of educational systems to claim that they are transmitting ‘knowledge’ or ‘culture’ in an absolute, universally derived sense, though it is obvious that different systems, at different times and in different countries, transmit radically different selective versions of both” (1981, p.185). In line with this thinking I would argue that the knowledge, values, norms, standards and so on that are peculiar to the cultural arbitrary of mainstream education are asserted as objectively ‘true’ by the mainstream. Bourdieu and Passeron proffer the notion that, “the more directly a pedagogic agency reproduces, in the arbitrary content that it inculcates, the cultural arbitrary of the group or class which delegates to it its PAu, the less need it has to affirm and justify its own legitimacy” (1990, p.29). Because the mainstream reproduces the cultural arbitrary of the dominant West-centric social order it is positioned to champion its pedagogy as though it were cultureless, in the sense of being presented as a universal cultural absolute and therefore rendered devoid of any cultural specificity. Given this it is clear to me that mainstream education can really only offer us assimilation.

Wendy Brabham and John Henry avow that, “…schools and classrooms within the institutionalised education system of the Australian nation-state are reproductive of cultural traditions…”, “…that schools constitute a cultural system serving the interests of the dominant cultural formation of the nation-state of Australia…”, and, “…that schools in the modern nation-state are primarily concerned with the assimilation of each generation into society’s economic and political fabric…” (1991b, p.4). Peter McLaren certainly believes that, “capitalism thrives on the regulation and eventual assimilation of difference…Difference becomes chartered in the service of capital so that the subjectivities of the citizenry can be emptied out as part of the rite of passage of becoming American” (1995, p.110) or in our case Australian. Marxist educator Frank Youngman too confirms that, “…education as a cultural and ideological institution is inextricably linked to the economic and political structure of society” (1986, p.20). Youngman attests that, “in contemporary capitalist social formations the education system continues to serve the interests of the ruling class, and acts to legitimate its rule and to train people to fit into the socio-economic hierarchy” (1986, p. 21).
Raymond Williams (1981, p.186) does however warn us that the “metaphor of reproduction” can be pushed too far because change is a fundamental process with all human societies. If we take reproduction to mean only the duplication of what currently exists then the discourse of reproduction becomes reductionist. In taking this on board I have come to understand that cultural reproduction is more reasonably a juxtaposition between social, cultural and political change within a cultural formation or tradition as much as strident perpetuation. I think though change has to be considered in context to what I have already emphasised in Chapter 2 about the structure of core values. It seems reasonable to me to hypothesise that values are a major factor in ensuring the relatively fixed nature of mainstream education at the macro level. I conclude this because values have a significant informing effect on both ideology and worldview (Gross 1985). Whilst it is perfectly true that no society is a static entity Gross’s (1985) contention that core values create an underlying stability is interesting in terms of understanding the constancy of the social, cultural and political terrain of mainstream education.

It is my experience that mainstream education is commonly described as being premised on egalitarian principles consistent with the ideologies of liberalised democracy. It is these sorts of claims that bring up for me the issue of meritocracy. Meritocracy is actually an issue that has been covered well by Miriam Henry, John Knight, Robert Lingard and Sandra Taylor in their 1988 sociological study of Australian schooling. Although written some 18 years ago this volume nonetheless remains a valuable primary academic reference. According to Miriam Henry et al., “meritocracy promises social mobility through a society in which the accidents of birth (class, gender, race, or ethnicity) are seen as presenting no permanent barriers to achievement” (1988, p.81). Miriam Henry et al. (1988) explain that the rhetoric of the mainstream is such that education is supposed to represent a level playing field where all students can succeed; all it takes is hard work and commitment. To get around the fact that mainstream education must accommodate “the accidents of birth”, policy and the like are formulated so that at least theoretically all learners are given a fair chance.

Great hope seems to be pinned on policy to iron out any discrepancies that might be in the school system in order to democratise education as an equal learning
environment. Interestingly Bourdieu and Passeron contended that there is a, “utopian character to education policy”, in that, “…the structure of power relations prohibits a dominant PA (pedagogic action) from resorting to the type of PW (pedagogic work) contrary to the interests of the dominant classes who delegate its PAu (pedagogic authority) to it” (1990, pp.53-54). From this I derive the sense that as much as we may be accommodated by the mainstream, the system itself cannot default from its pedagogic imperative to reproduce the cultural interests of mainstream society and, in particular, to protect the social, economic and political interests of those sections of mainstream society already most advantaged. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) state institutionalised education, “…must produce a habitus conforming as closely as possible to the principles of the cultural arbitrary which it is mandated to reproduce” (1990 p.57). Here then is the core contradiction inherent in policy; how to accommodate our cultural interests within mainstream education without putting at risk the cultural interests of the dominant groups in mainstream society.

For me the reproductive function of mainstream education takes me full circle back to the matter of hegemony. From all that I have read, particularly in terms of what Bourdieu & Passeron (1990) have put forward, I have come to see that if a learner is legally obligated to participate in a secondary pedagogy that inculcates an oppositional cultural arbitrary, that learner is effectively sited in a hegemonic environment. In thinking about this in respect to us I can see that if the mainstream keeps its pedagogic pressure up long enough a real danger exists that their worldview will either eventually come to dominate or at the very least cause psychological confusion. It is, to me, passive force. Of course it all sounds like ‘fait accompli’, but it is not necessarily so. This thesis, for example, is a work of contestation against the pedagogic authority of the mainstream. What the issue of contestation does for me is turn my attention to movements that seek to counter the hegemonic effect of mainstream education. Critical educator Antonia Darder, for instance, argued strongly in favour of bicultural education, “…wherein individuals learn to function in two distinct socio-cultural environments: their primary culture, and that of the dominant mainstream culture of the society in which they live” (1991, p.48).

There is a strong theme of hope in the idea of bicultural education that is inspirational at the level of theory. My concern though is the level of practice. For
instance, I know that I am principally seen as bicultural, in that I appear to function at an effective level within two cultural realities. But what does function actually mean? My existence in the Western world is in reality characterised by constant vigilance, resistance and defensiveness against the acts of racism that I encounter and the suppression that goes with that. It’s not just that, it’s also the need to continually justify my existence as a blackfulla. No doubt biculturalism, critical democracy and so on move beyond the concept of accommodation to full representation and voice, but realistically how much farther can mainstream education go in this direction given the cultural essentialism of its deep personality as both a policy (macro) and practical (micro) creation of the nation state. From my perspective all that mainstream education can really offer us is a curriculum that re-contextualises and commodifies aspects of our knowledge ways and a pedagogical praxis whose orientation creates a highly individualised and competitive classroom environment. I now turn my attention to these matters.

4.2 Curriculum and Pedagogical Praxis within the Mainstream Classroom

When thinking about a classroom I imagine that most of us would first visualise a room identifiable by its particular set-up in terms of furniture and equipment like blackboards, white boards, tables, chairs and so on (Henry et al. 1988). But is that all there is to a classroom? Miriam Henry et al. avow that, “classrooms are shaped and constrained by institutional biases, curricular prescriptions, teacher and student biographies and roles, and the structural and ‘hegemonic’ (e.g., controlling) features of society in which schools are set” (1988, p.3). From this we can see clearly that a classroom isn’t just a physical setting, it is in effect a sociological setting. As a sociological setting the classroom itself can be analysed as a site for cultural reproduction. In mainstream education the day-to-day happenings of the classroom are regulated through curriculum and pedagogical praxis. Together curriculum and pedagogical praxis scope matters like: i. what is taught; ii. why it is taught; and iii. how it is taught. As such curriculum and pedagogical praxis can be considered as the reproductive mechanisms of the classroom, with the classroom, to take the metaphor further, being the ‘machine’ of an industrial form of mass education.

A curriculum is classically the knowledge content of a learning programme (Print 1993). In general we would be most familiar with curriculum in the form of subjects
like English, maths, science, geography, history and so forth. A curriculum in respect to mainstream education is a formalised document that not only prescribes what is to be taught, it also sets out definitive goals, aims, objectives and outcomes that typically i. articulate the educational intent of the curriculum, ii. stipulate expected learning benchmarks for learners and oftentimes iii. provide instructional advice to teachers for praxis (Brady & Kennedy 2003; Print 1993). Pedagogy on the other hand is “the science or art of teaching” (Dictionary of Sociology 1998). As such pedagogy encompasses all that a teacher does in the act of teaching. According to the New South Wales Department of Education and Training pedagogy is, “…the core business of the profession of teaching…”. As they advise, “…the term pedagogy recognises that how one teaches is inseparable from what one teaches, from what and how one assesses and from how one learns” (2003, p.4). We can thus appreciate that curriculum is a tool for teaching whilst pedagogy is teaching itself.

From the above account I can see that curriculum and pedagogical praxis are absolutely interlinked to become the core business of the classroom. It is my contention that the business of the classroom does not happen within a social or cultural vacuum; rather it is implicated directly in the work of cultural reproduction. Let’s begin by looking at the reproductive work of curriculum. Non-Indigenous academic Murray Print made the observation that, “to a substantial measure, the behaviour of society today reflects the nature of curriculum taught to this adult generation when it was in school” (1993, p.40). Miriam Henry et al. likewise noted that, “the way in which school knowledge comes to be defined and structured within the school context tells us something about our social structure” (1988, p.61). The gist of these statements is plain; curriculum is not independent of the framework of society. Non-Indigenous academics Laurie Brady and Kerry Kennedy couldn’t have expressed it more plainly when they wrote, “the curriculum does not stand apart from society – it is firmly embedded in it” (2003, p.3). Without doubt “Australian education, manifest through the curriculum, reflects Australian society and culture…” (Print 1993, p.40).

The notion that curriculum is firmly embedded within the framework of society remains largely inconsequential until critical questions are raised in reference to the cultural arbitrary of curriculum. In theorising about curriculum Professor Michael
Apple, a leading critical authority on curriculum, famously posed the question: “whose knowledge is of most worth?” (1999, p.32, 2000, p.44). In raising this question Apple moved the issue of what knowledge is of most worth to a new eminently more critical level. What such a question does is make sure that any critical analysis of curriculum takes into account not only what knowledge has or has not been selected for curriculum, it also takes into account the cultural identity of knowledge itself. Apple duly noted that, “…the curriculum is itself part of what has been called a selective tradition. That is from the vast universe of possible knowledge, only some knowledge gets to be official knowledge, gets to be declared legitimate…” (1999, p.11). Likewise he noted that textbooks, “…embody what Raymond Williams called the selective tradition: someone’s selection, someone’s vision of legitimate knowledge and culture, one that in the process of enfranchising one group’s cultural capital disenfranchises another’s” (Apple 2000, p.46).

In illustrating the selectivity of Australia’s mainstream curriculum Barry Osborne wrote that:

In expressing the dominant group’s perspectives on history, the curriculum typically silences the accounts of women, the poor and working class, ethnic minorities and Indigenous groups. Moreover, it presents the dominant group’s interpretations of other groups if and only if they are seen as having any cultural, social or economic status. Since only the dominant group’s social, cultural and economic expressions receive wide dissemination via the curriculum, it is these expressions which students are invited, indeed coerced, into accepting as normal, universal and even natural. (2001, pp.228-229)

From Barry Osborne’s analysis it can be seen clearly that historical knowledge at least is skewed through mainstream curriculum in favour of one cultural arbitrary over and above other cultural arbitraries. From an Indigenous perspective Osborne’s example of history is particularly pertinent. Take for instance my earlier reference to Kurnell. In thinking about the skewing of curriculum I ask myself is Kurnell represented in mainstream curriculum as Kundle, its original, and for me, true name? Is Kurnell identified as the traditional lands of the Gweagal people?; and is Kurnell represented as a site of Indigenous resistance?

The skewing of mainstream curriculum doesn’t just involve the subject of history. From my perspective it extends to all other subjects. Let’s look at geography. Kurnell for instance is the southern peninsula of Botany Bay according to West-centric knowledge. These places names are, from the perspective of our knowledge
ways, enforced geographic tags; they are symbolic of colonialist knowledge imposition. I ask myself is the invader politics that contextualises these West-centric names taught through mainstream curriculum? Do mainstream learners get to know that Botany Bay is Kamay? Another sterling example is language. Why are our languages referred to as second languages, why isn’t English termed a foreign language? From our perspective that’s exactly what it is. As for geology; what does mainstream geology teach about our ontology?, if indeed it is referred to at all, it is presented as religious mythology or as deeply significant aspects of our life ways and knowledge ways? I could go on and on with example after example, but the main point to be taken from what I have said is that mainstream curriculum gets skewed. Whose knowledge is of most worth?; certainly not ours.

When the curriculum we are expected to learn does not reflect our cultural arbitrary the effect of this on us can be twofold. It can be hegemonic in that we are placed in the dreadful position of having to devalue the veracity of our own knowledge ways, or it can antagonise us into resistance. From an Indigenous perspective the reality of mainstream curriculum is that knowledge is commodified in concurrence with the priorities and interests of the West-centric dominant social order. In actuality mainstream curriculum in Australia is produced under the auspices of State governments, though the Federal government does exert its influence through legislation, the formulation of policy and the activity of organisations like the Curriculum Corporation (Brady & Kennedy 2003; Print 1993). This is not a straight forward process though in that the producers of curriculum are under pressure to not only respond to political asseverations about curriculum, they must also respond to the expressed needs and wishes of a whole range of lobby groups, from parent/family organisations, teacher organisations, environmental organisations and so on, including Indigenous groups (Brady & Kenndey 2003; Print 1993).

With such a diverse and often oppositional range of voices certain voices inevitably get heard over others. This very point was emphasised by Michael Apple who stressed that whilst it is everyone’s right to be represented and heard in the business of deciding the “cultural capital” of school knowledge in reality, “…the freedom to help select the formal corpus of school knowledge is bound by power relations that have very real effects” (2000, p.62). The power relations of representation are
complex. Given this, it would be naive to claim that the content of school knowledge is ordained in a totalitarian manner by the state, or to claim that the entire corpus of school knowledge is exclusively that of the dominant social order, compromises are undoubtedly reached. Apple certainly feels that, “curricula aren’t imposed in countries like the United States. Rather, they are the products of often intense conflicts, negotiations, and attempts at rebuilding hegemonic control by actually incorporating the knowledge and perspectives of the less powerful under the umbrella of the discourse of dominant groups” (2000, p.53). It is this “under the umbrella” scenario that warrants closer scrutiny.

No matter how democratic debate over curriculum may appear to be, at the end of the day it is the officials of State governments that have penultimate say in what knowledge gets to be included and what knowledge gets excluded. In this regard it pays to not lose sight of the fact that curriculum developers themselves “…both transmit and reflect the culture of which they are part” (Print 1993, p.39). As Murray Print noted, “…when developers devise curricula the cultural background of those developers will become evident in the content they select, the methods they include, the objectives they set and so forth” (Print 1993, p.39). Murray Print concluded, “…it is not possible to talk about a culture-free curriculum. Rather, one should consider a curriculum as a situation where judgements are made as to what aspects of culture are to be included and why” (1993, p.39). All of this is very troubling from an Indigenous perspective because it raises critical questions over what curriculum developers choose to include in mainstream curriculum about our life ways and knowledge ways, how they interpret our ontology, and most especially how they construe our spiritualism.

I do of course acknowledge that those responsible for writing mainstream curriculum consult with, and involve Indigenous peoples in the process of deciding Indigenous curriculum content. Indeed the next time I get asked to volunteer my services in this regard won’t be the first time. I would argue though that whilst this sounds very respectful and accommodating it does not eliminate culture conflict issues. With curriculum producers whose cultural arbitrary is the same as the cultural arbitrary under which curriculum must ultimately be framed there is at least no culture conflict, even if there is tension over viewpoint and over details. On the other hand,
curriculum producers, whose cultural arbitrary is not the same, function in a situation that is recognisably preconditioned by culture conflict. Moreover, even when we are involved in the construction of curriculum like Indigenous Studies, or the supply of perspective for another subject, there nonetheless remains an issue as to autonomy. It is my contention that all persons involved in the construction of mainstream curriculum must contextualise knowledge in a manner and way that is consistent with the knowledge parameters of the Western worldview.

To me the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges in mainstream content brings to the fore the issue of re-contextualisation. This is actually an issue that Michael Apple has addressed. Apple claimed that:

The “cultural capital” declared to be official knowledge, then, is compromised knowledge, knowledge that is filtered through a complicated set of political screens and decisions before it gets to be declared legitimate. This affects what knowledge is selected and what the selected knowledge looks like as it is transformed into something that will be taught to students in school. In this way, the State acts as what Basil Bernstein would call a “recontextualizing agent” in the process of symbolic control … (2000, pp.64-65)

From the work of Basil Bernstein on re-contextualisation I derive an important understanding about the dynamics of knowledge when taken from one cultural arbitrary and infused into another. According to Apple, Bernstein’s study of text reveals that text is “…de-located” from its original location and “re-located” into the new pedagogic situation…” (2000, p.65). The overtone in regard to Indigenous knowledges for me is unmistakable. When our knowledges are de-located from their original cultural arbitrary and re-located into the cultural arbitrary of mainstream curriculum the integrity of context and meaning is re-conditioned in accordance with the cultural arbitrary for which it has been newly framed.

Not only is knowledge re-contextualised in the process of being commodified for school curriculum knowledge is also imbued with a property characteristic (Bernstein 1971). According to Bernstein, “children and pupils are early socialized into this concept of knowledge as private property” (1971, p.56). In illustrating this point Bernstein (1971) draws on an image of a student huddling over their work in an effort to shield it from the sight of other students. It’s a familiar scene, particularly at examination time. This whole notion of knowledge as private property set me thinking. I asked myself is this something that is consciously asserted or is it something that learners come to know reflexively as part of their experience of the
classroom? It brought to mind the concept of hidden curriculum, which is a term “…used to distinguish the implicit functioning and outcomes of education from explicitly stated goals, strategies and content” (Henry et al. 1988, p.70). Through hidden curriculum one can see that knowledge isn’t just conveyed through the formal face of official curriculum; it is also conveyed through processes and practices that go hand in hand with the structuring of curriculum.

Hidden curriculum Henry Giroux noted centres on, “…those unstated norms, values, and beliefs embedded in and transmitted to students through the underlying rules that structure the routines and social relationships in school and classroom life” (2001, p.47). Giroux (2001) explained that depending upon the analytical stance one takes hidden curriculum can either be an acceptable and necessary aspect of institutionalised education or it can be entirely problematic. For me it is the later because hidden curriculum highlights how mainstream education is set up to privilege certain cultures. You see I believe all learners receive tacit messages through education. These messages are for instance inherent in the status accorded particular subjects within the curriculum. “The distinction between mental and manual division of labour is a particularly significant indicator of subject status in schools” (Henry et al. 1988, p.76). When learners come to appreciate that particular subjects within the curriculum are colloquially prestiged over and above others they may well pick up messages about themselves in terms of their status, ability and worth in accordance with the subjects in which they are enrolled.

Just as there are tacit messages revealed through curriculum there are equally tacit messages transmitted through pedagogical praxis. So I move on now to focus on the reproductive function of pedagogical praxis, which I see is very much related to the concept of hidden curriculum. I begin by posing the question: what messages do Indigenous learners pick up about themselves and their cultures when faced with a pedagogical praxis that fundamentally works against their primary pedagogy? In posing this question I am alerting myself to the hidden messages conveyed through the pedagogical praxis of mainstream teachers that can be found not only in the language, values, attitudes and expectations teachers project (Brabham & Henry 1991b), but also through the cultural arbitrary that they, as employees of the state, serve. It must be remembered that just as learners come into the classroom already
inculcated into their own cultural arbitrary so do teachers. In his study of the politics of teaching in Australia non-Indigenous academic John Smyth poignantly wrote that, “teaching as an activity is never innocent” (2001, p.66). Teaching is never innocent of the cultural arbitrary in which it takes place or the cultural arbitrary of teachers.

Without doubt teachers do have a degree of autonomy within their classrooms to respond pedagogically to the diversity of learners that they teach, but unless they are willing to come to terms with the cultural limitations of their own outlook they are unlikely to be able to make a positive impact on culturally marginalised learners (Osborne 2001). Of course this is not to say that all teachers are not conscious of their own cultural arbitrary, or for that matter adhere strictly to orthodox pedagogical methods. Some teachers I am sure are very amenable to alternate pedagogies. At the end of the day, however, whatever pedagogical innovations are employed by mainstream teachers, at some stage the mere fact that learners have to be assessed in an individualised and ultimately competitive manner means that teachers have to return to pedagogical techniques that are directed towards this outcome. This is where the notion of knowledge as private property resounds with meaning for me; the tacit meaning inherent in treating knowledge as though it were a property to be privately acquired and owned is indicative of an ideology and worldview that to my way of thinking naturalises the valuing of individualism and competitiveness.

Wendy Brabham and John Henry interestingly observed that, “there is a common sense view held by many Australians that human beings are, by their very nature, competitive” (1991b, p.16). The acceptance of individualism and competitiveness as natural is to my mind more a reflection of cultural arbitrary than a reflection of an organic human trait. Most assuredly from the perspective of my own cultural arbitrary individualism and competitiveness are not natural forms of common sense. That said, what is particularly pertinent about Bernstein’s (1971) concept of knowledge as private property is that it points me directly to the ideology that defines the pedagogical orientation of mainstream education. Teaching in whatever form it takes to my mind always involves underlying understandings that act as an overarching compass for pedagogical praxis. This compass is sociologically embedded. For instance, how I choose to teach my child is based on an educative imperative to convey a context and meaning that is consistent with and reinforces an
Indigenous cultural arbitrary. Given that I am of a collective culture my choice of pedagogical praxis is oriented toward enhancing a valuing of collectivism.

Before I go on to consider pedagogical orientation in terms of mainstream education I digress for a moment to emphasise that it is not my intention to delve into the specifics of differing modes of pedagogy that may or may not be used by individual teachers within the mainstream; my principal concern here is with the sociological orientation of pedagogical praxis. In taking the concept of pedagogical orientation and applying it to mainstream education I can see that the educative imperative of the mainstream, being sociologically embedded within Western capitalism, necessitates pedagogical orientations that extol individualism and competitiveness. I say this because the ideology that frames Western capitalism gives great focus to both the status of the individual and the individual’s responsibility to compete to succeed (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 2000). Under the ideology of capitalism “…existing inequalities of income and wealth represent the socially just returns for the different contributions that people make to economic activity” (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 2000, p.39). This acceptance of unequal distribution as a ‘normal’ by-product of the competence or otherwise of the individual weaves all the way into the classroom and is reinforced there by the ideology of meritocracy.

There is a noticeable correlation between the economic imperatives of capitalism and the orientations of mainstream curriculum and pedagogy. Wendy Brabham and John Henry correspondingly noted that, “the ethos of schooling, driven home to children by the structuring of school knowledge, is one of competitiveness and individualism”(1991b, p.14). Frank Youngman too wrote that, “the experience of education encourages the internalisation of values such as competition, individualism, deference to authority and the importance of consensus” (1986, p.105). It thus comes as no surprise that teachers within the mainstream must ultimately lean toward pedagogies like individualised tasks, assessments, tests, examinations and so on. Indeed Miriam Henry et al. suggested that, “often, within a competitive schooling environment, particularly at the secondary level, teachers become more concerned with grading and ranking students than with ensuring that all students have learnt what are regarded as essential skills and bodies of knowledge”(1988, p.179). Certainly it is clear to me that mainstream “schools are
intimately involved in the credentialling process through sorting and selecting students” (Henry et al. 1988, p.178).

For me sort and sift pedagogies, which are in essence framed in favour of individualism and competitiveness, very much dovetail with the core objective to prepare young learners for adult life, particularly in terms of their participation within the economic structures of society (Henry et al. 1988). I think most of us would agree that the economic structure of Australian society is predicated on a hierarchical and differentiated labour force (Henry et al. 1988). There is for instance this commonplace understanding of a split between what is colloquially seen as mental labour as opposed to manual labour. This in turn encourages hierarchical differentiation between occupations, so we might find for instance a doctor being considered more important than say a factory worker. In a hierarchical and differentiated labour force focus is placed on the individual to strive, to compete, to get to the top of the economic heap. Not surprisingly it is not so very different in schools. “Given the way society is currently structured, not all can succeed economically. Likewise, given the way schooling is currently structured, not all can succeed academically” (Henry et al. 1988, p.178).

For the most part within mainstream society the hierarchical differentiation of learners doesn’t seem to be overly alarming, the valuing of individualism and competitiveness seem to rationalise it. In terms of my own teaching experience the rhetoric behind the ranking of learners suggests that individual assessment is a fair way of gauging individual progress. The arguments that proffer fairness though rapidly lose credence in my view when considered in context to the subjectiveness of sociological embedment. Pedagogies premised on the individual are reckoned to focus on personal ability. Competition thus merely gradates learners in terms of their ability, but the problem with focus on ability is that it is “…intimately related to the broader ideology of ‘individualism’, which in turn is embedded historically in the development of Western capitalist democracies” (Henry et al. 1988, p.191). Ability then is a loaded concept because the idea of ability as innate fails to recognise the particular terms under which ability is being measured. How learners are sorted and selected in terms of ability within the mainstream without doubt correspond sociologically to the tenets of the dominant Western capitalist cultural arbitrary.
Barry Osborne wrote at length about mainstream ability assessment strategies like formal tests, stating that, “…there are substantive and iniquitous weaknesses in the formal testing regimes we employ in Western societies. Not only are tests flawed, they are weak in the uses to which they can be put other than to sort and sift, and they produce major consequences in the lives of students already marginalized by our societies” (2001, p.277). For one thing these tests are usually couched within a certain cultural arbitrary, using language and expressing instruction that inevitably alienate those for whom such language and expression is unfamiliar (Osborne 2001). Perhaps what is most disenfranchising for us however is that individualised competitive assessment and testing undermines, de-values and actively operates against our core values, especially collectivism. In my own experience there is significant cultural shame involved with assessing individual ability through competition. The fear for us is that we will stand out and leave behind the rest of the mob. Our valuing of collectivism is such that we may even feel compelled to actively ‘throw’ a test or assessment if there is any risk to our collectivism. I can assure you that this is precisely what us mob did, especially in secondary school.

There is much to be said with regard to the sociological predilection of mainstream curriculum and pedagogical praxis; I have touched on but a few of the many avenues that can be explored in this regard. My aim has simply been to demonstrate to you that mainstream curriculum is constructed in a culturally specific setting, and confirm to you that the knowledge that it contains is selected, processed and commodified in keeping with parameters that are sociologically determined. With regard to pedagogical praxis my aim has been to highlight the tacit messaging, particularly in reference to values, which happens as a result of the sociological orientations of mainstream pedagogical praxis. I have come to realise that the sociological orientation of mainstream curriculum and pedagogical praxis is unreservedly predisposed in favour of the cultural arbitrary of the West-centric dominant social order, whatever the alleged meritocratic virtues of mainstream education may be. From an Indigenous perspective mainstream education can only ever offer us an education that is not of our cultural arbitrary; that is an assimilative education that carries with it all the dangers inherent in the will of hegemony.
CHAPTER 5: EDUCATION, RESEARCH AND INDIGENOUS IDENTITY

5.1 The Position of Indigenous Identity in Education

The position of our identity in education reflects the position of our identity in society. To put it into perspective a brief timeline seems in order. Our lands were invaded in 1788, 218 years ago. By 1967 we were finally recognised as citizens in our own lands, a mere 39 years ago. In 1975 the government sought for the first time to actively consult us about our education, just 31 years ago; and in 1989 our educational aspirations at last gained some acknowledgement through national policy, pitifully 17 years ago (Partington 1998). In summarising our history since invasion Gary Partington succinctly wrote:

…Indigenous people have been dispossessed and alienated. For most of the period from initial contact to the present day, they have been largely excluded from participation in mainstream life and have had their freedom restricted by legislation, regulation and social ostracism. It has been only in the last 30 years that they have been acknowledged as full members of society, and even then, the acknowledgement has been legal and political rather than social and economic. (1998, p.3)

This then is the socio-cultural/socio-political context that landscapes our experience of non-Indigenous education since invasion. It is a landscape that I feel is best scrutinised from three perspectives: assimilation, segregation, and accommodation.

Before I go on to explore each of these concepts I want to first give an Indigenous context to education. You see when I consider our educational circumstance since 1788 I start from the position of understanding that from the coloniser’s perspective our cultures were deemed to have no form of education whatsoever. I think Gary Partington expressed it rather nicely when he wrote, “Indigenous society demanded much of its members in the way of learning but because there was an absence of written texts the culture was so dramatically different from European culture, there was little respect among the Europeans for the educational processes employed in these societies” (1998, p.28). Of course the coloniser’s attitude was entirely erroneous. Our education structures weren’t and aren’t just incidental, residual, or for that matter informal, they are equally formal. We have always had structured and organised curriculum, and we have always had culturally apposite pedagogical praxis. This I discuss more fully in the final chapter’s of this thesis, my impetus for
making the point here is to motivate a deeper appreciation of just how ignorant and archaic the coloniser’s approach to their supply of education to us has been.

Non Indigenous academic Anthony Welch fittingly noted, “one of the distinguishing features of colonialism is the profoundly held belief in the racial-cultural superiority of the colonising civilisation and people” (1997, p.45). The caustic undercurrent of this belief, as you will have already read, characterises the undertone of our histories since invasion. Certainly the fullness of this belief’s toxicity can be sensed when one delves into the specifics of our history of encounters with non-Indigenous forms of institutionalised education. One of the most informative and useful analyses I’ve read with regard to this history was written by Wendy Brabham and John Henry (1991a). Wendy Brabham and John Henry (1991a) opened their study by looking at the era 1788 to 1850, which they observed was an era in which the coloniser’s made concerted efforts to ‘rescue’ us from the primitiveness of our cultures. “The sustaining objective throughout this period, whether exercised within government institutions, protectorate or mission schools, was to replace the Indigenous cultures with British culture” (Brabham & Henry 1991a, p.10). The coloniser’s no doubt thought themselves virtuous in seeking to absorb us into their society.

In this early period of colonialism there appears to have been two main approaches to dealing with us. The first was to simply get rid of us but, as was pointed out earlier, this form of wantonness was regarded, particularly in Christian circles, as somewhat inhumane. The next best thing was to ‘civilise’ us. Accordingly colonial leaders were advised to “…bring the ‘natives of the colonies’ to a voluntary induction into Christianity and thus forth to a state of civilisation” (Brabham & Henry 1991a, pp.8-9). Education, naturally, was the key. “Education was to be the means to changing the behaviour of Koories, schools were to be the sites through which Koories would be convinced to give up their own culture and embrace British culture” (Brabham & Henry 1991a, p.9). When we didn’t take to the coloniser’s magnanimous offer to ‘civilise’ us our resistance wasn’t seen as a reasonable rejection of a foreign culture, rather it was distorted into an indicator of innate dim-wittedness on our behalf. “Koories, it was deemed, had not been attracted to British culture because they were incapable of the intellectual sophistication demanded by British language, customs, religion, work practices and morality” (Brabham & Henry 1991a, p.11).
The connection between biological determinism (Henry & Brabham 1994) and early sciences like craniology, and the general thrust of Darwinist thinking within the coloniser’s logic were unmistakable. Our rejection of the coloniser’s way of life merely fed a growing popularist viewpoint that emphasised our ‘primitiveness’ and ‘intellectual paucity’. Having failed miserably in their efforts to indoctrinate us, and having established us as the cause, the next best thing the coloniser’s could do with us was to remove us from the sight of ‘civilised’ society into missions and stations. From the 1860’s up until roughly the end of the 1930’s the coloniser’s efforts to educate us, whilst still focused on the fundamental objective of assimilation, were more ‘realistic’ (Brabham & Henry 1991). It became apparent to both the coloniser’s and their missionary cohorts that we weren’t readily ‘civilisable’ in any full sense of the term. The next best and bearable position was for us to take enough Christian knowledge and enough labour knowledge to make us capable of either eking out our days on missions and stations, or making ourselves useful to ‘civilised’ society as servants, labourers and the like.

“The europeanising project continued but the schooling component now reflected the colonist’s diminished aspirations for Koori potentiality” (Brabham & Henry 1991a, p.13). In keeping with the times, missionaries rather than the State took on the responsibility of educating us (Partington 1998). Right from the start missionaries operated from the perspective that “the function of education was to civilise the natives: to teach them Christianity and the Western way of life and to rescue them from their heathen ways” (Partington 1998, p.33). As a consequence missionary salvationism reflected a deeply imbedded paternalism. It was a dreadful situation because life outside missions had became harder and harder for our peoples as our lands were systematically stripped out from underneath us and we were pushed to the margins. Missions provided physical protection for us, a protection that meant segregation (Brabham & Henry 1991a). I know only to well from my own family history that whilst supposedly protecting us missionaries and their staff often resorted to draconian measures to suppress our identity. The reality of missionaries and the education that they provided was that it was fixed on one thing - christianising us.

Mission residents like my great grandparents and their children were taught to read and write, but the reading and writing they were exposed to very much centred on the
bible as the ultimate text of civilisation. The trouble with teaching literacy skills was that there was no way to control how we would use them. Some mission residents like my great grandfather used these skills to bring attention to our suffering and our social, cultural and political rights. It was an uncalculated effect of mission education. Mission life also had other uncalculated effects. “Within these total institutions, Koories established a ‘secret life’, an underground of Koori cultural affirmation, continuity and transformation away from the surveillance of the stations’ supervising staff” (Brabham & Henry 1991a, p.14). My Dhungutti family in the Macleay Valley most definitely did just that; knowledges remain known to us today because of this secrecy. Great grandfather Anderson too stood steadfast, maintaining his cultural pride and identity. After decades of protection and segregation it became clear that we weren’t going to die out and, even more exasperatingly, we weren’t going to capitulate our ‘native’ ways (Brabham & Henry 1991a).

Just as the coloniser’s original efforts of assimilation hadn’t worked neither had segregation. Segregation became impractical. Running missions and stations became costly, our populations began to increase, and a loud voice of protest against cruelty to us was beginning to be heard throughout society (Brabham & Henry 1991a). All of this, over time, led to a change in tack. So what was next for us? Well, assimilation again. This time however assimilation was conducted on the basis of unusually harsh policy. Much of this policy centred on measures of our ‘blood’. “It was widely accepted that ‘full blood’ Koorie children were ineducable to European standards, whilst children with some European ‘blood’ were more likely to benefit from a europeanising education” (Brabham & Henry 1991a, p.17). Forced removal of our children intensified. Quentin Beresford accordingly noted, “although the explicit overtones of biological absorption faded during the 1940s the practice of forced removal continued. Tens of thousands of children were removed by authorities up until the 1970s because parents were judged to have failed to bring up their children according to white standards” (Beresford & Partington 2003, p.53).

We can all tell stories about this time either through direct experience or through the fear that it incited. In the Macleay Valley, where many members of my family lived, whenever they saw a car coming they’d scoop the kids up and run and hide in the mountains. When the officials left a rag would be waved to give the all clear to
come back. Ironically it was during this same period of intensive removal of our children that the government of the day decided to give us access to public schools. I can’t help but wonder what they were thinking? Somehow the powers that be expected that if we were allowed to go to mainstream schools everything would work out; we’d be educated the white way and become productive citizens of Australia. According to non-Indigenous academics Brian Galligan and Winsome Roberts (2004) this was entirely the view of the Commonwealth Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck, who was in office from 1951 to 1963. From Hasluck’s perspective the best way to handle us was to get rid of any idea of us being anything other than ordinary Australians and shove us back into society with equal access and opportunity like every other citizen (Galligan & Roberts 2004).

The trouble with assimilation Hasluck style was that “…it did not recognise the distinctiveness of Aboriginal people or aboriginality, and so was ill-equipped to deal with the growing sense of black pride…” and it “…failed to tackle racial prejudice from Australians…” (2004, p.173). As Quentin Beresford noted, “expressions of such outward racism were still widespread in many parts of Australia in the 1970’s and still exists in some quarters today” (Beresford & Partington 2003, p.47). From my own experience, and from those of the many other Indigenous peoples I know, racial prejudice has had a long-standing reign in the ethos of this country. No doubt the wide dissemination of Western ‘scientific’ knowledge of us played a major role in fuelling this racism. In planning for our assimilation into white society it seems that no one stopped to think about the real meaning of equity. When we were invited into white schools, often against the wishes of parents and teachers alike (Brabham & Henry 1991a), no provision was made whatsoever in the way of culturally apposite curriculum or culturally apposite pedagogy. We were given limited access to a system dichotomous to our cultural identity and worldview, and that was that.

Nugget Coombs, a well known non-Indigenous advocate of Indigenous educational rights, noted that, “the State and Commonwealth Governments expected that Aborigines would choose to live by the same standards, accepting the same obligations as the rest of the Australian community. This offer of assimilation was widely felt to be humane, progressive, indeed generous” (1994, p.71). I don’t know of many Indigenous families who couldn’t recount from these days, and earlier days,
a litany of degrading, humiliating and psychologically belittling experiences. Certainly there was nothing humane about it. Mum tells of being made to stand up in class and read from a ‘jacky jacky’ book in broken English. When she read it in proper English she was chastised by the teacher who wanted her to read it out as it was written. It was a deliberate act to humiliate her in front of the class, and to show us up as backward. Mum refused to conform and ran out of the class. I know what it’s like. I experienced the same taunting when I went to school. I haven’t forgotten being shamed out in front of the whole school and being called King Billy. The explicit racism, directed at us as vulnerable children while at school, goes on and on.

We were caught in the middle; the government of the day wanted us in white society, white society wanted us out. The effect of all of this, and of earlier missionary efforts to assimilate us, was at times overwhelming. Through all of this though we never let go of our identity. “During the period of the assimilation polices, 1940’s-60’s, schools once again failed in their efforts to europeanise the Indigenous nations of Australia” (Brabham & Henry 1991a, p.25). So after persisting with trying to change us into honorary whites since invasion, the powers that be finally came to realise that education had to be changed to accommodate us. We were becoming more assertive in our protest against the malicious treatment meted out to us, and we were beginning to gain more and more white support. The 1970's saw the beginnings of change (Brabham & Henry 1991a). After years of deliberate subjugation our cultural interests were at least given some passing consideration. Assimilation, as an ultimate goal, did not diminish however; it simply became less overt and disguised in the political rhetoric that proclaimed our right to empowerment and self-determination.

From the 1970’s on the Indigenous education ‘problem’ was vigorously studied from every possible angle; it is still studied widely today. The sheer mass of material that has been written about our education to date is so great that it is not realistic to attempt to report it in any detail within this thesis. What has been recognised as standing out in all of this material is the Schools Commission Report of 1975 as a watershed moment in the provision of mainstream education to us (Partington 1998) “For the first time, Indigenous people were consulted in regard to the education of their children” (Partington 1998, p.48). What stands out next is the inception in 1980
of the National Aboriginal Education Committee, which culminated in 1989 with the launch of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy – NATSIEP. NATSIEP still stands as the national benchmark for Indigenous education. When you take into consideration the mathematics of our education you can see that for best part of 200 years the only idea the coloniser’s had for us in terms of our education was the utter annihilation of our cultures and our identities. I don’t think that can be disputed. NATSIEP supposedly changed all that for us.

As I see it NATSIEP moved our education into an era of accommodation, an era that I believe is as fundamentally hegemonic as the past; it’s just that the hegemonic relationship between the mainstream and Indigenous Australia is subtler now. I was particularly impressed with how Wendy Brabham and John Henry put it - “the assimilationist trap of the old colonial nation-state lies camouflaged amongst the new opportunities for Koorie ‘advancement’ now available within modern Australia” (1991a, p.29). So what are our new educational opportunities in terms of NATSIEP? First and foremost “the fundamental purpose of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy is to develop appropriate ways of responding effectively and sensitively to the educational needs and aspirations of Aboriginal people” (1989, p.9). It sounds wonderful in theory but I wonder how far ‘respond’ can ever really go, given all that I have said about the cultural arbitrary of mainstream education in the preceding chapter. It is true that State governments have responded by developing their own policies and have pursued initiatives like incorporating into programming Indigenous Studies curricula.

These sorts of initiatives certainly reflect attempts to address the equity purpose of NATSIEP, that is “…to achieve broad equity between Aboriginal people and other Australians in access, participation and outcomes in all forms of education” (1989, p.9). But realistically has broad equity really occurred? Quentin Beresford has noted that, “more than a decade after the introduction of the first National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) the extent of its impact has been limited; its initial target of education equity by the year 2000 has obviously not been achieved and is not in sight of being reached” (2003, p.11). Furthermore Beresford, like myself, noted that statistical advances in enrolment figures may well look good, but “…increased retention does not always accord with academic success at Years 11
and 12 and the greater rates of participation in early high school years are masking substantial problems with high rates of truancy, suspension and exclusion” (2003, p.10). For me the reality of achieving equity relies to a great extent on action at the local level. Where there are teachers and parents who are willing to work with us, equity and accommodation at least seems possible.

I have no doubt that at the local level inroads are being made in an effort to translate statistical success into a more complete success by making the learning environment more culturally congenial for us. Yet even when that happens there is still backlash. My wife was told only the other day how one particular school was not a good school because it overindulged the local Indigenous population; a not unreasonable approach given it’s high population of Indigenous students. NATSIEP goal 20 is aimed at enabling “…Aboriginal students at all levels of education to have an appreciation of their history, cultures and identity” (1989, p.15). To be frank our ability to ‘appreciate’ our cultures in mainstream education seems very much at the mercy of the whims and wishes of teachers and non-Indigenous parents; policy at the end of the day cannot monitor what actually takes place within a school. Moreover I ask myself what is ‘appreciation’? The word to me is misleading. After all we live our cultures, we don’t stand at the sideline to ‘appreciate’ as though our life ways were a piece of art hanging on a gallery wall. The undertone of ‘appreciate’ tells me that mainstream education is culturally limited for us; as I argued in the previous chapter, mainstream education is about mainstream society.

In reading Lester-Irabinna Rigney’s comments on NATSIEP I found myself in complete agreement. I was impressed with his insightfulness in observing that:

… in accepting this premise of the obligation of government to provide education, there is also an implicit acceptance of the governments right to govern Indigenous peoples in the 1989 AEP policy. Jurisdiction and authority over Indigenous education is conceded to government. The term “control” is consciously, or unconsciously, absent from the 1989 AEP text. (2002, p.76)

You can see what Lester-Irabinna Rigney is getting at when you read through passages in NATSIEP like, “for Aboriginal education purposes the effectiveness of schools, colleges and other educational institutions depends in large part on the degree to which Aboriginal people are involved in the processes of educational decision-making” (1989, p.13). ‘Involved’ doesn’t in any way mean control, nor
does it mean the right of veto. ‘Involved’ actually suggests to me that hegemony is still at play. What goes into curriculum about our cultures, and whether or not what we want for our children’s education is granted still remains well and truly in the hands of mainstream bureaucracy, not us. Involved just gives us some say and some comfort, it doesn’t fully equate with self-determination and self-management.

Martin Nakata too insightfully remarked that:

This national policy, which was produced ‘on behalf of’ the Islander by Western experts, currently involves a culturally biased reading of our needs, material as well as cultural. I would argue that this apparently liberal gesture ultimately serves the interests of those who continue to seek to dominate us, whether ‘liberal’ experts choose to know this or not…I reject any suggestion that somebody else’s reading of my culture could ever be apolitical, especially when that reading is done by Western experts; that reading is inevitably done in the interests of the West, however liberal their pretensions are, however blind they are themselves to this. (2003, p.134)

Indigenous people were involved in structuring NATSIEP, but NATSIEP is nonetheless all about fitting us into the mainstream; it’s about making certain changes to accommodate us so that we will function better, but its not about deep structural change. I find myself at the same conclusion as Wendy Brabham and John Henry, namely that, “institutionalised education has attempted to accommodate Koori children and adults without any fundamental change in the deep structure of its schools” (1991a, p.30). As I read it NATSIEP symbolises ‘friendly’ assimilation. Our identity in mainstream education is recognised, but under interpretive constraints set by the cultural arbitrary of its sociological embedment.

I am not setting out to deride all that has happened since 1989. Many positive initiatives have been put forward but clearly, the inescapable fact that our education participation remains problematic suggests that policy alone is not a remedy. Reliance on policy has essentially created a mythological panacea for Indigenous education. However, when policy is blocked or ignored at the level of practice the curative intent of policy becomes illusory and diminishes into rhetoric. Furthermore when recognition of our cultures is confined to NAIDOC week and the flying of our flag the illusion of policy becomes all the more stark. The expectation that Indigenous students will respond magically to appropriated Indigenous symbology, and suddenly perceive the mainstream as culturally affirming is dubious. It is plain to me that we do not derive a cultural return from an education that is not on our own terms. In this regard Wendy Brabham and John Henry very succinctly commented,
“in education, Koorie families of the 1990’s are continuing the struggle of the past twenty decades of preventing their children from being culturally devoured by the assimilative administration of the nation-state’s education system” (1991a, p.30).

So what is the alternative? Quentin Beresford noted that, “debate still centres on some key unresolved issues, including whether or not Aboriginal students are best served by seeking improvement in the mainstream education system or in alternative forms of provision” (2003, p.238). Articles 14, 15 and 16 of the draft United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples (1994) articulate for me a more reasonable approach for our education because the draft actively sanctions choice. For me these passages from articles 14, 15, and 16 stand out in this regard:-

ARTICLE 14 - Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate their own names for communities, places and persons.  
ARTICLE 15 - Indigenous children have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State. All Indigenous peoples also have this right and the right to establish and control their own educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. States shall take effective measures to provide appropriate resources for these purposes.  
ARTICLE 16 - Indigenous peoples have the right to have the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations appropriately reflected in all forms of education and public information. (1994, pp. 7-8 of 14)

This document was recently adopted by the United Nations Human Rights Council and will be presented to the General Assembly for ratification (ENIAR media release 2006). Kungarakan/Iwaidja Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma expressed his hope, “…that the Australian government will join with the overwhelming majority of nations around the world in endorsing the Declaration at the General Assembly and work with Indigenous peoples in Australia to faithfully implement its provisions” (ENIAR Media Release 2006). I too maintain the same hope because as I see it there is a real need for us to have access to education that is centred within the framework of our own cultural arbitrary, and that is what the declaration advocates. If education is to unshackle our identity and advance our worldview we must control it. I leave the final word to Indigenous spokesperson Tiga Bayles - “we have tried over the years to put some black faces into white classrooms. However, I think the answer – the real answer – is Indigenous community schools. Every black fella will not send his kids to them, but it gives us a choice” (2001, p.25).
5.2 The Position of Indigenous Identity in Research

From the preceding section you will, I hope, have gained some sense of the history of our subjugation through education. To me this subjugation is attributable, in no small way, to the limits of Western knowledge at the time. As you will have gleaned from Chapter 3, much of this knowledge was founded on understandings put forward through sciences like craniology, phrenology, eugenics, psychology and the like. These sciences emerged through subscription to an idea – in our case an idea that hypothesised that any non-European life way was fundamentally inferior. An idea though cannot live for long, and certainly cannot transfer from one generation to the next, without some measure of informational corroboration. It all comes down to evidence. Generally speaking for an idea to take hold and be sustained, particularly in the Western sense, it must be supported by evidence. Where do we get evidence? – from research. Research in turn, when legitimised by the relevant authoritative bodies, is disseminated as knowledge. Research, for me, is inseparable from knowledge; one begets the other. So I surmise on this basis that research, as with knowledge, is not an objective entity but rather a sociologically conditioned product.

When one begins to see research as non-neutral one can begin to see that research can either work in favour of a particular cultural identity or it can work against it. I maintain that just as knowledge is contextualised by cultural arbitrary so to is research. In our experience since invasion Western research has been a powerful and devastating tool that has categorically worked against our cultural identity (Williams & Stewart 1992). Western research from the outset was singularly purposed toward advancing the dominator’s project of colonialism. In this regard Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) ‘Decolonising Methodologies’ stands as a significant exposé. Linda Tuhiwai Smith importantly noted that the coloniser’s approach to research was such that they assumed that their own ideas were, “…the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings”(1999, p.56). For us research is thus an artefact of colonialism. Linda Tuhiwai Smith surely intimated as much when she wrote, “…scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism…” (1999, p.1).
From Chapter 3 you will have gained some insight into the excesses of coloniser research; into how we have been measured, poked and prodded from every conceivable angle in order to prove us not only different and exotic, but also inferior in every possible way. From our perspective it was all part of the coloniser’s project of legitimising dispossessing us of our lands and our cultures. As I’ve already said the sheer volume of scientific material on us is unbelievable. Perhaps though to gain a real sense of why our peoples are so oppositional to research one only has to take a look at one of the vilest forms of coloniser research - anatomical research. There are any number of articles that expose the extreme nature of this form of research, but to be honest I felt shocked and spiritually shaken when I came across the work of D.J. Cunningham, Professor of Anatomy at the University of Edinburgh. In his article ‘The head of an Aboriginal Australian’ Cunningham (1907) detailed with a gruesome explicitness his study of one of our old fulla’s. Not once did Cunningham (1907) express any moral concern about defiling our ancestor’s remains, nor did he express any sensitivity for our ancestor as a fellow human being.

We ask, what purpose did anatomical research really serve? Whose interests were being fulfilled through the violation of our forebears? At the end of the day we can only see this form of research as being singularly purposed towards evidencing our primitiveness. In conducting this type of research scientists like Cunningham actively reinforced the hegemonic ideology of Western superiority. What amazes me is that Cunningham conducted his research only a century ago, a few years after Federation, at a time when Australia was finding its way as an alleged modern nation. To me it’s like something out of the middle ages. I cannot overstate how scarring this form of research is for us. It is certainly not an over statement to say that it has left within us a deep-seated psychological legacy. How could it be otherwise? We still deal with the fall-out of anatomical research. We are reminded of the hurt of this research every time we are called upon to repatriate, from museum repositories, the remains of our ancestors. For me, when I have been called upon to do this, I’ve felt tremendous spiritual relief to return our ancestors to country, but equally a strong cultural grief about why our people were taken in the first place.

To my amazement anatomical interest in our forebears didn’t end with Cunningham’s generation. It is, for instance, possible to find scientific interest in our
ancestors’ skulls as late as 1974. C.J. Hackett (1974) of the Institute of Orthopaedics in London made use of one of our ancestors for his particular research, again discussing in extraordinary detail our ancestors’ remains. The argument that Hackett confined his research to skulls collected best part of a century ago doesn’t make it acceptable; these are the defiled remains of our people. “In December 2002 a number of very prominent US and European institutions issued a declaration...they claimed the museums’ role in promoting culture outweighed the desire by individual countries or ethnic groups for the return of significant items” (The other stolen people 2003, p31). Well, we actively contest this; we fervently call for the return of our people (The other stolen people 2003). As Dr Michael Pickering, Director of the National Museum of Australia’s repatriation programme, said, “science doesn’t own everything. Just because I’ve got an interesting head, doesn’t give a scientist ownership or the automatic right to study it” (The other stolen people 2003, p.31).

By no means is our psychological scarring through Western research confined to the repulsiveness of anatomical investigation. Almost as wounding, in my view, was the type of anthropological research advocated by A.P. Elkin, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney. In 1946, after a flurry of discussion about the urgent need to preserve in a pristine condition tribal peoples for scientific purposes, Elkin responded by saying, “the present need is not a call for the conservation of Aboriginal peoples of scientific interest, but immediate intensive field work wherever primitive cultures are not broken down, and where they have comparatively recently done so” (1946, p.96). Although Elkin stopped short of advocating what he termed the “human-zoo” scenario, he nonetheless advocated an immediate scientific invasion of our communities (1946, p.95). According to Elkin all the researcher needed to do was master the “native language” that way the researcher would be imbued with the ability to enter “…into the thinking of the people concerned, and so feel competent to discuss primitive mentality, philosophy and so on” (1946, p.96). How naïve, how can language alone provide true insight into worldview? Not once did Elkin acknowledge any sense of the interpretive limitations of his own cultural arbitrary.

Elkin wasn’t just content with treating ‘tribal’ peoples as objects of study, he also suggested that, “experienced field workers…are required at once, to work amongst
the civilized native of Australia...including mixed bloods, for these people often retain much knowledge and many attitudes which belong to the former native culture…” (1946, p.96). None of us were to be spared. What seemed to concern Elkin most was cashing in on an opportunity to see socio-cultural change in action. He noted, “this is a unique opportunity for anthropologists, for our science is concerned not with an imaginary static society or unchanging man, but with man in society in process of change” (1946, p.96). Again, what was all this research supposed to do? On the surface it may appear as though this form of research was recommended on the basis of a genuine anthropological curiosity about human social evolution. Realistically though in advising that our communities should be studied as living laboratories of socio-cultural change was Elkin not also affirming the hegemonic ideology of Western superiority? Elkin’s undertone was that we were ‘civilising’ before their eyes, meaning we were previously ‘uncivilised’.

What I refer to here is just the tip of the iceberg. To be honest it is hard to know where to begin and end, there is so much material that could be cited to illustrate the ignorance and hegemony of Western research. Just as I said when writing about our collectivism it is very tempting to keep the evidence coming, to go on quoting case after case in order to substantiate my point about Western research, but then again surely reference to anatomical research alone goes a long way to doing that. My insight into our degradation through research however has not just been framed by expanding my knowledge of scientific maltreatment it has been contextualised through the experiences of my family. I grew up conscious of the reality that we, as Indigenous Australians, represent a ‘meaty’ subject to researchers. That’s what my family felt at La Perouse where I grew up. Uncle Bill Ferguson said, “La Perouse is a show window, where tourists can see natives throwing boomerangs” (in Attwood & Markus 1999, p.79). It wasn’t just tourism that we were handy for. Being so conveniently located within easy distance of major Australian universities and other research organisations we were easily accessible for Western researchers.

It seemed to us that all non-Indigenous researchers wanted to do is delve into our culture and our lives in order to fulfil their own ambitions and curiosities. These ‘strangers’ came and extracted information time and time again. My mother told me about my father’s reaction to yet another non-Indigenous person who came to our
house asking questions about us. Dad confronted this person saying, “you’re always coming here with your pen and paper, and you go away and write things up the way you want, it’s been going on for years”. If it wasn’t someone from a religious organisation, it was someone from a university, a government department, or a curious hobbyist. Prior to 1967 the only permission needed to gain access to us was that of the government appointed mission manager. We were compelled to comply to the tune of supercilious remarks that told us it was “for our own good” or “it will help us to understand ourselves better”. We were absolutely denied authority over what was written about us, and we were never consulted. It wasn’t enough to dispossess us of our citizen’s rights, smother our culture, discriminate against us, herd us onto a reserve and control us; we were exploited as captives for research.

My mother has a collection of government reviews, reports, historical records, and other miscellanea all of which feature commentary and decree in respect to us. My father’s view of all this documentation was that its function was to “keep us at arms length”. To me my father’s words encapsulate well the effect research has had in keeping us marginalised. We were always fearful and suspicious of what non-Indigenous researchers would do with the information we gave them. They were never transparent about their intentions and motives. We knew they were doing it for themselves because we’d never hear from them again; they went as fast as they came. Dad taught us to be careful about how we answered their questions. Mum told us, “that they [the government] had tried to move us from La Perouse”, off prime real estate, and out of sight. When government representatives came to “interview” us they said, “Tom, why don’t you want to move?” Dad , “I like the scenery”. He wasn’t going to justify living where we did, and didn’t say anything they could manipulate. My father was suspicious of this line of questioning; he was suspicious about motive. Non-Indigenous researchers weren’t compelled by our needs.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith said, “in its clear links to Western knowledge research has generated a particular relationship to indigenous peoples which continues to be problematic” (1999, p.39). For me the business of research remains more than problematic for us; it remains highly emotional and politically charged. In 1992 I had the opportunity to finally express my feelings about research when I presented a
paper on research in collaboration with my colleague Ian Stewart at the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Conference at Hervey Bay, Queensland. At the time we said, “Aboriginal people throughout Australia are saying loudly and clearly that enough is enough in respect of inappropriate and offensive research methods and practices” (1992, p.90). We highlighted that, “we have been, and still are, frequently considered to be objects for research and continue to be put under the microscope of the social scientists” (1992, p.91). We wanted to emphasise how culturally debilitating and socially disempowering Western research has been for us. We were concerned about the appropriation of our knowledges and the activity of Western researchers who gain personal kudos at our expense.

Nine years on I again reiterated that, “Indigenous people have been pawns in the research process for too long. Not only are we subject to research within our communities, we are also exposed to it in the educational setting and the workplace” (2001, p.13). I feel the same way today; my stance on Western research remains fundamentally unchanged. The position of our cultural identity in research has been, and to a great extent continues to be, defined by West-centric condescension. I am not alone in voicing our antipathy with Western research. Dean Collard et al. duly noted that, “Aboriginal people are very reasonably suspicious, angry and fearful of research. Not only have they been the subject of research by white people, but there is minimal evidence for them that any of this research has been at all helpful” (1994, p.114). Likewise non-Indigenous academic Les Mack together with Indigenous academic Graeme Gower remind us that, “…the commonly held view amongst many Indigenous Australians [is] that non-Indigenous researchers of Indigenous peoples are self-serving bastards who do not understand Indigenous Australians and are not concerned about the potential harm their research may cause” (2001, p.2 of 9).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith avows that, “the word itself, research, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (1999, p.1). There can be no doubt, I think, that the impact of being subjected to two centuries of culturally ignorant research, of being exploited for Western interests, has taken its toll. When we think about research we now ask ourselves what has research done for us? What has research done to our peoples? What has it done to the veracity of our knowledge ways? Even to this day every aspect of our lives remains under one microscope or
another. All the ‘ologists’ imaginable have had a go, dissecting us biologically and culturally. I imagine though that what I have written thus far about research could attract protestations that suggest that I have failed to note that not all research done on us has been so glaringly derogatory, that particularly post sixties things started to change in tune with a growing social consciousness of us and our rights as actual citizens of this country. That may well be so, but the fact remains we spurn being objects for research because we are still continually ambushed by new generations of Western researchers who see us as fertile ground for ‘their’ pet research projects.

I remember being in the audience when Errol West, a leading figure in Indigenous Education, spoke at the inaugural National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Conference at Jamberoo, New South Wales, in 1991. Errol West told us, “the battle for power is not just our right to say what should happen…It is over possession of our intellectual property, contemporary and historical. It is about prising open the fists of white academics who for years have been universally recognised as the experts on anything from cultural to causes. It is about us saying No!!” (cited in Williams & Stewart 1992, p.92). ‘No’, to me, was Errol West’s call to us to actively resist the alleged expertise of non-Indigenous academics. Interestingly the words of Colin Bourke, who I quoted earlier on page 52, reflect a similar view. The message I take from Errol West and Colin Bourke is that we need to challenge non-Indigenous hegemony over our knowledges and knowledge production. We need to reclaim our own identity, on our own terms, in research. How do we do that? One of the most fundamental actions we can take is to assert our political, social and cultural demands for research.

In regard to our demands for research I see them as three-fold. In the first instance our demands are political; they centre on power, ownership and control. In the second instance our demands are social; they centre on motive. In the third instance our demands are cultural; they centre on worldview. By asserting our demands we seek to quash invasive, archaic and authoritarian research; we seek to eliminate research that is offensive, exploitative, and repressive. As Lester-Irabinna Rigney has so rightly said:

Unless Western knowledge orthodoxies are interrogated, the basis of their power will continue to reproduce the colonised as a fixed reality, including the subtext of Indigenous Intellectual nullius. The struggle for Indigenous intellectual sovereignty is to move our
humanness, our scholarship, our identities and our knowledge systems from invisible to visible. (Rigney 2001, p.10)

As far as we are concerned research that ignores our aspirations is spiritually demoralising and morally corrupt. We assert our right to censure research that rummages around in our cultures and our affairs. Research that threatens our cultural sovereignty can no longer be tolerated. This is our resistance.

My idea that our assertion of power, ownership and control over research is characteristically political stems from my understanding of our valuing of autonomy as our core political value. If we think back to what I wrote about this core value in Chapter 2 we can see that a correlation exists between asserting power, ownership and control and autonomy’s subsidiary value self-determination. Self-determination is a key theme in my earlier work on research (Williams & Stewart 1992; Williams 2001), just as it is in the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and that of many other Indigenous colleagues. I think though Lester-Irabinna Rigney put it rather precisely when he wrote, “…Indigenous people now want research and its designs to contribute to the self-determination and liberation struggles as defined and controlled by their communities”(1999, pp.109-110). Power, ownership and control are all fundamental to the realisation of self-determination as the expression of our valuing of autonomy. In terms of research, power and control relates more directly with the theory and praxis of research as a process whereas ownership relates more directly with research as knowledge production.

Let’s begin with the issue of power. As Les Mack & Graeme Gower (2001), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Lester-Irabinna Rigney (1999; 2001) and myself (1992; 2001), and many more of our colleagues, have all intimated through our critical commentary on research, it’s not that we reject research outright, we don’t. What we are saying is that our contestation with research is such that we believe that there is a moral imperative that entitles us to say yes or no to any research that seeks to take us as its subject. It’s a point that former ATSIC commissioner Rodney Dillon highlighted with regard to the continuance of research on our ancestors’ remains. Despite all that has been done to our people through this type of research Dillon still managed to leave a door open by saying that, “if remains are to be accessible to scientists, then that decision should be made by communities” (cited in The other
stolen people 2003, p.31). This shows that we are not, as some might suppose, steadfastly oppositional to research even though, given our experience, it would be justifiable. We are prepared to listen to any reasonable proposal for research, but we absolutely assert our right to allow or disallow it for ourselves.

Having the power to say yes or no is just the beginning. Before any green light can be given we need to stop and scrutinise the terms and conditions of research, particularly from the perspective of ownership. Les Mack and Graeme Gower noted that, “for many Indigenous Australians research is seen as another form of dispossession where knowledge is the commodity at stake and custodianship of it is often lost to non-Indigenous individuals and institutions that are not accessible to them” (2001, p.3 of 9). Dispossession is exactly why ownership is such a pivotal issue for us. Terri Janke, an Indigenous Lawyer with specialist knowledge of Indigenous copyright and patent concerns, explained that, “when Indigenous knowledge is removed from an Indigenous community, the community loses control over the way in which it is represented and used” (2005, p.101). Terri also explained that, “in fact, intellectual property laws actually allow for the plundering of Indigenous knowledge by providing monopoly rights to those who record or write down knowledge in a material form, or patent it” (2005, p.100). This is precisely why we need to question who gets to own the knowledge product of research.

One of the most practical ways we can prevent continuing exploitation of our knowledges is to refuse all research that fails to acknowledge our cultural and intellectual property rights. This means we should refuse any research that does not invite us into the research as active stakeholders with the right to exercise control over the research process. I once claimed, “Indigenous control of the research process is paramount in reversing the damage that the use of traditional research methodologies has caused” (2001, p.13). For us having control means being fully informed about the research, and all of its processes, from start to finish. It means being able to negotiate ownership and/or co-ownership of the research especially in terms of the knowledge expectations of the research; the methodology and methods involved in the research; the person/s involved in orchestrating the research; and the documentation and dissemination of the outcomes of the research. Being able to
exercise control throughout the research is self-determination in action. It empowers us by ensuring that the research will articulate our Indigenous voice.

Of course realising power, ownership and control over research is unlikely unless the underlying motive of research is predisposed towards our needs, interests and aspirations as we determine them. Quite frankly, given our history with research, why would we choose to be involved in research that doesn’t advance our identity and our social, cultural and political well-being in accordance with our worldview? We need to look analytically at how research will benefit us so that we can establish whose interests proposed research serves. By no means is this easy. Proposals for research may well contain the rhetoric of emancipatory language. Whilst this might tempt us, it may also dupe us. It is important for us to look past ‘window dressing’ in order to critically cross-examine the aims and objectives of any research that seeks to involve us. Motive was on our mind when Ian and I wrote, “this battle over power and control in the area of research is essentially about denying continuing access to community knowledge when such activities seeks to exploit this knowledge by using it for purposes other than the advancement of goals and strategies established through community decision-making processes” (1992, p. 92).

Our fixation with the motive of research has much to do with worldview, since worldview is a determining factor not only in terms of research purpose, but also, as Henry et al. (2002b) observed, in terms of research methodology. “The system of principles upon which a researcher’s preferred methodology is based is neither a value-free nor culturally pure abstraction…” (Henry et al. 2002b, p.2). Research methodology can be seen distinctly as a construct of one’s worldview. Worldview to me encapsulates the essence of cultural arbitrary as a sociological precondition. This is a crucial point because it harks at the very core of Indigenous dissent with research. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) actually explored the issue of worldview in context of methodology by questioning the purported objectivity of Western research. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) concluded that non-Indigenous research, conducted on and about us, cannot be anything other than reflective of a non-Indigenous worldview; that is a non-Indigenous cultural arbitrary. To me this introduces serious doubt over the certainty of knowledge generated through West-centric research.
Like me, and many others, Lester-Irabinna Rigney (2001) has maintained a strong stance on our right to assert our own intellectualism and has made particular advances in regard to the idea of Indigenous intellectual sovereignty. Lester-Irabinna Rigney’s idea of Indigenous intellectual sovereignty is now a challenge for us and ushers in a new era; an era that Martin Nakata (1998) has identified as that of an Indigenous academy. As Lester-Irabinna Rigney wrote, “producers of Indigenous Australian research aim to push the boundaries of social science in order to make intellectual space for Indigenous cultural knowledge systems that were denied in the past” (2001, p.9). Lester-Irabinna Rigney also pointed to the need to produce “…counter-narratives through alternative investigative methods” (2001, p.9). For myself I have been vocal about research since I first spoke publicly on the matter back in 1992. I am a long-standing advocate of alternative research praxis. The position of our identity in research up until the last couple of decades was very much suppressed and defined by West-centric prescriptions. From the next chapter on my focus is all about Indigenous research and education. What you have read thus far backgrounds what you will read from here on.
6.1 Philosophising an Indigenous Methodology

I remember vividly, when I first entered academic life, feeling anxious about research. I was deeply concerned about being able to fulfil my academic research obligations without becoming involved in research that was distressing to our peoples. I consider myself lucky though, because I worked under the supervision of a non-Indigenous Research Fellow who understood exactly where I was coming from. Like me my colleague strongly believed in the principles of Indigenous empowerment and self-determination. Through the tutelage of my colleague my eyes were opened to a new way of thinking about research. I was introduced for the first time to alternative forms of research. In terms of research methodology I became familiar with action research, a methodology that encourages “…collective self-reflective enquiry” (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988, p.5). I felt an immediate rapport with this methodology because, unlike conventional methodologies, it didn’t work against my worldview. Action research felt comfortable. It held, for me, a far greater prospect of being acceptable to our peoples. Through learning about action research I began to understand that research could work for us instead of against us.

Around the same time I was also introduced to the concept of participatory action research. Participatory action research was even more appealing to me because the participatory aspect took the collaborative benefit of action research to a more emancipatory and empowering level. Whereas action research opens the way for us to be actively involved within research, participatory action research moves research into a distinctly socio-political dimension. Participatory action research more convincingly moves away from the status quo of researcher as expert in that “participatory research aims to empower people, not only in the sense of being psychologically capacititated but also in the sense of being in-power to effect needed social change” (Park 1993, p.2). I was so excited by this because to me this methodology created an educative environment wherein we could become conscious of our condition of repression and work for ourselves toward our own socio-cultural/socio-political liberation. As a result of my learning I became a long-standing proponent of participatory action research.
In our 1992 conference paper my colleague, Ian Stewart, and I made our feelings plain about participatory action research. We said:

Participatory action research is most definitely not about academics from the university system doing research on people and making them the objects of research…Participatory action research confronts head-on the false claims of scientific rationality and objectivity put forward by researchers operating from within other more traditional and conservative paradigms. The manipulative social relations that characterise the traditional research-researcher relationship have no place in participatory action research, which operates on the basis of collective and collaborative decision-making, implementation and analysis. (Williams & Stewart 1992, p.93).

Some years later I again publicised my advocacy of participatory action research when I wrote about the benefits of this form of research in terms of the professional development of Indigenous Australian Health Workers (Williams 2001). At the time I contended that, “in the practical sense participatory action research can be incorporated in practice based educational methodologies with ease. The research program itself becomes the learning setting, and the educator becomes a non-impositional facilitator” (Williams 2001, p.14).

How I made the link between participatory action research and pedagogy has much to do with what I learnt from the research experiences of the Yolngu peoples. Raymattja Marika, Dayngawa Ngurruwutthun and Leon White (1992) explained how the Yolngu community at Yirrkala worked together as a research collective, using participatory research, to address their concerns and needs about education. What was inspirational for me about this was the way the Yolngu peoples established control and ownership over the research process; how they negotiated the research with all Yolngu stakeholders, and how the research became a collective enterprise. Balanda (white) researchers only became involved in the research when they demonstrated that they could “…operate under firm Yolngu control” and conduct themselves according to Yolngu protocols (Marika, Ngurruwutthun, & White 1992, p.10 of 14). The entire research process was underpinned and driven by Yolngu epistemologies, beginning with the Yolngu negotiation method of “Galtha Rom” which located the research within the framework of Yolngu knowledge systems (Marika, Ngurruwutthun, & White 1992, p.8 of 14).

To me the Yolngu experience shows that in theory and practice research, with the right methodology, can be used by us to further our collective development, and contribute meaningfully to our knowledge ways. I found the Yolngu experience
culturally compelling. In my opinion their leadership in implementing and maintaining Indigenous research is deserving of acknowledgement and respect. Certainly there is a very real danger that without exemplars of practice like the Yolngu experience the ideal of Indigenising research could remain largely theoretical. The combination of what I have learnt of Yolngu ways of researching and what I have learnt along with my colleague sat at the forefront of my mind when I began to explore how I would approach my research proposition in practice. As a strong advocate of participatory action research I naturally looked at this methodology first. I thought long and hard about how I could establish my research as an Indigenous participatory action research project. The problem was every time I thought about it I kept coming back to the same question: is it realistically feasible given that I would be working to a relatively tight academic time frame?

In the end I determined that it would be far too ambitious to undertake an Indigenous participatory action research project. The consultation process alone is very protracted. If it is done as it should be, in tandem with the Indigenous peoples who would conjointly own and control the research process, it would require a significant longitudinal commitment that would scope beyond the time parameters of doctoral study. Participatory action research even on a small scale can be logistically challenging if all the principles that underpin this methodology are fully realised in praxis. With all this in mind I began to think about what other methodology I could use. That is when I started to feel a deep anxiety about it all. I knew that I could not just go into our communities and walk away again taking data with me. That would simply duplicate Western methods of invasive research, be morally reprehensible, and shame me deeply as an Indigenous person. I ruminated over Indigenous research for days; a process of introspection that was both emotionally and ethically perplexing. My convictions concerning research have always been unambiguously founded in our right to cultural sovereignty and that never left my mind.

I needed to conceptualise research as an Indigenous entity so I looked for relevant literature to try and find out what was happening in terms of the theorisation of Indigenous research methodologies. Notable amongst the various authors I read was Lester-Irabinna Rigney who has advanced an Indigenist research model principled on “resistance”, “political integrity” and “privileging Indigenous voices“ (1999, p.116).
Linda Tuhiwai Smith too put forward an interesting “agenda for Indigenous research” which “…focused strategically on the goal of self-determination of Indigenous peoples” (1999, pp.115-116). Using a “metaphor of ocean tides” Linda Tuhiwai Smith recognised in her agenda the importance of the ideals of “survival”, “recovery”, “development” and “self-determination” to Indigenous peoples. Theorisations of this kind put forward strong guiding principles for Indigenous research. Adding an important ethical dimension to such principles are authors like Daryle Rigney and Gus Worby who advocate the development of an Indigenous research charter “…as a way of committing universities to best negotiated practice in the giving and receiving of knowledge” (2005, p.388).

It seemed to me that most of the discussion concerning Indigenous research centred on establishing theoretical concepts for practice. In that regard I thought that what I had read was an important body of work that provided a very necessary theoretical foundation for the continued development of Indigenous research methodology. In terms of research the theorisation of methodology is important because methodology is in effect the channel between theory and practice. I began to evolve my thinking, realising that whilst participatory action research is adaptable to our worldview, as a methodology it is neither unique to, nor created specifically out of the Indigenous experience. What I was really looking for was an Indigenous research methodology that provided an ethical alternative to participatory action research. I didn’t quite find what I was looking for so I decided the only way forward for me was to formulate for myself my own version of an Indigenous research methodology. I saw that the Yolngu peoples were able to transform a non-Indigenous research methodology into their own culturally germane research model. Following their lead I likewise wanted to create for my research a culturally embedded methodology.

It dawned on me that the core values that I had identified as fundamental to our worldview are not just relevant to curriculum and pedagogy; they are also very much relevant to the development of an Indigenous research methodology. I realised that these core values should underscore the philosophical foundations of Indigenous research in order to enable the production of Indigenous knowledge commensurate with Indigenous ways of knowing. I found confirmation of this viewpoint in a publication sponsored by the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal & Tropical
Health. In this work John Henry et al. (2002a, p.8) raised the point that, “the development and adoption of research methodologies and approaches which are more respectful of Indigenous values and inclusive of Indigenous knowledge and world views” is a requisite for Indigenous research reform. If we are to challenge the invasiveness of Western forms of research we must begin to conduct our own research using our own research methodologies for the generation of our own knowledges. As an Indigenous project my research must be powered by a research methodology that celebrates our identity, our life ways and our knowledge ways.

In synthesising my own ideas for an Indigenous research methodology I reflected upon the social, cultural and political expressions of our worldview in terms of our core values: collectivism, spirituality and autonomy. I thought about how each of these values could be validly represented within the research process by weighing each value against what I knew of existing paradigms of research and knowledge. I saw an obvious rapport between our valuing of collectivism and the collaborative methods of participatory action research, but when it came to our spirituality I didn’t immediately see any such affinity. I did however discern a distinct correlation between our valuing of autonomy and the emancipatory principles of participatory action research, which derive from critical social theory. Thinking about critical social theory then led me to ponder the critical/oppositional nature of the feminist perspective in research because the feminist perspective does take an interesting epistemological position in terms of conventional constructs of Western knowledge. Realising this drew my attention to the relevance of this perspective in terms of the legitimation of our knowledge ways.

The collaborative/emancipatory principles of participatory action research, together with the critical/oppositional outlook of critical social theory and the epistemological concepts of the feminist perspective produced for me a guiding ideological framework for the philosophisation of an Indigenous research methodology. Now before I go on to clarify this in more detail I want to divert for a moment to the issue of Indigenous co-option of Western research/knowledge paradigms. My interest in this stems from personal conversations in which I was reminded of the continuance of a distinct mindset that takes issue over what constitutes ‘real’ Indigenous knowledges. In writing on research Noonuccal, Quandamooka academic Karen
Martin claimed that, “…western research is a western practice and, as such, it is not a feature of our own world, so a research framework that is entirely Aboriginal is not possible” (2003, p.211). Karen Martin went on to note “…Indigenist research occurs through centring Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being and Ways of Doing in alignment with aspects of western qualitative research frameworks” (Martin 2003, p.211). These are important observations that bring to the fore the contentious question about whether research can ever be considered quintessentially Indigenous.

Reading Karen Martin’s words challenged me to evaluate whether or not my conceptualising of an Indigenous research methodology is actually validly Indigenous. Indeed I was moved to think about whether the outcomes of its use would articulate genuine Indigenous knowledges. I think, however, the major problem with this issue is that research is too often thought of in solely formalised academic terms, and that typically puts a Western slant on things. When I think about research more generally I realise that research is essentially about the basic concepts of question and answer, problem and solution. These surely are concepts that are characteristic in every human culture. Given this, it follows, from my perspective, that we can afford to relax our thinking about research so that research is not so tightly constrained as an exclusively Western entity, tied to a key aspect of a hegemonic apparatus – academia, but rather freed up as an inclusively human entity. When I think about research in this more universal way I am released to intellectualise research as an Indigenous enterprise. You will find that this line of reasoning annexes with Chapter 3 in terms of the hegemony of Western knowledge.

The pivotal question here is: does reference to the principles underpinning particular Western methodologies somehow lessen the Indigenousness of my work? It’s a good question, but one to which I give a categorical no. I believe that when we centre our research in our own life ways and knowledges ways, be it traditional and/or contemporary, we are Indigenising our research; we are emphatically making it our own. Karen Martin asserts that, “…Indigenous research must centralise the core structures of Aboriginal ontology as a framework for research if it is to serve us well. Otherwise it is western research done by Indigenous people” (2003, p.206). It is precisely this continuing debate over what constitutes Western research done by Indigenous persons as opposed to Indigenous research that has given me added
impetus to locate my research within my own conceptualisation of an Indigenous research methodology. At a personal level I found Karen Martin’s focus on ontology very affirming. In seeking to energise my research methodology through our core values I feel I am tapping directly into the cultural essence of our ontology and our epistemology.

In considering both the ontological and epistemological aspects of our spirituality in terms of research I found an intellectual benefit in the feminist perspective. In this respect I find myself in complete agreement with Lester-Irabinna Rigney who has likewise emphasised that, “in seeking possible examples of liberatory epistemologies for the Indigenous movement, one can draw on experiences and writings from within the feminist movement” (1999, p.114). One of the most compelling aspects of the feminist perspective is its grounding within the critical tradition. As I touched on earlier, the philosophical foundations of critical social theory, as reflected in both the theoretical foundation of participatory action research and the feminist perspective, embody in my view the most appropriate rationalisations for deconstructing the socio-political/socio-cultural context of Indigenous suppression. Critical social theory encourages such deconstruction in as much as “…a critical social science is one which seeks to uncover those systems of social relationships which determine the actions of individuals and the unanticipated, though not accidental, consequences of these actions” (Fay 1975, p.94).

From reading the work of prominent feminist academics Patti Lather (1992) and Dorothy Smith (1999) I learnt that the feminist perspective applies critical social theory as the philosophical medium for deconstructing, reclaiming, asserting and validating the worldview of women’s knowing (Lather 1992; Smith, D 1999). In a nutshell “feminist researchers see gender as a basic organizing principle that profoundly shapes/mediates the concrete conditions of our lives” (Lather 1992, p. 91). Indigenous researchers such as myself can learn from this by creating our own intellectual perspective for deconstructing, reclaiming, asserting and validating our worldview of knowing. The feminist perspective confirmed for me that research and knowledge are bound in the centric: for example, West-centric, male-centric, culture-centric, value-centric and so on. Research and knowledge are thus not the neutral/objective entities they are so often proclaimed to be. We must always ask
through whose lens was this research and knowledge produced? This is the deconstructive element; it is the beginning, but we must also find ways to re-voice our own ontological understandings and to repossess our own epistemologies.

Lester-Irabinna Rigney noted that, “a common similarity found within Indigenous and feminist theorizing is that of lived experiences” (1999, p.115). In that regard I found of particular interest the branch of feminist perspective referred to as feminist standpoint theory. “A feminist standpoint, achieved through struggle both against male oppression and toward seeing the world through women’s eyes, provides the possibility of more complete and less distorted understandings” (Lather 1992, p.93). That is because “…the knowing subject is always located in a particular spatial and temporal site, a particular configuration of the everyday/everynight world” (Smith, D 1999, p. 5). Research thus becomes a field into which the subjectivity of lived experience is not only invited; it is legitimated as methodologically defensible. For me feminist standpoint theory provides us with a fine example of how lived experience forms the lens of our knowing. In Chapter 3 I wrote of Martin Nakata’s (1998) conception of an Indigenous standpoint theory. I see this Indigenous standpoint theory as questioning the orthodoxy of West-centric knowing by reclaiming, asserting and validating Indigenous-centric knowing.

Feminist perspective can inform Indigenous research methodology because it can provide for us a model to refer to as we seek to centre ourselves not as researchers of the Indigenous but as Indigenous researchers enveloped in the life force of our own knowledge production. Without doubt socio-cultural and socio-political experience is an indelible teacher. Through reflection on experience greater insight and greater meaning can be garnered. On this basis the context of my research is absolutely underscored by the social, cultural and political experience of my Indigenous being. By situating myself, as an Indigenous cultural being, within the context of my research I feel my ability to impart a cultural insight borne of my socio-cultural partisanship. As Marion Piantanida & Noreen Garman attest, “at the heart of the inquiry is the researcher’s capacity for encountering, listening, understanding, and thus “experiencing” the phenomenon under investigation” (1999, p.140). It all harks back to the objectivity/subjectivity debate I discussed in Chapter 3. Lester-Irabinna
Rigney is right “…Indigenous research by Indigenous Australians takes the research into the heart of the Indigenous struggle” (1999, p.117).

Methodology to me is all about giving focus to the Indigenous lens of my research. It is the foundation on which practice is built, shaped and directed. For me the process of establishing an Indigenous research methodology began with articulating a set of guiding principles as an ideological and ethical compass for my praxis. From the outset I was clear about what these guiding principles should be. As my research is Indigenous research I determined that my guiding principles must be Indigenous emancipation, Indigenous empowerment and Indigenous self-determination. These are principles that I am deeply and personally committed to. I very much see these principles as honouring our struggles, our cultural aspirations and our continuing fight for the survival and revival of our cultures. I have, in fact, been a strong advocate of these principles ever since I first became involved with research back in the early 1990’s (Williams & Stewart 1992; Williams 2001). For me emancipation, empowerment and self-determination engender my methodology with a liberatory orientation. As a liberatory concept my research methodology is thus resolutely purposed toward Indigenous cultural sovereignty.

Binding into the research methodology a purpose is my way of creating an additional navigator for research praxis in that the purpose fortifies the context and meaning of the guiding principles. Having a methodological purpose also offers to potential Indigenous stakeholders in the research a sense that their Indigenous identity will be culturally legitimated and celebrated. By purposing my research toward our cultural sovereignty I am not only embedding within the research our valuing of autonomy, I am also generating a culturally bonding energy that opens up the research as a medium for the expression of our valuing of collectivism and spirituality. Underscoring and powering my research methodology is our Indigenous worldview as epitomised in our core values: collectivism, spirituality and autonomy. In thinking about the context of each of these values I realised that each core value implied for research specific criteria for praxis. Starting with our valuing of collectivism I saw that my research at the level of praxis had to be negotiated, collaborative and participatory. These are criteria that are likewise reflected in the ideals of participatory action research.
In terms of developing criteria for praxis in respect to our valuing of spirituality I started from the perspective of knowing that my research needed to be structured to harmonise with our spiritual feel for time by allowing the research to flow with the energy dynamics of the day. I saw that spiritually driven research must be fluid, spatial and flexible so that the research is moved out of West-centric time constructs. I saw too that spiritually driven research must be metaphysically dynamic in order to open up the research as a vehicle for the expression of our ontological and epistemological ways of knowing and seeing. It is this openness to other forms and ways of knowing and seeing that put me in mind of the feminist perspective. Finally in terms of our valuing of autonomy I saw that in praxis my research needed to be critically deconstructive and reflective in accordance with the analytical concepts of critical social theory but also unifying and educational, which drew back to mind the practices of participatory action research and feminist perspective. Below is a visual synopsis of the Indigenous research methodology I philosophised for my own practice as an Indigenous researcher conducting Indigenous research.

MY INDIGENOUS RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

principled by emancipation; empowerment; self-determination

purposed towards Indigenous cultural sovereignty

underscored by
Indigenous worldview ⇔ Indigenous values
social ⇔ collectivism cultural ⇔ spirituality political ⇔ autonomy

criterion for praxis
negotiated, collaborative, participatory
fluid, spatial, flexible
metaphysically dynamic
critically deconstructive, reflective, unifying, educational
6.2 Translating Methodology into Practice

The first step to realising doctoral research at the level of practice is to obtain an ethics clearance. An ethics clearance is particularly important because it is through such a clearance that academic institutions substantiate the integrity of research to be done under their auspices. Ethical clearance in effect sets up protective measures that safeguard against inappropriate and harmful research. For me the process of gaining an ethical clearance began with detailing exactly what I intended to do at the level of practice. With the liberatory intent of my methodology firmly etched in my mind I set about planning a research process that would mirror my ideals at the level of practice. I started from the position of knowing that I needed to work with research methods that would give ascendancy to our values and worldview. I was serious about designing the research process as a mutually educative exchange. Historically our experience of research has been one in which the expertise of the researcher has been extolled at the expense of the researched. I knew that I had to replace this superiority/inferiority relationship with a reciprocative arrangement that defined my role as a co-learner in a collaborative undertaking.

In counteraction to conventional research methods like interview, which are for us highly confronting, I created the concept of *telling space* as a reflection of our practice of yarning up about mob, community and country. I then created the concept of *dialogic exchange*, again by drawing on our yarning and storying practices, which you were first introduced to in Chapter 1. *Dialogic exchange* in essence denotes a highly flexible and fluid culturally apposite yarning environment for sharing knowledges, ideas, emotions, experiences, concerns and aspirations. One of the greatest advantages with *dialogic exchange* for me is that it opened up the research process to the energy dynamics of the day. I planned that *dialogic exchange* would begin with a first phase of *telling* in which I would yarn up, mainly to potential Indigenous stakeholders, about my identity. This for me was a necessary step in establishing my cultural credibility. It was at this stage that I disseminated my Indigenous Identity profile to those who didn’t already know of me, my family or my heritage. I then visualised a second phase of *telling* where I would yarn up about the research itself and disseminate my formal letter of introduction to the research, the Plain Language Statement, and a research Consent Form.
As it turned out most often these introductory phases of telling took place simultaneously. Once we’d worked our way through these initial phases of telling I was then in a position to invite potential Indigenous stakeholders and non-Indigenous participants to indicate whether they wanted to become involved in the research or not. This then brings me to the matter of who was actually invited to take part in the research. Part of the process of gaining an ethics clearance involves providing detail about who is to be ‘selected’ and ‘recruited’ for the research. At the outset I had real problems wrapping my mind around the concepts of selection and recruitment. I felt very uncomfortable because both terms suggested to me a weeding and ranking process that, quite frankly, I personally find culturally confronting. As far as I was concerned my research was for all us mob. I emphasised in my ethics application that I could imagine that from a Western standpoint it would be logical to select Indigenous stakeholders based on categories like urban, rural or traditional (tribal). I made it abundantly clear that there was no way I could do any such thing, as to do so would culturally shame me very deeply, and erode my cultural integrity.

What I actually proposed to do was invite my own mob into the research as stakeholders, and non-Indigenous educators, who have extensive experience in and of Indigenous education at both the school and adult level, as participants. I was entirely deliberate in making a distinction between stakeholder and participant. The reasoning behind this rested on my personal conviction that any of us mob involved in the research would be, as far as I am concerned, fellow co-owners and co-authors of the research. My motive for inviting non-Indigenous educators into the research was based on my contention that we can really only critically examine the cultural predisposition of mainstream education from the viewpoint of looking from the outside in. That’s because mainstream education is not, as I argued in Chapter 4, of our cultural arbitrary. What I wanted to do is go beyond this; I wanted to try and see mainstream education from the inside out. This is where the non-Indigenous participants came into research because, to me, they offer an appropriate cultural lens through which to critique mainstream education from within the context of its Western cultural arbitrary.

My intention was to approach potential non-Indigenous educators I knew of by reputation as well as educators I knew personally. I clarified in my ethics application
that I would make initial contact with those persons I didn’t personally know in a more formal manner via mail, email or fax, but that I would be more casual with the educators I knew, and contact them in person or by phone. In actuality I ended up making initial contact with eight potential non-Indigenous participants, three of whom I knew personally. I contacted six by email, one in person and one by phone. Oddly the only person I contacted by phone turned out to be a person I didn’t previously know, but because I was aware that they knew about me, and my study, it felt fine to take a less formal approach. I asked each potential participant whether they were interested in receiving information about my research. All eight said they were happy to receive my introductory material. As it turned out six of the eight people I contacted agreed to participate in the research without hesitation. The other two indicated initial interest, but after an exchange of emails didn’t get back in contact with me. After follow-up emails I didn’t pursue matters any further.

With regard to contacting potential Indigenous stakeholders I explained in my ethics application that I envisaged a spiralling process, which would begin with me approaching persons I knew. From this I foresaw a cultural path that would lead me into contact with other Indigenous peoples. I was completely confident that this was how things would work out for me because it’s how we do things in our everyday life; it’s how our kinship and collectivism works. I am very aware, however, that this appears far too unorganised and random from a Western perspective, but from our perspective it is sound practice as cultural networking. My attitude, in terms of the West-centric notion of recruitment and selection, was that I would not get to choose who the Indigenous stakeholders would be; rather I accepted that my mob would be the ones to choose me on the basis of my culturally integrity. I also clarified in my ethics application that I would make first contact with potential Indigenous stakeholders in person or by phone, and that I would only meet up for telling if and when I was invited so to do. In reality I ended up making initial contact with twenty-five Indigenous persons and one Indigenous educational organisation.

This is where the process of firming up who was going to be involved in the research became interesting. In brief I made initial contact with thirteen persons by phone, seven persons in-person and, unpredictably for me, five persons and one Indigenous education organisation by email. I’ll begin with what happened as a result of the six
emails. With the Indigenous education organisation I opted for initial email contact because they had a current website, and because I thought that it would be less invasive. Even so, I never received a reply to my first email so I sent a follow-up email. Because no reply ever came I simply didn’t pursue things further. As for the five persons, one I knew was always very busy and hard to contact, so emailing seemed a much better option. When this person eventually replied they said they were, “very interested my brother”, so I sent my introductory research material. When there was no further reply I followed-up with another email, but as this didn’t generate a response I left it at that. I wasn’t at all bothered when they didn’t return my email. With us blackfulla’s when we don’t get back in touch it’s like saying, “no, I’m sorry I can’t”. We know this because of our cultural ‘reading between the lines’.

Before going on with my account of contacting potential Indigenous stakeholders I want to digress for a moment to clarify how we view the matter of non-contact. If we are put in a position to actually say no directly it can cause us real shame. Following-up more than once can cause even more shame by making us feel obliged, and that can also be coercive. By not continuing to follow-up my silence sends a confirming message that I understand and respect that the person I am trying to contact is too busy. That said the next two emails I sent were simply notes asking if I could phone for a yarn. I did this because I had no other contact details at the time. In both cases I received a prompt reply confirming that it was fine to call, so I did. Both my calls led to telling sessions. After these sessions I waited to hear from each person to see whether they wanted to become involved in the research. In one case, as I hadn’t heard anything for a long time, I sent a follow-up email but in the end as nothing further eventuated I left it at that. In the other case I received the consent form in the mail so I phoned to confirm that their posting of the consent form meant that they were interested in becoming involved, which indeed was the case.

The difficulty with this particular contact was that when it came time to dialogic exchange the person concerned indicated a strong opposition to Indigenous independent education and became very agitated. I was completely taken aback; I had after all been very up-front about my research. As a consequence this person did not become a stakeholder in the research. The final two persons I initially contacted by email were contacted in this manner because I was asked to do so by a guiding
Elder. However, as I received no reply from them I assumed that they weren’t able to become involved. In effect of the initial six email contacts I made not one resulted in active stakeholders. The seven in-person contacts I made however were a little more successful. One person declined because they couldn’t see how my research would fit into the mainstream. Another four formed the one group. With this particular group our *telling phase* lasted until 2am in the morning. As I had predicted in my ethics application we literally spent hours yarning up about family and cultural business. It wasn’t until we’d done this that we felt the time was right to turn our attention to what the research was all about.

Another of the in-person contacts actually came about through yarning after a funeral. Because we started yarning up about values I decided to mention my study. A few days later this person phoned and came over home. As with the group of four our *telling space* likewise ended up focusing first on family and cultural business, before research. We did agree to meet up for *dialogic exchange* when we could, but it never came about. I knew this person was caught up in family, cultural and work priorities so I wasn’t concerned. The final in-person contact I had happened purely by chance. This person invited me to send the introductory research material via email. As I didn’t hear anything further from this person I sent a follow-up email, but after an initial acknowledgement they never got back in touch. All in all of the seven in-person contacts I made, I ended up establishing the collaboration of four active stakeholders. So I come now to the thirteen initial contacts I made by phone. The first call I made was to a person who did indicate a keenness to participate, but they did say that they couldn’t do so until after they had returned from a journey home to country. Several months went by before I contacted them again, but when my messages were not returned I didn’t pursue things any further.

The next person I phoned I met, along with their brother. While they both initially agreed to be part of the research at the time of our initial yarn, the *telling phase*, when it came time for *dialogic exchange*, some seven months later, the brother was unable to take part so another person stepped in. As I didn’t have the number of the third person I wanted to contact I rang an Aunt who goes visiting kin to put the word out that I wanted a yarn. Sure enough a few days later I was phoned. As an Elder this person took a guiding role in my research. Because it was a bad time, with
people passing on in the family, the right time for dialogue with this stakeholder never emerged. This stakeholder did however introduce me to four other potential stakeholders, one of whom was so interested in my research after I had phoned them that we ended up doing dialogic exchange in our first meeting. Another just wanted to know what I was up to so I wasn’t surprised when they didn’t get back to me. The other two were the ones I had contacted by email, as mentioned above. Two more of the thirteen I phoned not only met up with me for the telling phase, they both ended up feeling the right energy to move into dialogic exchange on the same day.

To contact another potential stakeholder whose mobile wasn’t on I phoned a couple of Indigenous organisations, then went to some places where this person often goes, leaving messages. It was effective because a few days later they called, and we met up for the telling phase. With this person the telling phase was very deep. Before we could talk about research we needed to deal with serious cultural business; but we both knew when the time was right to turn our attention to the research. When we did another person came along and joined our meeting. Both persons agreed to become involved in the research. A few weeks after our telling we met up again for dialogic exchange. Again, before we started we needed to visit country first; it was our way of centring the spirit of our dialogue. A similar situation occurred with another person. When we met up for telling, and as it turned out for dialogic exchange, we first did a welcome to country, then we visited mob before we turned our attention to the research. As with dialogic exchange with the group of four I mentioned a few paragraphs back, we found cultural comfort in yarning at night. Interestingly a few weeks later this particular stakeholder wanted to meet up again to do more work on their transcript.

With the last four people I initially contacted by phone three ended up forming the one group. There was actually a long gap between telling and dialogic exchange with this group because we had to wait until after other business like NAIDOC week had come and gone first. The last person I contacted by phone was keen, and went straight into dialogic exchange. The whole process of contacting potential Indigenous stakeholders spread over months, and involved a lot of phone calls, emails, messages and meetings. In the finish I ended up with 15 active Indigenous stakeholders out of the 25 initial contacts I made. I do, however, consider the Elder
who gave me direction a stakeholder as well, as a matter of cultural respect. One thing is for sure I was right in thinking about the process as a spiral because that is what it turned out to be. I was also right in predicting that we would do a lot of yarning about mob and country; we literally spent hours focused on our oldfulla’s. The Indigenous Identity Profile too was very effective for both the Indigenous stakeholders and the non-Indigenous participants. Being able to see who I am and who my family is made a difference.

After each person had formalised their consent to become involved in the research we moved into *dialogic exchange*. In my ethics application I explained that I would be developing both Indigenous and non-Indigenous briefing documents in order to motivate and guide *dialogic exchange*. As it turned out these briefing documents were invaluable not only for generating dialogue but also, with regard to the Indigenous document, educative. The content of the non-Indigenous Briefing Document was straightforward; it merely consisted of two broad themes with four open-ended questions to each theme. These themes and questions have all been listed in Chapter 7. As for the Indigenous Stakeholder Briefing Document, it was substantially different to the non-Indigenous document. For that reason I have included a copy of the text in Appendix One. As you will see I detailed in the Indigenous document three broad themes for *dialogic exchange*. Under each theme I explained the aim of the theme, listed what I saw were the benefits in discussing the theme and disclosed my own viewpoint with regard to the theme. I then provided a series of quotes relevant to the theme.

The briefing documents were distributed during the *telling phase*. By providing these documents at this early stage I was able to ensure that everyone was fully informed about the subject matter of the research. In thinking about the ethics of this I realised that whilst the non-Indigenous Briefing Document was unlikely to cause concern, the Indigenous Stakeholder Briefing Document might raise eyebrows. It could, for instance, be asserted that this form of briefing document effectively put words into people’s mouths and prejudices the informational outcomes of the research. It could also be claimed that I am merely asking people to agree with my own perspectives. If such arguments were to have credence the follow on conclusion would be that the Indigenous stakeholders would be at risk of being coerced. What
needs to be known in terms of this is that as collective peoples we do not feel at all intimidated by having information about another Indigenous person’s viewpoint, we actively expect it. It is for us necessary for gauging the position and motive of the person who is undertaking the research. It is how we assess a researcher’s integrity, and establish our connection to the research.

For me, the Indigenous Briefing Document was the most culturally respectful way to seek Indigenous views. As I predicted in my ethics application using briefing documents to energise the research process in practice meant that in both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous setting the research dialogue was able to flow freely. In the non-Indigenous situation the open-ended questions guided the participants into re-exploring their own experiences and understandings. In the Indigenous situation the research themes liberated our dialogue. We found that we could take all the time we needed to fully express our cultural emotion. It also turned out to be a really constructive way of creating the cultural space we needed to spiritualise our dialogue. This was so important to me because one of the strongest driving commitments of my research, as an Indigenous project, was to give freedom and veracity to our spiritual voice. I wanted our spiritualism to be heard not as an anthropological or folkloristic construction, but rather as a genesis of Indigenous knowledge production. I felt strongly that my research was a medium for us to articulate, without fear of derision, our spiritual knowing as legitimate knowing.

As part of the process of obtaining an ethics clearance researchers are asked to predict if there is anything that would compromise the ethical integrity of the research. In thinking about this I recognised that from a non-Indigenous viewpoint it might be presumed that family involvement in the research could be problematic. I thus clarified in my ethics application that as a member of a large Indigenous extended kinship family network it would be out of the question not to invite members of my extended family into the research process. Non-Indigenous persons who are not au fait with Indigenous kinship networks may assume that this presents as compromising, but as collective peoples we look for and actively seek out familial involvement. Certainly to not do so would be culturally insulting. Familial involvement is a very comfortable situation for us. It is not a predicament wherein we feel cajoled or susceptible to undue influence. As a transparent, fluid and very
spatial process I made sure that there were no limits to free and informed consent. Certainly no one was asked to sign consent forms on the spot, and everyone had the opportunity to go away and consider the research.

With respect to the issue of privacy I explained in my ethics application that I would fully protect the confidentiality and anonymity all stakeholders and participants. Everyone had the option to say whether or not they wanted to be publicly identified within this thesis. As it turned out the majority of stakeholders and participants with whom I dialogued indicated that they didn’t really mind if they were identified. I felt very humbled by this as it spoke volumes to me in terms of their trust of me. However, I had to weigh identifying individuals in the research up against how I visualised reporting the informational outcomes from dialogic exchange. In the end as much as I felt very privileged to have been given permission to identify individuals within the research I decided that out of respect for those persons for whom confidentially and anonymity was preferred I would simply keep everybody’s identity private. In terms of recounting the experience of the non-Indigenous participants my main interest was really to capture their experience of Indigenous education through a non-Indigenous lens. In terms of storying our Indigenous voice my aim was to capture the ‘unity’ we shared as an Indigenous lens.

In terms of recording the informational outcomes from dialogic exchange my main concern was to be as unobtrusive as possible. I thought my best approach would be to minute in note form rather than use other mediums like audio or videotape. My plan was to transcribe these notes into text then return the text for revision and approval. With group dialogic exchange I planned to take notes on butchers’ paper. That way the text would be completely visible and could be evaluated, revised and approved as we went along. These notes would then be written up as a report and returned for further comment and/or correction. In practice all stakeholder notes were recorded on butchers’ paper. I realised that it was a cultural imperative to be completely transparent and that meant that the stakeholders had to see what I was writing down. It was far more self-determining because they controlled the development of the text. I did end up tape recording two non-Indigenous sessions and one Indigenous session because that was what was preferred. These recordings were transcribed in full and returned for amendment, deletion and/or addition. I was
very serious that everyone was empowered to exercise their ownership over their
text, so only their sanctioned text appears in this thesis.

I made it clear in the ethics application that I would not be indulging in any long-
winded postulation about what was said in the dialogue. I wanted the dialogue to
stand on its own. My objective was to move away from conventional forms of
research reporting because I felt strongly that I couldn’t report as a researcher with
some sort of neutral, detached investigative role. The only thing I was certain about
in terms of reporting was that I needed to ensure that the research text resonated with
the strength and passion of our dialogue. With the non-Indigenous participants I saw
things as fairly straight forward whereby text could simply be placed under the
relevant question. With the Indigenous stakeholders however I wanted to do
something quite different. I wanted to record our story as one collective voice. This
necessitated the creation of a composite narrative. Composite narrative in this regard
is the fusing of individual voices into one by taking what one person had said and
partnering it up with what others have said. It is the creation of one conversation out
of several independent conversations. I guess it’s a bit like imagining we were all in
the same room at the same time yarning up together.

Finally in translating theory into practice I found myself at odds with aspects of the
ethics process. I detail these concerns here as a contribution to understandings about
good cultural practice in Indigenous research. The first of these matters relates to the
storage of research text. In my ethics application I noted that I felt extremely
uncomfortable with the mandatory six year period for keeping research text. I
indicated that I very much preferred to return research transcripts as soon as the
research is finished. My comments were queried so I explained that I felt strongly
that Western ideas about good practice in research don’t necessarily correlate with
Indigenous standards and/or expectations in terms of research. In particular I wanted
to clarify that the issue of data storage has a cultural dimension in that the policy of
keeping research data for a period of 6 years could trigger serious cultural
discomfort. Why wouldn’t we see this as yet another way of keeping records on us?
Why wouldn’t we fear that our information might be re-used without our authority?
Certainly our experiences with research have demonstrated categorically that our
knowledges has been dreadfully misused and abused in the past.
The next issue I raised was with the standard wording used in the pro-forma consent form, which I ended up changing from “…consent to be a subject of a human research study…” to “…consent to becoming an Indigenous stakeholder/non-Indigenous participant in an Indigenous research study…” Terms like “subject” may appear perfectly innocent from a non-Indigenous perspective the term subject implies to us that we are being asked to consent to being put under the microscope of academia as objects of research. To ask Indigenous stakeholders to sign a document with insensitive wording such as this would make me extremely uncomfortable and shamed. To reverse Indigenous scepticism of research it is vitally important that we are invited to sign off on consent forms that are worded in a way that respects us as collective co-owners in the research, and which state clearly the aims and objectives of any study seeking our involvement. The last issue I addressed concerned queries that were raised regarding my disclosure of my own views in the Indigenous Plain Language Statement. On the basis of this query I got the feeling that not much was known about how we Indigenous people communicate. What appears to be bias from a Western standpoint can be the opposite in our worldview.

I guess all that remains to be done now is to respond to the question: did theory really translate into practice with my research? To answer this question I need to go back and reflect upon the principles and purpose of my research methodology. Was my research emancipatory, empowering and self-determining? Well to me it was. It was emancipatory in the sense that it was an educative process. Through dialogic exchange I was able to facilitate us in developing a more critical understanding of our own educational circumstance. We utilised this new understanding to help us express more effectively our aspirations in terms of the survival and revival of our cultures and our identity. It was an empowering and self-determining process because all the stakeholders were able to feel a genuine sense of control and ownership over the research. Through dialogic exchange I am pleased to say that a number of us have started to workshop further and re-develop our cultural and educational ideas and hopes on the basis of this research. These ideas and hopes stand a real chance of translating into solid community based initiatives. All of this points us forward toward our cultural sovereignty.
CHAPTER 7: RECOUNTING THE EXPERIENCE OF NON-INDIGENOUS PARTICIPANTS

7.1 An Opening Note

As you will have read in Chapter 6 my dialogue with the non-Indigenous participants centred on two research themes, with each theme comprising four open-ended questions. As it turned out the openness of these questions enabled our dialogue to flow as a natural undirected critical/reflective conversation. This was invaluable to our dialogue because what came out of it was an extraordinarily insightful body of knowledge. In recounting the participant’s dialogue my first concern has been to conserve the richness of their voice. For that reason, and out of respect for their expertise, I have not engaged in any in-depth reinterpretation of what was said. Instead I have merely prefaced their words with my own impressions, reflections thoughts and feelings. Sections 7.2 and 7.3 reflect the two research themes, and are sub-divided in accordance with each theme’s corresponding questions. So as to make certain that the participants words stand out I have deliberately shaded their text. In section 7.4 I have recounted segments from my dialogue with two of the participants in particular, as their dialogue covered additional issues highly pertinent to Indigenous education. I have then closed this chapter with a conclusory comment.

7.2 Dialoguing Research Theme No.1

What is your perception of the role of education in terms of the production and reproduction of culture?

As a frank acknowledgement of education as implicit in the production and reproduction of culture the following response is an ideal opener for Theme 1. I was particularly interested in the metaphor of schools as factories. It is clear from what has been said here that the socio-economic interests of society take precedence as a driving agenda for education. I find phrases like “they mark you” very sobering, it reminds me about how often we were marked at school; it makes me wonder about how our children are being marked now. The prioritisation of the socio-economic seems so very distant from the collectivism of our worldview.
“Mainstream education is a powerful mechanism for producing and reproducing culture. How schools are organised, whether it’s in Australia, England, France, Germany or wherever, schools are like factories - factory systems. They’re systems that produce and reproduce whatever society requires at the time - employment is the key. The actual outcome is measured on a numerical score. They mark you for a place in society. They mark students depending on a student’s background. If your parents are lawyers, or whatever, you are more likely to go to elite schools. The role models around you help to shape your identity.”

Interestingly in this next view the production and reproduction of culture is allied to the concept of responsible citizenship. In this regard the context of citizenship is not seen as just socio-economic, rather it is seen in terms of the ideals of social justice. This is a strong and thought provoking reading of mainstream education. What impressed me in particular was the highlighting of education as a much broader entity than merely institutionalised forms of education like schooling. It opens the door to realising that our kids enter the mainstream already significantly educated from the perspective of their own worldview. I was also comforted to learn that all students are potentially harmed when they are left “unknowledgeable” about our place within Australia. I can see from what has been said here that there is a tangible link between guiding students to conceptualise their citizenship and the curriculum to which they are exposed.

“One thing schools can do is to get them [Aboriginal students] to be ashamed of their own culture. If Aboriginal kids never see anything about their own culture in school, what message does that give them? Aboriginal Studies is generally either poorly dealt with or not dealt with at all. Aboriginal kids who are a small minority in a school are still entitled to learn about their culture. The underlying premise of government policy is assimilation, at best; in the best light you could portray it. The Federal Government is using numeracy and literacy achievement levels to gauge whether schools are achieving or not. The Federal Government is increasing funding for literacy and numeracy whilst cutting out Indigenous committee’s such as ASSPA committee’s and groups that consult with education systems and governments. Education through schooling has a significant impact in relation to the production and reproduction of culture for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. It can do good, and it can do a lot of harm if it leaves both groups of students unknowledgeable about the history of the colonisation of Australia and the contribution that Indigenous people have made to the development of our country. There are specific issues that non-Indigenous students need to address; the colonisation of Australia and the dispossession of Indigenous people, and the responsibility they have in working towards just outcomes. I don’t see non-Indigenous students as being responsible for the stealth or dispossession of Indigenous lands in Australia, but it needs to be dealt with in a just way. As the beneficiaries of the act of dispossession we are left with a moral imperative to ensure that this issue is addressed. There needs to be knowledge of this history and the complexities of Aboriginal languages and culture, for example, knowing the local Indigenous names of the area in which they live. For Indigenous kids there are two levels to address. We need to make sure their self-esteem is strong and that they can see positive futures, and they need an understanding of local and national Indigenous affairs. That involves all the support services available to them. That’s how I see the outcomes of production and reproduction as active responsible citizenship, local, regional and national. It is about working with kids so they move forward as
individuals and as part of their community. It leads them to see that exploring issues leads to knowledge of wider community perceptions of how to act to achieve positive future outcomes”.

In answering this question this next participant looked specifically to curriculum, and in doing so, highlighted an important distinction between official and unofficial curriculum. The underlying factor in this is one of culture clash. The official curriculum gives the impression that mainstream education accommodates our culture; that it is not necessarily solely set on producing and reproducing Western culture. The unofficial curriculum, however, gives a completely different picture and shows just how entrenched the Western worldview is within mainstream education. I believe it is true that we do bring our “culture into the classroom” and that we do use our “cultural resources to respond”. I felt that this was a very intuitive interpretation of what happens. From my perspective it’s all about survival in these systems.

“I think there’s a couple of things that we probably need to keep in mind … there’s a bit of a difference between the official curriculum and the unofficial curriculum. The official curriculum, if you look at NSW, in schools it has as well as the subjects like Maths and English and so on, it does have Aboriginal Studies as a compulsory subject for all kids, even in schools where there’s no Aboriginal kids, it does have multicultural perspectives. So officially schools are about telling kids about Australian history, about Aboriginal history, about Aboriginal ways of life, about multicultural ways of life, so that’s the official story. The unofficial story is I think probably shown really well in studies like…[which] shows that unofficially Indigenous kids often learn messages through the way the school operates, the culture of the school operates. Like we’re in competition with each other, maybe its difficult to beat other kids in the school, a lot of the kids learn that school is a place where its hard to take a risk for fear of being shamed, so there’s kind of an unofficial thing that’s working as well. So I think the important thing for us to understand is that education often gives one official message to kids, but at the same time they’re learning a whole lot of other stuff, and so there’s all that hidden curriculum stuff, an unofficial curriculum. So, I also think in terms of Indigenous kids, from my own experiences, and from the research that I’ve done, is that they do bring their culture into the classroom, and they use their cultural resources to respond to what they see, and oftentimes those responses look to white educators as though the kids are not as able, perhaps naughtier, more resistant, less cooperative. But I like to interpret those as a cultural response to the way school has worked for their people, their community, their mums and dads”.

With the following commentary I am left in no doubt as to the cultural predisposition of mainstream education. Clearly education, as it is constructed through the mainstream, fulfils the reproduction needs of Western society. What I found very informative was the observation that this is exactly what mainstream education represents to those of our cultures where Indigenous life ways and knowledge ways exist in a more visible way, for instance, through language. For mainstream education to be more meaningful for us it cannot dominate and override our own
cultural education. It is noteworthy that we can work positively with mainstream curriculum if we ourselves define the learning context so that it is affirming to our cultural needs and aspirations.

“Well certainly for white society that its whole purpose, particularly reproduction, and generally those in power structure the curriculum to ensure that dominant groups are the ones whose kids succeed. You see it, I guess in most cities, where the kids in the…suburbs, hear in…for instance they’re the classier suburbs…all end up in the Uni of…, all doing law and commerce and medicine and so on, and its that reproduction element. But it’s not perfect though, because it’s a fairly Marxist view, the reproduction bit, and yet there are sufficient examples of kids from the poorer communities and Aboriginal kids and so on ending up at university, including the University of…that the system benefits a whole lot more kids than just the privileged. The difficulty for Aboriginal kids…, some of them, the difficulty is generalising because you have some kids who are very much assimilated in the mainstream, then you go through to the kids from the Northern Territory…, who only speak English when they’re in the classroom, so we’re generalising a bit, but for them the purpose of the school is the reproduction of the dominant culture, and in most cases their own culture is totally neglected. So schools like…and so on provide that quality mainstream education in an environment that meets the needs of the kids so far as their self esteem goes and their sense of belonging, and that sort of thing…They’ve got more control over their own lives and destiny and so on. I think that’s very important”.

Autonomy was acknowledged by this same participant as a major factor for us. I can appreciate that a lot of teachers find it difficult to cope with trying to understand our worldview; so in a certain sense I can see that they suffer within the system as well. In the end it comes back to the Western cultural outlook of mainstream education. I agree there is a great risk that our “kids are going to be alienated”.

“Autonomy is a fairly key element in the life of Aboriginal kids, and if they find that they’re constricted by school they’re not going to be terribly happy, and be part of the drop outs. So there is a benefit in a situation where the kids feel that they are in charge of their own destiny. So I think if you look at Aboriginal schools, in schools where Western culture for them is relatively insignificant, such as in…and so on, and they only take the cultural artefacts without taking the values of language and so on willingly, school doesn’t have a great deal of relevance. What needs to be done is having teachers from the community who teach in a bilingual sort of two-way method that used to operate in the Northern Territory, that I believe they cut funding for as of the late 1990’s, but the kids acquire mainstream culture within the context of their own culture. I remember reading years ago a short story or a tale in a text about a school, a British school in a colony in Africa. The teacher was from the back blocks of Nigeria and was teaching in their own language and the inspector came along and said you’ve got to use English, so the teacher said to the kids, now children, in his own language, we have to use the language of the oppressor, and made it clear to the kids that it wasn’t his choice. I think the difficulty for schools is if you’ve got white teachers in schools with Aboriginal kids you’re not going to be able to understand the context the kids are coming from, you’re not going to be able to interpret the curriculum for them in ways that are meaningful, and the kids are going to be alienated without a doubt”.

There is a strong sense within the following interpretation that mainstream education is utterly locked into the production and reproduction of Western culture. There is
for me a recognisable similarity between what has been said here and the preceding positions. In reading this I felt awed, and challenged at the same time. The racism issue is bigger perhaps than people realise, or care to admit. To a great extent saying “they try to supplant your culture” sums up succinctly what I have long felt through experience. It challenges me in terms of “can you ever change white people”. What we are dealing with here is the system itself, and entrenched attitudes within the system. How do we get around this?

“Educational systems try to reinvent you so you come out as a professional. They try to supplant your culture with their culture. The Aboriginal survivors are those who give them what they want; they live in two worlds successfully. One of the features of academia is competition. Some Aboriginal people can adjust in the system and back in the community, Universities, for example, are about maintaining the status quo. The chance for real innovation is getting less and less. Education systems should be about innovation, but they’re extremely self-promoting and conservative systems. It comes back to racism, non-Indigenous people just cannot see their own practices; they cannot see difference. Good basic theory is student centred learning, the other way its teacher centred. One of the great flaws in white people is they think their own perceptions are the truth. They’re very ignorant of the difference between perception and fact; for example, Aboriginal people are what white people think they are, especially among educators. Perceptions about Aboriginal kids effect how they teach them. Can you ever change white people - it’s a utopian dream. You might have a white teacher that wants to help, but it could still be negative because of racism, and anything that sets up Aboriginal people to be different. How can you change this without a change in the white intellect”.

The role of education as an agent in the production and reproduction of culture is again confirmed in this next response, which draws attention to the role of teachers themselves, as well as curriculum and the learning environment. For many of us when we voluntarily enter into mainstream education as adults we do so to specifically tap into whitefulla knowledge and resources, often so we can take what we want and need back to our own communities. For our kids it’s a different situation. Their identity is still maturing so they are more vulnerable, and often not strong enough to negotiate the learning environment, so they’ll vote with their feet. That we continue to be seen as “static” merely perpetuates ill-informed attitudes about us. “The only way is the white way” says it all really.

“Non-Indigenous people like to see Aboriginal culture as being static. It poses the problem: “well how do we teach Aboriginal people?” They misunderstand the purpose of education. Two-way education was exciting for us because we could have Aboriginal culture and non-Aboriginal culture coming in together, but the students themselves, particularly the Senior Health Workers, pointed out: “we know about the cycad nuts and how to extract the poison, we want to know the whitefulla stuff of being a health worker.” You have to be mindful of how Aboriginal people want the learning environment set-up. Sometimes I had to negotiate the time to teach with them, for example, 7:30 in the morning, so Aboriginal people could go fishing at low tide, and then teaching at night. I reckon you need a level of autonomy to do it.
this way. The role of education is critical in the production and reproduction of culture. What do we do to Aboriginal peoples sense of identity in this situation? It brings me back to treating people with respect and dignity. Any system you engage in, you’re actively up against it because the only way is the white way. There is no magical formula for working with Indigenous people; for example, eye contact in one community might be offensive, but necessary in another. When I was looking at these questions I thought what damage have I done in the classroom?; they’ve helped me reflect on my past practice, they’re really good questions that need to be asked”.

What in your view are the social, cultural and political values that underpin mainstream education?

The following observation verifies that the values of mainstream education are geared toward promulgating the dichotomy of success versus failure. It is apparent that the mainstream values competitiveness; and that competitiveness enables a process of weeding out and stratification. I was very interested in the point that the degree to which our kids deal with this has much to do with whether or not their parents have entered “the professional classes”. What is being pointed out here is that in real terms only a few Indigenous students will ever get through and achieve according to mainstream conceptions of success. For the rest, there is a far greater chance that they will experience school as a negative environment. Values like competitiveness, as well as arbitrary tests that rank and mark the individual, are fundamentally distant to our worldview.

“The values schools pump out sit well with professional families, than say working class families. Those spelling and maths tests are what marks out the extent to whether you’re successful or not. This stuffs brutal, and is happening all the time, on a daily basis. Schools are pretty clear about what they’re doing, and why they’re doing it. It’s about producing winners and losers. It’s all about forming judgements about you, as soon as you have that interaction. Curriculum is shaped to those values and outcomes - success and failure…Aboriginal education needs to be about understanding all of this stuff we’re talking about. It’s about enabling young Aboriginal people to be successful. It’s about Aboriginal people being able to choose what they do beyond school. Unless some Aboriginal kids have parents who enter the professional classes that then shapes quite profoundly how Aboriginal students cope with school, or how they see school helping them achieve what they want to be. However, there are lots of Aboriginal kids who don’t see school as helping them at all”.

This next viewpoint is very much an adjunct to the official versus unofficial curriculum; competitiveness dominates.

“What do schools say to kids officially? They say to them work hard, behave yourself, cooperate, work with each other. Culturally I think…the curriculum is set up to tell kids that they should value other cultures, but the reality is that sometimes it plays out differently. Politically you learn that you’re in competition with other kids; that some kids do well at tests, some kids get rewarded more than others”.
“Unfettered individualism”, it can’t be expressed any plainer. Again that dichotomy of success and failure comes up. Individualism and competitiveness are clearly what perpetuate this dichotomy. These are values that are completely oppositional to our worldview. If our kids go into mainstream education, and can’t succeed because of these values, they are labelled failures.

“I think that the driving value that underpins mainstream education is unfettered individualism. This is a strong value that encourages an outlook that doesn’t take adequate account of our responsibility to others at the family and community level. There is rhetoric about this in some government and religious schools, but only that. The other value that underpins mainstream education is that success at school leads to success in life as a causal effect. This encourages forms of competition amongst peers that works against the type of co-operative and collective development needed for a truly just society. One other value that is significant is that there is a hierarchy of things to be learnt in mainstream education that denies attention to the importance of the emotional, creative, and moral development of students. It is a myth that schools work for everyone. Another value that underpins mainstream education is an overwhelming focus on final products and outcomes, as a result individual students are treated in a deficit way when they can’t achieve the standards set for these products and outcomes. This happens because the focus is not on where the student is, but where they need to be. For many students with backgrounds other than mainstream students this gap can be enormous. Teachers’ failure to move students to more than where they are, to where they need to be, results in a generalised sense of failing by these students. Often the quality required in these assessment tasks has no resemblance to the sorts of literacy or numeracy tasks they might face in their future or have faced in their past”.

Individualism, competition, they come up once more as the dominant values of mainstream education. I was genuinely wowed by the thought that these systems, when underscored by individualism and competitiveness, are aggressive. I hadn’t thought of the impact of values in mainstream education that way before, yet when you think about it aggression isn’t just overt, it can be subtle yet insidious. Think for instance of the psychological trauma of being labelled a failure. When you think about it, that’s aggression. I was wowed too by the notion that the education system is reductionist. That compartmentalisation of knowledge into an ever-decreasing cycle of specialisation, in my view, works against us, and the holistic approach we take, especially with our own knowledge ways.

“Individualism, highly competitive ultimately it gets aggressive. In our education system the successful will always rise to the top, but what about the ones that are thinking differently?, what about the ones with communal knowledge?, what about the big picture people? When a student starts in primary school they have a wide knowledge but school, secondary education and universities keep narrowing it down until it gets specialised, its ‘reductionism’. They don’t accept difference”.

This next response gives quite a different take on this question. Here value is seen in context to knowledge structures, to economic constraints, and the business of
compensating for difference. What stands out for me is that our knowledge ways are obviously too difficult for the mainstream to cope with. That some of us are now looking to take a more individualised approach is interesting. I know about this, sometimes it has to do with shame, of being pointed out as different, for being seen as getting something for nothing, the number crunching exercise of just getting the Aboriginal students through. I think it needs to be remembered that taking an individualised approach, achieving on one’s own merit, doesn’t necessarily mean the psychological purchase of the value of individualism.

“The fact that knowledge can be quantified, measured, and owned, and can only be given validity scientifically, or proven scientifically. This is what happens to Aboriginal knowledge, because it can’t be proven, it becomes marginal, invisible or non-existent. Another value is that there’s only one way of doing things, and knowing things, and that’s our way. Political: we’re heading towards user-pays, tertiary in particular, towards the rich and elite. So it’s becoming increasingly restricted towards the rich and the elite. A level of apathy and ignorance is coming to the forefront in universities. Students just sit there and really don’t care about what you’re teaching them. The diversity of students is starting to change. There’s that emphasis on the individual achieving. What a lot of Aboriginal people are now saying though is that we want to achieve on our own merit, not just because we’re Aboriginal. One of the social or even political values is our need to over compensate, to treat Aboriginal people differently for the wrong reasons, not the right reasons. One of the values that underpin mainstream education is the bank job, the mug and jug where the overall expectation is that the student is the passive recipient of information and the teacher is the expert. Another value is there’s a big divide between theory and practice. Indigenous story telling or narrative isn’t valued”.

Competitiveness, obedience, compliance, and conformity; they stand out in the following commentary as feature values of the mainstream. There is a distinct correlation with this participant’s observation that a high value is placed on the development of students as “useful workers in society” and the earlier observation that highlighted the economic imperative of education. I agree wholeheartedly about how our kids react to the issue of submissiveness. From my own experience I can confirm that once there is a clash between us and a teacher the learning environment becomes hostile for us.

“That’s a curly one; social, the cultural and political values. Mind you it depends on what school you’re in because some schools run cooperative learning, but I think parental expectations quite clearly are that children will perform in certain ways, and competitively as well. That they’ll acquire their learning, and there’s a sense that they’d have to share that with other kids, so the notion of the stronger kids helping the weaker ones academically, a lot of parents oppose that and so there’s this belief, I guess its that competitive urge again, in getting to the top of the pile. What other values are there? Just thinking of the kids initially, what values and so on are they being taught? It’s a curly one, there is so many. I guess obedience is one thing quite clearly, that constructing the kids so that they are able to work in a group in an amenable way so that the kids all perform according to the teacher’s whims, and strong sanctions if they don’t. That they’ll be obedient, they use appropriate language in
the appropriate context and they’ll speak in certain ways of deference and so on, its very important to teachers that the kids respond submissively to the teachers. A child who responds aggressively to the teacher gets the teacher’s back up very quickly. This is a problem for Aboriginal kids of course. They will often regard the way the teacher talks to them as a sign of how they should respond to the teacher and the teacher who shouts at a kid, you would know all about this, the kid shouts back. I’ve seen it, and often the kids get into trouble for not being compliant. So I guess its all designed to construct the kids as useful workers in society who, with a body of knowledge and skills for performing in the workforce and so on, so the strong value placed on literacy, numeracy, knowledge in the subject areas, less value is placed on being able to work cooperatively with others, and I know I’ve contradicted myself because I said earlier that it’s important in some classrooms, but when it boils down to when you get to the final years of schooling the most successful are those who are academically performing. Apart from those, I mean Australia’s society, I don’t think its unique, Americans have the same emphasis on sport as a means of attaining high career achievements so yeh, so one of the cultural elements is sport. Political values, schools tends to be a little left wing, teachers tend to be sort of more labour supporters than liberal supporters, now I’m not sure if that’s what you mean by political values?”

How do the values embedded in the mainstream promote or impede Indigenous cultural identity?

Rightly, identity was highlighted as a major issue for us. There’s no denying that our identity relates to collectivism. Our prioritisation of family and community, and our sisterhood and brotherhood with Indigenous peoples globally attests to this. The question of what is it that we are “prepared to give up?” is confronting. To me this question serves as a wake up call because it makes me think about what we have to compromise in terms of our identity to become successful players in mainstream society. We need to think critically about this for the sake of our children, and the cultural integrity of their identity.

“For Aboriginal people it’s clearly about identity. Its about how you fit in with those other people who are important in a social and cultural sense, like your parents, aunties, uncles and more broadly other people like the strugglers and fighters either here in Australia or overseas. Achievement is a mark for success. I see achieving success as crucial, so whatever happens has to encourage and support identity, and effectively support participation in those structures you have involvement in, including schooling, and those lengthy schooling processes are seen as a positive experience. One of the vicious things about schools is that it makes suppressed people blame themselves, its blame the victim. The key to all this is identity and how Aboriginal people see success and how education can assist them. How do they, or want to, achieve success for themselves or other people? What is it that Aboriginal people are prepared to give up to achieve something?”

To me the following response confirms that the collective nature of our identity is such that it conflicts distinctly with the mainstream’s valuing of individualism. What I found thought provoking was the observation that the promotion of our cultural identity within the mainstream doesn’t necessarily create the necessary bridge between us as Indigenous peoples, and us as learners of mainstream curriculum. I
wasn’t surprised by the basic skills test experience of this participant. It’s the sort of thing we’d do in school, and we’d always get in trouble. For us co-operative learning is collective learning; it supports our sense of identity. Not only that, collectivism is for us a genuine coping mechanism in pressured situations like mainstream schooling. At home we are taught to look after brothers, sisters, cousins and so on. We teach this as a cultural obligation.

“I think at the point of Aboriginal kids needing that kind of mainstream system is that they often see or feel that they’re in another person’s game, and they’re not being particularly successful in that other person’s game. There are lots of examples where I think it culturally interesting about the way the Aboriginal kids that I knew in school responded to the various mainstream situations. I’ll give you an example – the basic skills test. Now they should be set up in a competitive environment with every kid doing their own work. Now if I had those year 6 kids at…and I set them up to do a test sometimes I’d see them, they’d be walking around, looking at each other’s work, they’d be yarning and I’d say, “hey mate what are you doing?” and they’d say, “hey Sir, its me cousin, I’ve gotta help my cousin”, or “its my brother” or “its my friend”. So you’ve kind of got a cooperative mentality, cooperative culture, meeting up against this kind of a test situation…so promotion of cultural identity I think that’s a really important question to explore. I had a student, Indigenous student, two years ago who did a case study of an inner city school. Now this school was a great promoter of Aboriginal identity, in fact it was a priority Aboriginal school…and she said in terms of the promoting of Aboriginal identity the school did an outstanding job, it worked hard to make the kids feel proud, it worked hard to make the kids feel as though their culture was valued. But there became a point where the student as an Aboriginal and the student as a learner separated, so that’s what I mentioned to you earlier, there’s this kind of double track thing that can happen. So here’s a school that promotes Aboriginal identity, but it got to a point where they couldn’t see the relationship between this learner as an Aboriginal kid and this learner as a learner of mainstream curriculum”.

This next observation certainly encapsulates things in a nutshell. When I reflect upon what I have experienced as a student, educator and parent I recognise this at a personal level. It is very true that self-esteem, confidence and the will to try is severely fractured by a negative schooling experience. These detrimental effects don’t magically disappear in adulthood. How often have I come across Indigenous peoples who blame themselves for their negative schooling experiences, and then unwittingly associate that negativity as a causal factor in why they are experiencing a bad social problem. The psychological effect seems, to me, to be profound.

“These values generally act in a negative way on the identity of Indigenous students. I also feel they also act in a negative way on non-Indigenous students. The immediate impact of these values is that they fail to participate in schooling through poor, erratic attendance and finally dropping out. Further down the road this negative experience might restrict the opportunities they might have in further education and training. These negative experiences can lead people to believe they can’t learn while doing enormous damage to their self-esteem in the process. This severely limits the life choices they might perceive they have”.
In the following response this participant gives specific focus to the structural aspects of learning; that formalised classroom set up. This type of set up accommodates well values like individualism and competitiveness. We do seek to learn in different contexts because these different learning contexts sit well with our values, particularly our collectivism and spiritualism.

“The context of learning is constructed to disadvantage Indigenous people. With Indigenous people in general, the learning doesn’t just occur between 9:00 and 3:00. With non-Indigenous people, the bulk of the importance is based on classroom learning. With Indigenous people different learning contexts are valued more significantly. Classroom learning for example, should have a relationship between fishing trips or whatever people do locally; it’s of equal importance to people”.

With this next viewpoint I can see that there’s a definite politics to schools, which emulate the broader class structures of society. It is clear from this that as parents we are less likely to be listened to, let alone have our aspirations acted upon. How can our identity be promoted when the values of the mainstream are so obviously entrenched within a broader social structure that has us at its base?

“Its intriguing that in wealthy schools that teachers defer to the parents and in poor schools the parents defer to the teacher. Teachers expect compliance from them so when you get to Aboriginal schools the parents are given no credence at all. Teachers do exactly as they prefer without any discussion, in many cases despite the parents wishes to the contrary. So one school I worked with over a number of years, the parents have quite clearly outlined what they want from the school and the school has totally ignored them. Now if you have that in some of the…suburb schools here in…where the parents have tremendous influence, the schools defer very markedly to the parents, so the politics underlying schooling is that power resides with those with the status and wealth, and teachers have a perception of where that power is and where it isn’t. Cultural values are of course the dominant ones and it’s very difficult to get teachers to accept that other values are worth involving in the curriculum, so Indigenous and migrant values are cast aside. There are some exceptions as we’ve discussed but in the main the white culture, upper middle class generally, is what takes precedence”.

**Based on your experience do you feel that the Indigenous worldview can realistically find non-tokenistic space within the mainstream?**

The following observation, to me, confirms the importance of community cultural context in education. As I see it, where we form a minority within a school, or where teachers do not respond to our culturally-based educational aspirations, we will always face problems whenever we seek to assert our identity and worldview.

“Yes. At the same time my answer would be tokenistic if it didn’t highlight the resources implications and views of teachers to have this achieved. I have had the privilege to work with educators, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal in the Northern Territory, and while we have been working in the context of an Aboriginal community we are seeing kids reach year 12”.
This next response doesn’t shy away from reality. To begin with, that dual identity issue is something I straddle every day. I guess I can only confirm that what is said here is an accurate assessment based on my own experience. Colonialism has affected all of us in one-way or another.

“The reality is Aboriginal people have to survive in two societies. You have to have dual identities. I saw the ‘two-way philosophy’ breakdown; students at… tried to implement it but came up against non-Indigenous resistance, which led to burnout and frustration. There are Aboriginal people who are headhunted by the system who won’t challenge the system. Its Aboriginal people doing exactly what whitefulla’s have been doing. The nature of colonialism is to get people to turn on their own people. Even today the colonial process is still going on”.

I agree with this next observation in that it’s all about “hearing Indigenous voices”. For our worldview to find non-tokenistic space within mainstream the people within mainstream have to respond in a positive and committed way. I am reminded of the non-Indigenous educators I have met over the years who have worked to do just that. On the other hand, I know only too well, from personal experience, that these educators remain a minority. There are those who do resent, and react negatively, to reforms that advance our cultural needs.

“That’s the main challenge, it’s hearing Indigenous voices to begin with, and allowing them to rightfully occupy the space. A lot of Indigenous space is being colonised. For Indigenous people it’s about reclaiming that space. It’s about sharing that space so no one has their identity compromised. Indigenous worldviews can find non-tokenistic space if we’re committed. It’s an ongoing contested area”.

This next response covers a lot of important ground. Clearly the attitudes of teachers and students alike have much to do with whether or not we find non-tokenistic space within the mainstream. I couldn’t agree more; it is far easier for teachers to concentrate on aesthetics, rather than broaching the social and political realities of our lives. So long as our cultures continue to be pigeonholed as relics of the past, our cultures will never be seen as part of the future. This participant brings the issue of learning context to the fore. Unquestionably we cannot separate from our values and worldview when we enter mainstream education.

“You know I think it can, but you talk about tokenism. I think its easy in schools to promote Aboriginality as a kind of exotic other person stuff. I think it’s kind of easy for schools to kind of let’s go do Aboriginal art, or let’s do Aboriginal stories – you know how the Kangaroo got its tail. It’s much easier to explore that with the kids. Do some dot paintings, you know, whack them up on the wall, beautiful look we do Aboriginal stuff, we’re culturally sympathetic, but to teach year six kids around social and cultural issues at… that’s a much more difficult issue to explore. Talk about land rights, talk about mining in Kakadu you know. I think it’s quite easy, I think for schools to walk into the comfortable Aboriginal
space, but they don’t always walk into the political Aboriginal space. Somebody said to me once when I was teaching at University – we explored the question what do Aboriginal people eat? Well I said what! MacDonald’s, steak, you know – what do people eat? Because the culture is encapsulated, its enclosed, so I think that’s one of the big issues for schools to explore I think, contemporary Aboriginal issues, and for them to understand the way Aboriginal people live today, and how the way they live today is connected to their pre-invasion history, and the post, the colonial history. So I think that those are really important issues I think we sometimes dance around. You cannot escape in all of this stuff…you cannot, in my view, separate the learner, the Aboriginal learner from the school learner. So, those two have got to be strongly in play, you know I’m an Aboriginal learner, this is the way I operate, these are my values, these are community values, these are my family values and they’ve got to interplay strongly with me as a learner of English, mathematics, HSIE, science…found really interestingly that the teachers at the school, which is a good school, the teachers could not see the link between teaching these Aboriginal kids Aboriginal stuff, cultural significantly learning, they couldn’t see the connection between that and the kids learning their literacy. They kind of thought if I make these kids feel good here then they’re going to work well there, but they didn’t see how those two had to really strongly connect, so I think that’s an important point about those two things”.

I was very interested to learn about the bi-dialectal approach mentioned by this same participant. As far as I’m concerned this participant is accurate. Commonly our way of yarning is taken to be poor or bad English, and used to separate us out, and flag us at best as different, but more commonly as linguistically deficient. What is often not understood is that we legitimately use within our conversation our own words, our own terms and phraseologies. When teachers don’t realise this they can easily develop a specific, often negative, picture of us so that we don’t feel valued.

“There’s been some really good work on bi-dialectal learning around…where the schools have appreciated that kids, all Aboriginal people, I probably generalise pretty strongly, but all Aboriginal people speak some form of community English, and that community English varies depending on context, stronger when they’re with their mob, often weaker at school. But sometimes stronger at school, if the kids are excited, or feeling really good, or feeling really cranky. See, when I was a teacher at…I used to know by the different way that the kids spoke to me. If they spoke really strong Aboriginal English to me it meant one of two things; they were feeling either really comfortable with me, you know, “aay Sir”, or they were cranky with me. If they were really close to me they would speak more community, but also if they were really cranky with me because kind of like showing a distance, ‘you’re a whitefulla”, and then I’d have to think ok, their dialect is changing, what is it that I’m learning from the way that they’re speaking to me now. Now that’s a cultural thing and I don’t think many teachers are aware of the fact that these kids are code switching all the time. Every Aboriginal learner is bi-dialectal, they speak a community language, and then they’re involved in speaking standard Australian English, and I think that’s a real challenge that some schools are working towards. Keep in mind Shayne that in the English syllabus, English K-6 at least, that’s primary syllabus, I can’t talk about secondary but I think it’s the case, that Aboriginal English is recognised. But, remember what I said before there is a difference between the formal aspect of it, and the informal, the way it plays out. So as soon as you get teachers who see Aboriginal English as wrong, of inferior worth, then those kids receive a message that their community is not as strongly valued. So I can’t stress enough this kind of importance, you know you can analyse the NSW syllabus and you can see how it is very supportive officially of Aboriginal community and kids, but the pedagogy and the playing out is the really critical thing that needs to be addressed”.

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What I was particularly interested in, in the following commentary was that there are people who are finding that Western values are not necessarily “good for society”, and that maybe our values “would be useful” in responding to this. Even if our worldview cannot be “implemented” within mainstream education at least this participant is optimistic that it can be taught about in a non-tokenistic way. I get the feeling from this that our worldview is something that everyone can benefit from knowing about.

“Whoo, yeh, that’s a hard one. I was only reading about this the other day, how Indigenous worldview is totally neglected and given no credibility at all. I think its in…book on Aboriginal history, I can’t remember the exact title but…wrote it, and how in the invasion Indigenous perspectives were totally ignored. I was thinking could society be re-constructed to adopt the worldview of shared values and spirituality, the perceptions that the world isn’t made for humans to manipulate, but for people being a part of nature and so on. I think that might be fairly difficult to implement, to achieve, but to teach that these worldviews exist, I think it’s quite feasible, so the implementation of them at a functional level I’d say is probably unrealistic to hope for because the dominant cultural values of white people are embedded in everything. But by the same token there are a lot of people saying that these values are not good for society, and a different set of values would be useful, and so to teach Indigenous worldviews on alternative ways of interacting with the world might be useful. It might contribute to a change, and certainly in the Aboriginal Studies curriculum here in…that’s all incorporated in a non-tokenistic way…We’ve just constructed a stream of studies, core Indigenous studies, and students who take that unit will be exposed to that content solidly, and I guess it would be in a non-tokenistic way. The mere fact that the…has gone ahead and produced this course of study is an indication that they are willing to construct a non-tokenistic course for students”.

The reality though, as this same participant noted, in terms of finding non-tokenistic space is that many schools don’t really attempt to teach about our worldview in a way that moves beyond the concept of our cultures as enduringly ‘primitive’. Again we come back to the teachers. If they lack the cultural insight necessary to interpret authentically our worldview through their teaching they could, unknowingly, do more harm than good. As I see it, the ones that do take it on can come up against a lot of difficulties. For instance, they might get conflicting perspectives on what culture is from Aboriginal people within the local community, or they could come up against ridicule from their own peers. The other issue here is entirely similar to one raised earlier, that the contemporary politics of our survival, our self-determination, needs to be an essential component of curriculum.

“There’s no question that there’s so many schools that do nothing, as you say they do NAIDOC once a year and that’s it. But a lot of primary schools have Aboriginal studies content in the curriculum, and the difficulty is it’s taught by non-Indigenous teachers. Any teachers who aren’t really immersed in the culture they’re teaching, you just loose so much because you don’t have that worldview so you can’t understand it. The other thing of course is what do you teach if you’re teaching Indigenous studies? While the traditional is
attractive to white people, current political issues and debates are probably what’s causing
difficulty for Indigenous people and I think that’s what ought to be taught. Present
Indigenous views on society and progress and all this ought to be part of that curriculum, and
so you’re sort of starting at 1965, the bus trip out to the community NSW, the freedom rides,
and go on from there with the politics of it. I think that’s necessary for non-Indigenous kids
to understand, that it’s been a hard fought battle for Indigenous people to get out of the
oppression they experienced from about the 1880’s to the 1960’s, the position hasn’t
changed simply because some do-gooder has gone, oh well we’ll give Indigenous peoples
equal rights now, its been a battle all the way”.

7.3 Dialoguing Research Theme No.2

What are your views on the effectiveness of Indigenous educational policy in
redressing Indigenous educational disparity and culture conflict with the
mainstream?

As you will read in the following commentary, when policy is ineffectively
implemented it becomes rhetoric. Just putting money behind policy doesn’t
automatically ensure the success of policy. The key issue here is not so much the
effectiveness or otherwise of policy, it is more to do with the quality of education
itself. Quality education is for this next participant culturally inclusive education.
On a personal level I agree strongly with the need for student centred learning. I’m
not surprised though that the ‘blame the victim’ issue is again raised in terms of our
education. In particular, I connect with the observation that we are treated according
to how others perceive us to be. I have experienced first hand this form of
typecasting, and it usually results in being assumed to be of limited intellectual
ability. As a blackfulla you’re always under scrutiny.

“It’s a scatter gun approach. All they’re doing is throwing money at a problem and hoping
for the best. Policies are failing miserably. Education is a basic human right. As long as we
keep thinking on things as an Aboriginal problem and not a human rights problem, we will
keep on ‘blaming the victim’. Quality education must be student centred so it adheres to the
culture of the student. We don’t get it; each one is an individual and learns differently.
There are generic principles, but we continue to fail Aboriginal students because we treat
them as what we think an Aboriginal person is. If I offered either a quality education or an
Aboriginal education, I would go for quality because it would naturally encompass
Aboriginal education. It’s an absolute paradox”.

There are significant similarities between this next reflection on policy and the
preceding one. Both suggest to me that at the end of the day policy is easily reduced
to rhetoric, though with this response the issue of adequate resources was seen as
imperative. The questions posed by this participant are extremely pertinent.
Indigenous education is without doubt complex, but as it was said words like ‘disadvantage’ do just put us into a ‘box’.

“I have a problem with policy anyway. Policy’s a numbers game; it’s about resources allocation. The system views policy as the means to an end. So the problem when you’ve got specific policies aimed at specific groups is: the history of policy aimed at Aboriginal people. We’re living with the consequences. How can a particular policy redress and fix up very complicated issues? How can one policy fix up all the complexities of education?, for example the issue of representation. How do you effectively represent a very very small percentage of the population with the highest percentage of problems? How can you address the huge need of a statistically small group when resources are allocated on a per capita basis? There’s a challenge for any policy when there’s not a level playing field. I don’t like the word ‘disadvantage’ because it’s like putting people in a little box”.

This next participant also looks to the issue of resources allocation, but definitely gives me the impression that resources are only ever as good as how they are used. In the first response to this question it was pointed out that just throwing money at policy doesn’t make the policy work in practice. It takes will, effort and planning to spend wisely. I was impressed with the idea of a comprehensive in-service training and follow-up. I take the point that in a practical sense it will increase the likelihood of change amongst teachers, but that equally demonstrates to me that there are many teachers who still have entrenched ideas about us. In reality the effectiveness of policy lies in the hands of staff at the school level.

“Well, I think that in a lot of respects policy is only as good as the resources the department puts into redressing or implementing the policy. So if the policies made, it can sit on the shelf and nothing happen because no resources are made available. For Indigenous ed. policy to be implemented there needs to be a lot of training for teachers. Here in…I’m not sure what the situation is elsewhere, all teachers have to go through a professional development on racism…and another package, so that when they’re teaching Aboriginal kids they understand what’s going on, and I think that is of benefit. The problem is one-day professional development programmes with a large group are pretty ineffective in achieving behavioural change amongst teachers. If you want to change them you’ve got to have an ongoing approach, a sort of action research way, where they are working with new materials, and at the same time their performance is being monitored so that they know they have to perform. This is all in the literature on changing practices, you know…and all that, because if you don’t apply any pressure to the teachers to change he or she will see no urgency in the matter and just retain old ways, but if you put pressure on them that they know that they’re, being, assessed is the wrong word, but they know that their performance is being observed and there is this pressure to conform to the expectations of those above them, they’re much more likely to change. The other thing you need is rewards for change. If it’s just hard grind teachers are less likely to embark on it, if they can see there’s some benefits for them, whether it’s in more time to make the changes, support for it, rewards at the end of it then they’re more likely to make it. So the policy itself will be singularly ineffective unless resources are put to making the change. So any policy is only as good as the efforts to implement it”.
There is to me a definite connection between the following analysis and the discussion of the issue of citizenship in Theme 1. My impression is that unless the hard social and political issues of our society are tackled within schools the effectiveness of policy will be compromised. In terms of us as Indigenous peoples struggling for the continuity of our cultures NAIDOC and flags aren’t enough to say that policy has been properly implemented. In my experience policy has done very little to significantly change insidious attitudes toward us. So is policy effective?, not on it’s own, not if it sits on a shelf and never gets read, or doesn’t get taken seriously enough to incite genuine reform. As it was pointed out in Theme 1 you can get one person trying earnestly to implement policy but what happens if their efforts are ignored, distained, or there’s no cooperation?

“In terms of question one I think we’ve got a long way to go. I think we’ve got a long way to go in Australian society generally. We’re having race riots down on the beaches between Anglo’s and Lebanese, and yet these kids have been going to school where their teachers have been telling them about multicultural Australia. One of the problems that you get is that, especially with Aboriginal policy, is a lot of the schools and teachers, I think, think that it’s only relevant to schools that have a majority or significant numbers of Aboriginal kids or it can be quite tokenistic and it can just be the Aboriginal day, or NAIDOC week or whatever, paintings on the wall. It’s not strongly taught. What schools would have gone after the race riots in Cronulla, and taught with the kids about an analysis of that, about how minority Lebanese youth are feeling in the wake of everything that’s happening in the world, with attacks on Muslims and so on. That’s the kind of thing that Indigenous people have been having to deal with since 1788, the fact they’re not valued, that they’ve been treated as second-rate citizens, many of them. In my opinion it helps you to understand how and why kids, community people feel dispirited, or resistant; not happy when things are going, you know, not seeming to go as well as people think they should. So, I think education has got a really important part to play, but I think education can only play an important part if it has the kids involved in the difficult, strong, powerful political issues, and it’s done in a way that doesn’t kind of separate out one group from the other. So if there’s a community response - so here I am in this school, I’m an Anglo Australian, my mates an Aboriginal Australian, and my other mates are Muslim Australian or whatever, and hey we’ve got a community responsibility to think about this and we have to work together. I can’t see how education has not got to be the answer, but we all know that education is at the same time part of the answer and the problem, don’t we. It’s there to solve things, but in fact it’s also creating other pedagogical and social issues”.

**Based on your experience does the theory of Indigenous educational policy realistically translate into practice at the classroom level?**

Governments can produce as many policies as they like, but if a policy isn’t implemented effectively it’s wasted. The question is how can the effectiveness of policy be measured at the classroom level?

“Well, I don’t know whether the theory of Indigenous educational policy has impacted strongly in the classrooms. I don’t see, I think there’s been a lot of really powerful research conducted into Indigenous education in the last four years in Australia, and I’m not sure how much impact that’s had on classroom pedagogy. I did a review of literature for the English
7-10 syllabus, NSW syllabus, before it was written, finalised for the Board of Studies through the Aboriginal unit, and we made a number of recommendations about the way Aboriginal Studies should have been embedded into the policy – based on theory, based on the way Aboriginal kids learn, issues around literacy and language. In the end I don’t know how much impact, in reality how many teachers really know where the kids are coming from or what are the important things to talk about. I don’t know how strong theory’s impacted”.

One thing that strikes me in reading this next viewpoint is that we ourselves, as you will have gathered from the tone of my work, actively assert our cultural distinctness. For me it’s not so much an issue of difference per se, but rather a question of how we are portrayed as different, and for that matter who portrays us as different.

“It’s not the theory of Indigenous education, ‘it’s my theory’. Educators have their personal theories about what an Indigenous person is. It’s the flaw, people believe what an Indigenous person is, not as human first. It’s so dehumanising not to acknowledge you as a human first. They’re teaching the Indigenousness of the person, not the humanist. You are always being studied as to how different you are, but not what the similarities are. We’re always looking at that small 5% of how we’re different not the other 95% that makes us the same. Learning by observation for example is no different to non-Indigenous people. You’re always observed as objects absolutely. We refuse to look at what’s the same all the time. Non-Indigenous people in education in particular are the same, they have the same view”.

What I felt most about this next response was that we may never really know how many teachers are out there struggling to implement change for us. Clearly there is significant opposition to the implementation of Indigenous policy at the level of practice, and that opposition is not just expressed through a lack of cooperation, it is equally expressed through a lack of resources, and proper evaluative measures.

“Not easily, and not often. For example, with the Indigenous Tertiary Assistance Scheme (ITAS), we wanted to get some intensive group work going, but we had to do it one-on-one. The National Education Policy for me?, but how do you translate the rhetoric into reality on the ground? How do you get to walk the line so people don’t pass the buck as if it’s just an Aboriginal problem? Some non-Indigenous people say: it’s not for me to do, or not my problem. The National Aboriginal Health Strategy is a classic; it died in the arse because it was chronically under-resourced. A lot of the current Indigenous policies are good but how do you implement and evaluate these policies?”.

In the following observation it was pointed out, very importantly, that there is a problem with policy when it is constructed at a level that is remote from the classroom. In effect, creating policy at a remote level disenfranchises teachers, parents and students alike. As this participant interestingly noted if policy were to be constructed at the local level, and accompanied by curriculum content, there would be a far greater chance that policy would be implemented within the classroom.
“It depends, if the policy is constructed from the bottom up then it’s going to be implemented in the classroom because the teachers have been influential in deciding it, but most policies come from the top and are made by expert committees who decide what’s a good thing, and it may not have the structures and processes in place for the teachers to implement it at the classroom level. But if the policy is constructed along with a whole set of classroom activities that teachers can engage in to implement the policy, that content, knowledge and skills, attitudes and values that have to be promoted within the policy then it could be realistically translated, but once again it’s a sort of subset of the first question. The translation depends on the process of policy construction and the process of policy implementation, so the need for resources, and as I say if the teachers are involved from the bottom up constructing policy at the school level its more likely to be implemented at the school level”.

This same participant goes on to discuss the role of teachers in terms of the implementation of policy at the classroom level. If teachers are unaware that an Indigenous education policy exists, if they carry personal attitudes that are “basically racist”, then the translation of policy into practice realistically is unachievable. From this commentary I can see that the effectiveness of policy is very much dependent upon the disposition of teachers.

“The implementation of policy really depends on many factors. The individual attitudes of teachers towards the importance of the issue I think is a huge one so if you’ve got teachers who are basically racist to start with you haven’t got much hope, you need a massive effort to change attitudes and typically departments of education don’t have the resources to do that. Most teachers wouldn’t know that there’s an Aboriginal education policy, and if they know it they would discount it because there are more important things to tend to, but there has been as massive change even so because more Aboriginal kids are staying at school and they’re succeeding and they’re finding more teachers who are supportive. So I guess it’s a generational thing for teachers to change their attitudes, and as they get content in university and before they go out teaching and they get professional development in schools, particularly schools with a lot of Aboriginal kids, they carry the knowledge they acquire in those Aboriginal schools into schools with fewer Aboriginal kids but still have some. I know schools in the metro area where there have been teachers I’ve met out in the bush in remote Aboriginal community schools and they’ve come into the city, they still work with the kids in much more effective ways than other teachers who haven’t that experience and so on. But things are changing; it’s not all doom and gloom. But the realistic translation into practice at classroom levels in part will depend upon the urgency which the teachers regard the policy, so if they’re teaching in a metropolitan high school with one Aboriginal kid in their class its highly unlikely that they’ll give much credence to it, but if they’re teaching out at…or another remote community, or…where there’s a lot of Aboriginal kids in the class the urgency of it will impress upon them and they’re more likely to say well what do we do here?”

In what context do you foresee a genuine Indigenous curriculum and Indigenous pedagogy emerging?

What can I say; the Western system of education is all encompassing. My first reaction with the following observation is to feel overwhelmed. What this viewpoint clarifies for me is that whatever we do it’s going to be opposed by someone or
another. It also clarifies for me that our best hope for a culturally based education lays outside the mainstream.

“We’ve been doing education for 500 years now, it’s very similar, but I don’t think it will happen. You’re trying to change a very powerful system. Your study could change the way education systems do things but there will be resistance. My question is: it would be interesting to see if some Indigenous initiatives are still holding true to their original principles? I wonder if... is still holding true to its vision? Specialist Indigenous support programs and centres around the country are being shut down, they’re under pressure because of financial constraints. It’s coming from the Federal government. I’m confronted by: if you give Indigenous people special support you’re confronted by equity issues—comments like ‘it goes against university equity policies’. It’s the structural racism. The paradox will always be government policy, will their policy allow it to happen”.

For this next participant the answer rests on negotiation. That means both sides coming to the table to work things out in a positive and constructive spirit. I agree having “black faces” up front can just be a ruse. If we are used for window dressing only, nothing is really negotiated; it comes back to that issue of tokenism. I feel connection with this point having been used as an upfront black face myself.

“Pockets of Indigenous pedagogy” are important but, as is pointed out here, it is done in the face of resistance, as a form of counter-resistance.

“This is a great question. The context is going to have to be negotiated. It’s going to have to be a partnership agreement. There has to be equity in the negotiation and delivery, not just black faces up front of the classroom. There has to be an environment, which is based on a framework of cultural safety, where people are treated with respect and dignity and build from there so people can come into a particular context without compromising their identity. It’s not going to happen until you get that sort of context. There are pockets of Indigenous pedagogy all over the place, but it’s not systemic and it’s despite the current context rather than being due to it. It’s a form of resistance rather than something they’re allowed to do or be encouraged to do, but it’s not wide spread”.

The following observation in a very fundamental way says that there is a context, a cultural context to education, and that context is absolutely vital in determining the forms of education that are sustainable. For Indigenous curriculum and pedagogy to really find space within an education structure, that education structure has to be contextualised within our own worldview. I can’t help but be impressed with what this participant has had to say.

“Well definitely in schools with all Aboriginal/Indigenous kids and where the community is traditionally oriented because teachers realise that they’ve got to do something different. What they’ve been doing all their teaching careers so far is not going to work, so its pressure on the teachers to fit in with an existing situation rather than taking say a school where you’ve got a minority of Indigenous kids and implementing an Indigenous curriculum there. To the teachers Indigenous kids can often be invisible, they discount them by saying they’re basically assimilated and so they don’t have any of their culture left etc, and in that way they can just say failure to succeed is due to a host of other factors basically located in the family,
and that way they don’t have to move out of their comfort zone. There are exceptions, if you’ve got a principal whose aware of the needs and expectations of Indigenous kids, or you’ve got a teacher who understands where they’re coming from you can get appropriate curriculum and pedagogy, but that’s often an individual thing. To make it a systemic thing it’s going to be very difficult. So, in…it’s the remote community schools where this is more likely to happen or Independent Aboriginal community schools in…The schools are run by the communities and they dictate what they want in the curriculum, and so they’re much more likely to have a relevant curriculum. So the context I think is Indigenous control or Indigenous dominance. The teachers might not regard the Indigenous communities say at…as dominant over them, but the fact that they are the minority and they’re overwhelmed by what to them would be a very different culture and way of life and everything, they’re more likely to think I’ve got to adapt my teaching to fit in with this”.

**What do you perceive are the main areas of concern and the main obstacles to Indigenising educational programming so that it realistically empowers Indigenous cultural advancement?**

As this next participant pointed out the first challenge for us is to define what we consider success to be. This participant is completely right; we will still come up against “Western benchmarks for success”. That numerical ranking system only serves to stratify us in a Western way. It is a major obstacle, that’s for sure.

“What's the criteria for success? It’s where policy comes into it. What is Indigenous criteria for success? Are they going to use the same criteria, ‘numbers’? Government policy will be the main obstacle by setting Western benchmarks for success rather than Indigenous benchmarks for success”.

To say the least Indigenising educational programming is a highly complex issue, it does come down to the question of how it can be done. It’s a hard one all right, as is asserted in this next response.

“I think there is all too often a lack of understanding in regards to this. A lot of people would think to have some black faces in there or a case study. They don’t understand contested knowledges. They focus on content rather than process. You have to talk about the history and the politics. The debate we will still need to have is, how do we do this? Do you integrate Indigenous issues throughout the curriculum or do you have stand alone courses and subjects, or Indigenous specific, or a mix?”.

This next participant has given a very comprehensive and thought provoking analysis in regard to this question. One thing that caught my attention was the issue of success. In heralding success I think the most important thing to remember is that for us that can be shame unless it is done culturally. Now that might sound over the top to a non-Indigenous reader, but to us being singled out for attention, be it good or bad, is through our eyes shame. This is for us success on whitefulla’s terms.

“Kids have got to feel valued as an Aboriginal person, they’ve got to feel valued as a learner as well…it’s that separation of those two things, but I think they’ve got to see that their teachers know where they’re coming from. I think they’ve got see that their teachers value
their community, they’ve got to believe that they can learn how to read and write, they’ve got to be, the successful kids at the school, have got to be held up for their success in a community way…not the big singling out. I think we make the mistake of kind of when we’ve got successful kids of holding certain kids out as being the champions, and not seeing that everybody can do well, and everybody’s in it together. It’s not about one person beating the other. So I think you’ve got obstacles about a competitive environment, you’ve got obstacles to deal with in terms of kids being literate, you’ve got obstacles to deal with in terms of teachers and systems understanding of what powerful Aboriginal education is about, and not just kind of romanticising it and trivialising it. You’ve got obstacles in showing the kids that no matter what their interests are or what their needs are they’re going to be looked after. If they start to get into trouble, or fall through the cracks, that there’s going to be someone who supports them and looks after them, who works for them…I think the significant obstacle, I think you’ve got to overcome I think boils down to the teacher’s attitude and the teacher’s pedagogy. I don’t think it’s an easy task Shayne”.

Without doubt teacher attitudes and pedagogy are for us a concern as this same participant has gone on to say. Certainly teachers may not be fully conscious that through their practice they may be doing more harm than good. For me the whole business of teaching has a lot to do with cultural context, in our case a cultural context that serves our identity and cultural aspirations. It’s true unless our kids feel valued as Indigenous peoples within the mainstream they will always feel like they’re outsiders.

“Paul Willis, the great resistance theorist…said famously “there is no one who oppresses so much as he who does it with an honest heart”. A lot of teachers feel as though they are well meaning, but they haven’t gone back to an understanding to what’s happening in their classroom. Now…teacher, in that visibility invisibility article, was…considered to be the best teacher in the school. Now…analysis showed that she wasn’t a good teacher, but teachers in my study in the…those teachers were well meaning teachers; they were trying incredibly hard. Trying hard is not good enough, you’ve got to, I say you’ve got to have your heart in the right place, but you’ve got to have your head in the right place as well, if you don’t have the two connected its not going to work. So your right there’s a lot of well meaning people doing harm to kids, they think they’re doing a good job keeping them disciplined, keeping them quite, keeping them under control, you know I’ve got 27 kids in my class and they don’t muck up. Well so what if they’re not learning, so what if they go to high school and they’re going to just muck up, so what if they don’t have the skills to be able to carry forward into their community. So teachers have got to really project into the future and think what these kids need. What they need – they need to be valued, they need to be proud, they need to have a strong self concept, they need to be literate, literacy has got to be one of the most important things that these kids need, and teachers have to be there on the journey with them”.

With this next commentary I gain a strong sense of the tensions that exist within school communities. What teachers do and how they do it certainly doesn’t escape the watchful eye of parents themselves. In my own experience I am aware of education staff, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who have tried to ensure that our cultures are represented in curriculum and school activity only to experience a
backlash of objection from non-Indigenous parents. It creates a serious dilemma in
the school community because it creates a divide between one set of parents and us.
As this participant so rightly pointed out “it’s the racist parents who are going to be
most strident in their opposition”. So we face obstacles from within the school itself
in the form of teacher attitudes, and more broadly in the form of parent attitudes.

“Well the main areas of concern are teacher change because they’re the ones who implement
any curriculum, and if you don’t change the teachers it’s not going to happen. So we know
what works, we’ve known for years what works, in terms of appropriate programming, we
know what works to empower kids, its been known for years, so knowledge isn’t a barrier,
the stuff’s all there; its basically getting systems, principals, schools and teachers to
implement it. In a remote community school where they’re all Aboriginal kids the
implementation is simple because you haven’t got a power clique of non-Indigenous parents
who would be critiquing what the school teaches. Where you get the implementation of
Indigenous curriculum in white schools with a minority of Aboriginal kids it becomes a
process of empowering the Aboriginal kids, possibly at the expense of white kids, then
you’ve got a power struggle, and that’s when the parents start writing to the minister and
their local member of parliament, berating the principal, withdrawing their kids and using all
the efforts to win a power struggle. So I guess what I’m saying is the teachers first of all
need to change so that’s one obstacle, but also the dominant culture is the other obstacle. In
many schools they’re going to resist very strongly any change to what they see is the benefits
and advantages their kids get. It’s the racist parents who are going to be most strident in
their opposition to those changes and you know you can’t convince them, they believe firmly
in their own values and refuse to accept that there might be alternatives, so its an uphill
battle. The obstacles are teacher change and the white parent resistance. I guess to
overcome that teachers need massive community action and massive teacher professional
development”.

7.4 Additional Commentary Informing the Dialogue

In opening my dialogue with one non-Indigenous participant I said, “you know what,
when we first had a phone conversation what you said was really poignant stuff and I
sort of got excited because part of my study is to help my people, but a lot of it is
about my own development as well, and I’ve learnt a lot from people like yourself.
When I was working at… I worked under the supervision of a Senior Research Fellow
he worked at…for a while, plus he was an acting deputy principal down at …school
as well. So I gained a lot of insight into school systems just working with him, but
I’m sure that there are other people such as yourself who have different kinds of
insight into mainstream education systems”. I then went on to talk about my views
on independent education. I noted that, “a lot of my own people too, they might not
necessarily agree with anything independent…”. I told this participant how I could
understand that, but that I nonetheless felt that they were perhaps, “…not looking at
it more critically because as you say the Western system has been very dominant”,

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meaning that Western society dominates through, “…promoting their own values and culture”.

In response I was told, “it depends though, you can have say a…[Indigenous] school in…and that’s a school for all Aboriginal kids and yet it has a very mainstream curriculum and achieves high standards”. I found this observation very poignant because it highlighted to me that its not just about curriculum reform, its about context. “So if you have a mix of cultural appropriateness in teaching mainstream stuff you haven’t got the worries of mixing with white kids, there might be tensions there and feelings of discomfort among the Aboriginal kids, and that makes a difference in having your own school. I know kids up at…they didn’t like going to the district clothes school [school with a uniform] because they felt uncomfortable there, particularly the kids from the community. There were several groups of town kids and there were kids from the community, but the ones from the community near …they had there own school in another location, … school, and they enjoyed going there because it eased concerns of having to have a school uniform and shoes and everything, it didn’t matter at…I think that it is really important, if kids don’t feel comfortable at school they’re not going to go, or if they do go they’re going to feel overwhelmed by it all”.

I felt encouraged that this participant could see why I am so interested in independent education. This participant went on to say, “so separate schools have a variety of functions. One is to teach culture but another is to enable the kids to be comfortable with their own group of relations and so on. So, separate schooling, I see nothing wrong with it if the kids are going to stay at school, and as you say not drop out at year 9”. I then said, “yeh, and you know what, I think…because a lot of Aboriginal people like other people in Australian society are led to believe that if your child is to become successful or to achieve in Western society they have to do well at school. I think there is that element of fear there, and I don’t know how you get around that because its well and truly entrenched in people’s minds but mainstream school is failing all kids it doesn’t discriminate whether you’re Aboriginal or not, a lot of kids drop out for one reason or another”. This participant agreed, “yes quite right”, so I moved on to say, “yet parents and other people still have this hope that things will get better. They’ll be waiting a long long time because sometimes these systems are
set up to maintain the status quo, and in my mind that’s how they reproduce their
culture by not changing it at all”.

We moved on with our dialogue but eventually got sidetracked on the subject of
teachers. This participant said, “I feel sorry for them, white teachers in remote
Aboriginal schools because they really are alienated from the community”, to which
I responded, “yeh, and they seem to be overloaded from their own people too”. I
told this participant how, “I’ve come across a few schools where non-Indigenous
teachers have tried to implement programs for Indigenous students and they come up
against racist attitudes from their own peers”. This participant agreed, “oh indeed,
I’ve seen that often”. So I said, “and that’s another reason why I think Indigenous
people themselves should be at least looking at an alternative to mainstream because
mainstream is just fraught with problems of all kinds”. This participant replied,
“mind you, if you’ve got Indigenous teachers teaching mainstream culture to
Indigenous students you’ve got the reverse problem that their interpreting a culture
that they might not be entirely familiar with, and misinterpreting it. You probably
need a mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers working with the kids. I think
that was the N. T. model, two teachers sharing the class and teaching jointly”.

Further along in our dialogue we were again diverted, this time by the matter of how
our cultures are trivialised within the mainstream. I remarked, “and the culture too,
schools are responsible for this as well, it’s been trivialised”, to which this
participant replied, “oh yes, spears and boomerangs, definitely”. I couldn’t have put
it better because I have come across this so often. I said, “but you know when
Indigenous kids go to a mainstream school and they’re exposed to that stuff it makes
them feel less Aboriginal in some cases”. This participant agreed, “oh, it’s an
embarrassment”. Now that doesn’t mean that our kids are not proud of their
cultures, but when the only aspects of our cultures spoken about in the classroom are
the exotic or primitive that’s what happens. I reiterated, “well yeh, it shames them
you see, and how can they possibly learn in an environment that shames them?”. My
remarks met with agreement. “Yes, it is appalling”. I moved on to say, “and all
these issues when I’m talking about an alternative education process need to be
considered.” It is in an alternative context that I see our children learning all aspects
of our cultures without fear of derision, in a context that will enhance their pride.
I commented, “anthropologists too, they’ve had a lot to do with the way that our cultures have been exoticised and trivialised...In the past it was actually schools who were using a lot of this material and I think a lot of it’s still around myself”. This participant then noted, “in a lot of respects it’s a hindrance to progress because the relevance of the physical culture isn’t there any more, the spears and boomerang stuff, while it’s romantic it doesn’t contribute at all to improving the position of Indigenous people, and it maintains in white eyes the notion that Aboriginal people are boomerang throwers and that sort of stuff, and I’d say counter productive”. I agreed, “and the main statement there is that as long as non-Aboriginal society continues to depict us as being primitive peoples, and as long as our young fulla’s are exposed to that sort of attitude there will never be a place for us in modern Australia, and they’ll think we just belong to the past and think we have no place in the present, or no place in the future as well. Another thing it does, and this is powerful, is that it makes people believe, including many Aboriginal people...that our culture is dead, that it died...but our cultures are not dead”.

Our conversation moved onto the survival of our values. This participant rightly pointed out, “well you see the values persist and they’re things that are taught from a very early age and they persist”. This then prompted me to say, “and that’s why my thesis is based around values because I feel they’ll make a very strong foundation for a curriculum and a pedagogical approach to teaching...I don’t believe our cultures, even out this way, our cultures are dead or static. I think it’s quite dynamic...its sort of still evolving, it just doesn’t look like it did prior to 1788”. Rightly this participant observed that, “…there are bodies of knowledge that have gone but the values that pervaded the whole of society are much more likely to persist”. I couldn’t agree more. I said, “yeh well that’s right, that’s exactly right, our collective values, our sense of collectivism is something that the European culture has never been able to destroy...I’m trying to teach my own people not to think that their culture is dead because an anthropologist said so, but to look more critically at what anthropologists say and to think deeply about what’s happened to us historically and socially, and that our ways of identifying the existence or the survival of what’s left of our cultural heritage and that, and you work with what you’ve got.”
When we got on to talking about policy we became preoccupied with the sheer volume of policies that teachers are expected to cope with. I observed that, “the trouble with all mainstream schools is that they’re being bombarded by all kinds of policies”. This participant explained, “oh yeh, that’s true so let’s get into the real world here. They’re implementing half a dozen new programs, or curricula or all sorts of things at any one time and they’re probably fighting industrial disputes and everything else as they do, so they prioritise and then the Indigenous education policy might be at the bottom of the pile, after the new maths syllabus or the new language syllabus or whatever. So they’re less concerned with making sure it works and then there might be disciplinary issues in the school that they’re more concerned with, I don’t know”. I replied, “they’ve just got higher priorities in most cases than just dealing with Indigenous, or the implementation of Indigenous policy. But Aboriginal Studies as well that’s another subject that has to compete with the core subjects of the schools, particularly at the secondary level. When it comes to funding too they usually or most often miss out”.

Bringing up Aboriginal Studies when we were talking about policy proved interesting. This participant noted that,“ in a lot cases the policies should relate to things like behaviour management and dress codes and language and so on, and so that it’s not necessarily curriculum content they’re teaching so much as the presence of the kids in the school and how they are interacted with by the teachers. Often teachers go about their way without any effort to implement policies, cultural acceptability for the kids so that they shout at the kids, they speak down to them, they treat them differently from the non-Aboriginal kids in discipline issues and so you don’t get that social justice that is essential if the kids are going to feel comfortable in the school and continue. In that sense policy doesn’t translate into practice for many teachers because they think they know best. I’ve observed a principal who’s actually studied Aboriginal Studies doing things that directly offend Aboriginal people and I don’t know if it was deliberate but their behaviour was quite offensive and this was a person who had the knowledge to work in appropriate ways, and chose not to do so”.

With the other participant our additional conversation surrounded the third question for Theme 2. I was asked, “what do you mean genuine Indigenous curriculum?” I
responded, “well, since curriculum concerns knowledge, I’m talking about knowledge, Indigenous knowledge as an entity of its own”. This participant then asked, “so you say that would be different from the Aboriginal education policy”, to which I replied, “well, with the education policy, it’s looking at mainstream systems here,...the successful implementation of the policy is completely reliant upon the non-Indigenous people in those systems to make sure it’s implemented at all the different levels in the system, but here I’m talking about a genuine”. This participant interjected, “that could only be taught by an Aboriginal person?” It was a strong question, but one I really needed more time to think about. To keep our conservational flow I just ended up saying, “someone asked me that question once before. It would probably be ideal if an Indigenous person had the responsibility of teaching it. However I’m aware that there’s a lot of non-Indigenous people who are very capable of doing the same”.

In our conversation I wanted to acknowledge that I was aware of many non-Indigenous teachers who do try to teach Indigenous curriculum by broaching issues like land rights, social justice and our contemporary histories. Although I did not clarify this at the time I must stress here that these are the aspects of Indigenous curriculum that I envisage non-Indigenous teachers would be able to support. My concern, and impetus for this research question, is my view that non-Indigenous teachers cannot bring into the Indigenous learning context the same cultural insight that we have. Teaching the spiritual aspects of our knowledges for example would really have to come from us. This participant challengingly said, “I guess the question you’ve got to ask is: can Indigenous kids only be successfully taught by an Indigenous person? That’s the trick question, isn’t it, if the answer is yes, they can only be, then does that mean apartheid, does that mean that we don’t bring the Aboriginal kids and non-Aboriginal kids together in our community”. I replied, “to some people it could be seen as apartheid but for some other people it could be seen as autonomy so I suppose it’s debatable in that regard, isn’t it?”.

I felt thrown for a moment as I collected my thoughts about the issue of apartheid. For me it’s about autonomy, but I acknowledge that there are other Indigenous peoples who see things differently, and would prefer to persist with the mainstream. This participant went on to ponder the point. “Would it be possible to have a school
where all kids regardless of whether they’re Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal can be taught mainly in an Aboriginal way, but what would that look like? What would, how would an Aboriginal school operate? Would it be different from the white school? Would there be no testing? Would it be literate?” I was momentarily surprised. I needed more time to think about these questions so I just said, “that’s a big question isn’t it”. This participant then went on to observe, “yeh, because we’ve already said that culture is dynamic, culture is not static, even though Aboriginal people have got this long history, a history for the last 200 odd years its been involved with another culture, and Aboriginal kids today are operating differently no doubt than the Aboriginal kids operated 20 years ago, or 250 years ago”.

In many ways I see an Indigenous curriculum and Indigenous pedagogy as being more socially responsive. I responded, “I’m pretty sure there’s a lot of working class kids that would probably be more responsive to an Indigenous curriculum than a formal mainstream one”. This participant agreed, “I agree, I think working class kids would perhaps be more strongly advantaged by more chances for sharing, more chances for working cooperatively, more chances to not be involved in a struggle with their teachers. I think teachers often try and win power struggles with their kids, and what I learnt in my early days at...was that if I was involved in a power struggle with a kid in a classroom I was not going to win that, because those kids were more powerful than me. In any classroom situation the kid in effect is holding the power, because they decide whether they’re going to learn”. To which I added, “or whether they listen or not”. It was an interesting point. I think in general we tend to always think of the teacher as holding the power, especially in terms of discipline. When I think of power as being held by students I can see that our kids do exercise their power, as I have said previously, usually by voting with their feet.

This participant followed up by saying, “whether they listen, whether they cooperate, they decide on that. The teachers making these decisions, but teachers kid themselves if they think that just because they’ve got a group of kids who are quiet and sitting down at their seat that they’ve actually won the battle. What I’ve been working on with my latest research, and work with Aboriginal kids, and non-Aboriginal working class kids, is to work in a classroom where the teacher is developing a sense of community, is not trying to get on top of those kids. I say to
them the more you give the power away the more control you’re going to have. You
know you give it back to the kids, you give them responsibility, you give them more
authority, and that’s what...said. You know these kids were brought up in a certain
way, and those ways were rejected by the teacher in the unofficial curriculum, so
there’s kind of a common theme”. Our conversation then moved on to the next
question. However, what was said during this interchange was very valuable. We
not only touched on important issues like perceptions of apartheid, the questions that
were posed about independent education flagged issues that my research is designed
to address. I will be taking up these issues in detail in my concluding chapters.

7.5 A Closing Comment

As I implied in my Opening Note the whole process of dialogic exchange with the
non-Indigenous participants was very open and flexible. Whilst the questions I
posed gave general guidance to our dialogue, you can see from the detailed responses
I received that some participants answered more than one question at a time.
Through their invaluable input the non-Indigenous participants not only enabled me
to gain what I was looking for, that is insight into the mainstream from the
perspective of a non-Indigenous lens, I was equally reminded of the broader issues
that need to be considered when intellectualising the dynamics of Indigenous
independent education. Whilst I benefited enormously from the participants insight
and experience, I believe that they too benefited from learning about my particular
position on Indigenous education. It was for me an extremely meaningful exchange.
I found that there were remarkable similarities between what the participants had to
say and the content of Chapters 1 to 5. In the following chapter I move on to story
the collective voice of the Indigenous stakeholders. As you read through Chapter 8 I
believe that you will likewise find remarkable similarities between the tenor of the
CHAPTER 8: STORYING THE COLLECTIVE VOICE OF THE INDIGENOUS STAKEHOLDERS

8.1 Affirming the Cultural Energy of Yarning

Before getting down to the business of storying our collective voice I feel that it is important to try and capture the cultural energy of our yarning. I want to do this so that you can gain some sense of the cultural feel of our dialogue otherwise there is a real chance that you may not get to experience the social, cultural and political meaning of what we said. For me this is a real challenge. What words do I use to re-create on paper the cultural energy of our telling space? Maybe the best way is to begin by reporting just how seriously all of us, as stakeholders in the research, took the business of dialogue. It was for us a solemn business because we were reflecting deeply on our cultural identity. Such business always involves emotion, a deeply cultural emotion that is an inevitable aspect of working for our cultural survival and revival. In reflecting on our dialogue from the perspective of my Indigenous lens I saw that our emotion was anchored by two key elements. These two key elements, spiritualism and historicism, overarched everything we said. Together these two elements created the cultural energy of our yarning. It is through these elements that we affirmed our cultural comfort and established our cultural confidence to talk.

Spiritualism and historicism were the means through which we ensured the cultural credibility of our telling space, securing it as an Indigenous conversational domain. Spiritualism and historicism were also the means through which we grounded the cultural identity of our dialogue and the worldview of the knowledge we generated. I can imagine though that whilst historicising dialogue sounds plausible, spiritualising dialogue might sound somewhat esoteric. It is, however, far from esoteric for us. Throughout this thesis I have reiterated a number of times our cultural predisposition for beginning yarning by talking about our families, our kinship and traditional affiliations. This is exactly what happened with us, we interwove into our yarning talk about our mob and country. There’s a very good reason why we did this. It was our way of finding connection with each other, but it was also our way of finding room to bring into our yarning our forebears. Bringing the spiritual presence of our forebears into dialogue is for us a deep form of cultural bonding. This may be hard to grasp, but essentially it means that even when our oldfulla’s are not physically
present they are still very much here with us.

Our forebears spiritualised our dialogue in that they informed and guided our thinking. In one sense spiritualising dialogue could be thought of as a type of cultural checking process. Time and again we reflected back on the life ways and knowledge ways of our oldfulla’s. By doing this we were able to measure the cultural veracity of what we had to say about our values, and our cultural development through education. At a much deeper level though spiritualising our dialogue culturally enriched us. Through spiritualising we were able to ensure that we stayed close to our ancestors and this empowered us to feel and experience our cultural continuity. Spiritualising dialogue went hand in hand with historicising dialogue because we brought our past into our present. Historicising dialogue accordingly involved mentally returning to, and reflecting upon, the experiences and struggles of our forebears in order to create for ourselves a culturally holistic telling space. Putting ourselves in the culturally emotional location of our history had a reinforcing effect upon us because we connected our thoughts and feelings with our aspirations for the survival and revival of our cultures.

In Chapter 7 you had the opportunity to learn what the non-Indigenous participants in this research had to say about Indigenous education, now it’s time hear what we had to say. The voice you will hear through the words that you read is a community voice; it is a voice that comes from the grassroots level of our peoples. My priority in storying our collective voice has been to ensure that our voice comes through loud and clear; that I do justice to the tone and intensity of what was said in dialogic exchange. In order to make sure that our words stand out in the text they have been recorded in *italics*. One thing about our yarning we didn’t compartmentalise what we wanted to say. We just let our conversation flow fluidly and naturally. For instance, often when we wanted to say something about values we ended up saying something related to education. To a great extent our text mirrors this. I cannot over stress the point that all the Indigenous stakeholders involved in this research are co-writers with me. For that reason as far as possible I have done my best to avoid over crowding my co-author’s words with unnecessary commentary. This is, I trust, not an antiseptic report of what we said in dialogic exchange, rather it is the face of Indigenous yarning. This is our story, our voice and our knowledge.
8.2 Yarning up Research Theme No.1

In opening up the business of dialogic exchange I went over my thoughts about our core values as outlined in the Indigenous Stakeholder Briefing Document. I reiterated at each session of dialogic exchange that my conception of our core values was based primarily on my own life experience, but I also pointed out that I had picked up ideas from the literature I had read. I commented often that, “I’ve read a lot of literature where people have spoken about values and I’ve heard people talk about values but they don’t go on and define what they actually are”. I also emphasised that, “those values in the briefing document are just what I’ve come up with and you don’t have to agree with anything if you don’t want to”. As I put it at one session, “well what do you feel our core values are? I’ve identified autonomy as our core political value, collectivism as our core social value and spiritualism as our core cultural value…I’m not saying you have to accept that, it’s just what I’ve got from the literature and what I’ve got from my own upbringing and that…but do you think they’re probably accurate?“, is there, “maybe some additions to make to that, something extra we can add to those values, or do they seem to be about correct?”.

It was important that I made sure everyone knew where I stood; it felt right. Telling my perspective was the most culturally appropriate way that I could create the space for everyone to put forward their own views. I felt reassured when there was strong mutual agreement about what I had put forward. “Yeh, they’re spot on”, “those three values you identified are what connects us all”, “the three values you identified are accurate, that’s what I base my teaching on”, “I think the three core values are close”, though, “the autonomy one is hard for Aboriginal people to conceptualise”. Because we all fundamentally agreed that collectivism was indeed one of our core values we didn’t need to spend a whole lot of time on this issue, but it certainly gave us a chance to yarn about family and forebears. It was a strong start to dialogic exchange; it made me feel culturally in tune. This was more than corroboration though; it was the beginning of a journey of connectedness between all of us as stakeholders in the research. There was something very powerful about sitting down together and yarning about our values. It was collectivism in action. We all felt a strong sense of being as collective peoples.
“Blackfulla’s have a collective thought, or collective way of thinking”. That’s it in a nutshell. We all recognised the energy of our collectivism. Together we asserted how absolutely paramount collectivism is to our cultural identity. “Family, community and identity are our values”. We can’t say it clearer than that. Our valuing of family is unmistakable. “I value the fact we have big families. It gave us an understanding of our heritage because our grandparents and great-grandparents were still around”. We all expressed decisively that we value at the highest level our extended family kinship structure. It was something we were all resolute about. “Our values are kinship values”. It is through our extended family that we gain vital access to cultural knowledge. “In our families we are taught by everyone in the family, not just your parents”. After all, “…how many people would stand up and acknowledge their elders and pay their respect to their elders”, because that’s exactly what we do to show just how important our senior people are in our life. As a matter of cultural protocol we actively seek to express our respect for our senior people, just as we actively seek to pay respect to the spirit of our forebears.

One stakeholder saw collectivism as so pivotal to our identity that it was singled out as our most significant core value. “…How can you define your core values…because if your core value is the family right which is that collective as one, and that’s the clanal structure…family is the core, then everything that you have belongs to that core”. It was a very solid statement because we all agree that family harks to the heart of our identity as Indigenous peoples. “There’s no place for individualism is there?”, “no”, “everything you do has to be done to support the group”, “that’s right, so your subsidiary values right actually are based in the core values”. You see whereas I saw values like sharing as subsidiary to collectivism it was pointed out that maybe these values are actually synonymous with collectivism. “…The core is the collectiveness of giving, sharing…sharing, caring, giving where nothing is yours it’s ours”. Clearly values like sharing are an integral part of our value systems. “Sharing is a strong Aboriginal value it makes everyone equal and gives everyone understanding, this is where respect comes in…from sharing you get a sense of spiritualism”.

“…Theft never belonged to us, we wouldn’t steal from each other because we were stealing from ourselves, so the true core values is that whole unit where we’re just
part of one”. As collective peoples we don’t envisage our individuality in a way that separates us from our being as part of the collective. Kinship is strong because, “that is the core of Aboriginal society isn’t it”, “yes”, “which is your family group right”. So if we take our collectivism to be at the pinnacle of our values pyramid then, as one stakeholder said, “...to me that subsidiary would be the second tier which is your spirituality” which “is subsidiary to the core”, “for the families your subsidiary values would be your spirituality”. One thing that talk about family definitely brought up was fear about the breakdown of our traditional extended family units and our collectivism. “When you look at that family core values, it has broken down because of what white society has given us”. “We’re actually taught individuality in mainstream, everybody’s an individual”, whereas, “we weren’t taught individuality, we were taught that what we did, how we did it effected the rest of us...we always had to think what I do, how is that going to effect the rest of the family...”.

“Individualism is a white value. Our collectivism is more like communism. Western society needs individualism because it supports their economic system...but when you have a collective you can be more creative because you’re safe and cushioned”. “You know what I think the big thing, difference with our culture is, we don’t really hold, I don’t know how to put it, how we all talk to each other, what I’m trying to say is you know like how there’s the hierarchy, the middle class, the average, we don’t have that”, “so we have no hierarchy, yeh”. “We have no hierarchy, no class system”, “it comes back to that core value - we’re not competitive”. That’s it, “...we’re a non-competitive race of people”, “that’s the difference yes”, “and here we are in a school system and a society that promotes competitiveness and individualism”. “It comes back to that core value again where our kids in a lot of ways still have that core value of the family”, “exactly”, “we’re not competitive with each other I mean you have to see that with so many sports people who quit the sport...family comes first, it doesn’t matter how many million they’re collecting if they want to walk away they walk away...”.

So, despite the pressures that individualism places on our extended family kinship networks our valuing of collectivism remains a cultural priority for us. Certainly we actively demonstrate this in how we connect with each other even when we don’t know each other. “...The thing is people in our culture, I went to Townsville, I was
walking through Townsville and these Koori’s walked past and one lad said hey hey brother how you goin, and I stopped and I talked to him for twenty minutes and…family were walking around, they waited for me just looking in shops and they said do you know him, I said no, they said you was talking to him for ages, I said yeh, he just said hello and we had a yarn about what they do up there, and what we do down here and that, you don’t think white people stop and”, yarn with, “total strangers”. That’s collectivism at work. “Yeh, exactly, that’s what you’d call it because no matter what Koori’s will talk to Koori’s anywhere won’t they”, “oh look, the first thing they want to know is where you come from”, “yeh”, “if they’re related to you, or married into you, you know, that’s the thing”, “yeh and that’s where your values and your respect comes into all of it and even if you’re not related”.

That’s us, we yarn; it’s our collective way. Our very real fear is that the white way, the individualistic way, will erode how we express our cultural connectedness. One of us lamented, “that’s all changing with us, it’s even changing in our society. You get Koori’s in…you walk past them and they won’t acknowledge you...”. It’s clear to us that we need, “to start to come back to that collective where what’s good for me is good for everybody...its community, and its working for the community, its not individual right...”. We have fear for our collectivism, “…because of the dollar, that’s the principal now, that’s the spirituality of life in white society it’s the dollar, that’s their spiritual guide”. “Money is ruining Aboriginal identity by splitting communities, there are power games going on”. We can feel the omnipresence of individualism; we sense the pressure that the economic individualism of Western society puts on our collectivism. Notwithstanding this the overall feeling with us is one of determination to retain and sustain our values. “The collective and spiritual is ingrained”, in our life ways and knowledge ways. Just as collectivism is integral to our value structure so is spiritualism.

The notion that spirituality is our core cultural value was virtually unanimously confirmed. The only exception was the observation that spirituality, in a pyramidal values structure, may well be a subsidiary value of collectivism. Either way we were all unified in identifying the interlocking relationship between collectivism and spiritualism and we all expressed our valuing of spirituality as a foundational aspect of our identity. It is through the interplay between our collectivism and spiritualism
that we feel our connectedness to country. “Our values are spiritual connectedness”, “natural environment like your connection to land and sea would come under spiritual values”. We spoke about how our spiritualism informs our connection to land in terms of our knowledge ways. “Our knowledge is different to non-Aboriginal people because it’s spiritual, we’re connected up with land and the spirit of our ancestors”. We also yarned about how our spiritual connection to land and the knowledge that goes with that has been shaped over thousands of generations. We kept coming back to our need to stay connected to country; to the spiritual and psychological strength it gives us. “You feel part of the natural environment”.

“No matter how hard you look at cultural values [we] will always be led by that spiritual guidance - back into spiritualism”. It was noted though that, “sometimes we can be our own worst enemy because we keep our values in closed doors, probably because we’ve been so suppressed. We have to walk as spiritual beings again”. Spiritualism is emotional business for us because it is one of the cornerstones of our being as Indigenous peoples. Certainly, “our values are about identifying who we are”. We had a strong sense that family was the link that connected us to our spirit because what we, “…value is passed onto family then passed down…”, and taught to the next generation. So as one of us observed, “kinship, identifying our kin, looking at blood lines so we can look at where song lines are running”, is part of this process because through our kinship ties we find our connection to country and the cultural knowledges that go with that. “You can expand on those values through looking at your dreaming stories. The sacredness of waters and parts of rivers, for example, ceremonial places where two waters meet. Spiritual, physical and mental development should come through in teaching these values”.

We didn’t dwell on yarning specifically about our spiritualism. We really didn’t need to because intuitively we gave a spiritual context to everything we talked about. I must however say I was worried about encouraging my fellow Indigenous stakeholders to yarn about spiritualism because it is such an intensely personal and deep aspect of our cultural identity. I needn’t have worried though for we all knew instinctively what could and could not be made public. We were all fully aware of how our cultural knowledges have been extracted and misused so it was for us a
matter of being cautiously informative. There was a cultural trust to our dialogue, which meant that none of us felt obliged to express our spiritualism unless we really felt comfortable to do so. That trust also meant that if spiritually confidential knowledge did get accidentally revealed then it would not be recorded or disclosed. What is certain is that collectivism and spiritualism are mainstay values and crucial to the continuance of our cultural survival. “All Indigenous people around the world are still pulling through. It’s the knowledge that’s sustainable. That spirituality and knowledge that’s been sustained”.

Whereas we were quick to identify collectivism and spiritualism as dominant values we found that we needed more time and space to connect with autonomy as our core political value. Whilst no one disagreed outright with autonomy being our core political value some of us needed to ponder the matter first before responding. “…Autonomy is a really hard concept to grasp because it’s a level of conscience…the other two [spiritualism and collectivism] you know, they are there but political values makes you think about your political views”. Indeed, “with the political there are levels of difference such as personal, community and national. Even with community there is politics that is played out, it’s dynamic”. At first glance autonomy was for some of us less obvious as an organic part of our value system. However, once we began to talk about self-determination and self-management we began to connect more strongly with autonomy as an Indigenous political concept. It was pointed out that, “we need to conceptualise we are political and that political oppression has been dominant”, in our lives. Maybe, “we haven’t really seen ourselves as a political entity”, even though, “we live in a political arena every day”.

Perhaps our tentativeness with autonomy stems from our anxiety about being able to realistically realise any degree of autonomy because of the continuing need to reach a political compromise with mainstream society. Certainly I sensed that we all felt that our autonomy was less under our own control though it was certainly noted that, “as a nation we all want autonomy, such as, in schools and other education programs”. Movingly it was said that, “as a nation we’re struggling to achieve when we get into a system that stops our progress and spiritualism and tells us how to behave. The system just whacks us; we’re being robbed spiritually. The system robs us
spiritually, physically and mentally”. When you feel constricted like this it is hard to envision concepts like autonomy. It was likewise noted that, “cultural sovereignty isn’t gonna come through the mainstream. We need to have something separate for the kids, it’s not about separating ourselves from society, it’s about maintaining our cultural rights”. So whilst autonomy wasn’t dismissed as our core political value the complexities inherent in autonomy led to varying levels of agreement from maybe that’s right through to yeh, that’s spot on.

Insightfully one of us saw that, “community based initiatives represent autonomy”. This was an important observation because within community based initiatives, “we acknowledge the spiritual and collective values...”. These values are built, “…into everything we do, so spiritualism and collectivism is a part of our autonomy”. By actively seeking to maintain our spiritualism and collectivism we are in effect asserting our unique identity as distinct cultures. When we seek to maintain and assert our unique identities we validate autonomy as a value. Even so, with regard to community based initiatives they haven’t, “…allowed for a 100% autonomy because it’s still based on funding from that white management. White management does have a fiscal value, they always look at how much money an Aboriginal initiative will cost. They always look at what is the bottom line in terms of dollars, not the value it gives back to the community”. In effect autonomy remains more an aspiration than a reality. That said it should be noted that, “our political values are our political rights to use the land as we did in the past. We didn’t sign our freedom away”. Our, “culture is a living lore, a living thing…We’re a nation within a nation”.

In yarning up values the issue of respect came up time and time again. “Those three values, one relies on the other a lot. Respect is the thing that keeps those values together”. How perceptive, when I explained my take on values I suggested that respect was a subsidiary value to collectivism and spiritualism I hadn’t seen it as part of autonomy. One stakeholder said, “respect is a value”, whilst another observed that at the end of the day it’s no good just talking about respect, “we have to practice what we preach”. We worried that, “you don’t get respect”, “no no there’s none in society”. It used to be that, “if you didn’t [show respect] when you were growing up you got knocked over”. “Family core values and the respect that comes out of that is the respect to your elders and so forth, right. Now our younger generations have lost
that, our generation right, children were taught to be there and listen, but you weren’t to interrupt adults talking you were in deep strife [if you did] because it was always classed that we just never had enough understanding of what we were talking about at that time. Children, until you got to that 16 or 17 years of age...you weren’t really given a role to speak, you were always taught”

Respect is, “...a big part of your culture and a big part of life”. It became patently clear through our dialogue that we all agreed that respect plays a major functional role in all aspects of our cultures. Respect is central to our collectivism in that we need to exercise respect in order to maintain the social cohesiveness of our collectivism. We need to exercise respect in order to find the humility necessary to learn and experience our spiritualism. Respect too is focal to the expression of our autonomy in that we need to hold and express cultural self-respect in order to be able assert the autonomy of our cultural identities in a culturally respectful way. That’s why for us culturally, “one of the main things is respect and acknowledgement”. As one stakeholder said, “my identity developed by practicing culture...respect is one of the main issues, you respect water, land, people and sources”. “Aboriginal knowledge means learning through the eyes of my Elders and learning from the grassroots level at a very young age”. There was a strong feeling that, “the strongest knowledge is about respect, it will always come up”, because in a sense, “respect translates into knowledge through value”.

In yarning up values we were able to realise and reiterate just how important our values are to us in terms of our worldview, our national identity and our cultural sovereignty. “Our values are to maintain what’s left of our culture and heritage and pass it onto our people, as a race of people”. We all felt strongly and passionately about the autonomous identity of our cultures. We saw that the spiritual knowledge that informs our worldview cements us to our land in a profound way so that, “our values are also to protect and preserve country”. Furthermore, “our values are respect for our Elders, the way we respect our stories”, because these are the stories that are handed down to us and that teach us about our land and our cultural obligation to country. It could be said that, “there are only two values: ‘what’s right’ and ‘what’s wrong’, its black and white”, because there is a strong cultural ethic to our worldview. Our worldview and our national identity is unique, separate and
distinct from mainstream Australia. We have never relinquished our cultural identity, we maintain our worldview and when all is said and done that grounds our cultural sovereignty.

8.3 Yarning up Research Theme No.2

The cultural quality of mainstream education especially from the perspective of our own educational experiences and our educational aspirations

When our yarning about values led into yarning about education I found the space to speak about my thoughts concerning the cultural quality of mainstream education as outlined in the Indigenous Stakeholder Briefing Document. Typically I’d ask a question like, “what do you think of mainstream education, do you think it promotes our identity or not?”. Our responses were unequivocal. There’s, “no way in the world mainstream education promoted our identity”, “not at school, only at home”, “mainstream never has and never will. There are exceptional examples you can count on your hand”, but these successes only occur when there is very strong Indigenous direction and input. “On the cultural side mainstream education was a distraction from learning about our culture”. It was a distraction for us because the cultural education we received at home was utterly unlike what we were exposed to at school. In a very fundamental way we found that, “the values at home are different to school”. In its most visible form this lack of support for our cultures was shown when, “Aboriginal kids couldn’t wear red, black and yellow necklaces to promote their identity, but Catholics could wear their crosses on their chains”.

“The mainstream...[validates]...everyone else’s way, but not ours. For example, they validate Muslim ways and Chinese, but not Aboriginal. They just don’t validate Aboriginal knowledge or ways”. “The education system is indoctrinating our own people”. “Mainstream education built this nation on lies. They built their myths and desecrated our myths and our values of the land. They’ve replaced our values for their values (money)”. It’s no wonder we feel that, “mainstream education hinders Indigenous identity and growth”. For us, “mainstream education can be subtle in [its] racism”. As one of us said, “I really don’t think we gain any cultural worth. It’s a white system. It’s set up to make everyone the same, that sameness is whiteness. Whitefullas sit in a place of privilege. They think everyone has to assimilate to them. They pay token gesture such as NAIDOC Week or a Rainbow
Serpent but a lot of us don’t come from the Rainbow Snake Dreaming. We are downgraded through our knowledge when it is taught as mythological; not truth. They make it sound as if the Dreaming is something from the far past. Its not, its a much bigger concept and its still part of our presence and existence; it’s our past, present, and future”.

Whilst the majority of us felt intensely that mainstream education is culturally negative for us one stakeholder saw a possibility that mainstream education can be built upon to give cultural meaning to education. “The mainstream education system is giving a middle piece, a core of what they want kids to learn, but Aboriginal perspectives and connections gives that core more meaning. This is how our collectiveness works”. So even though there is potential for our kids to gain from mainstream education, to enhance the likelihood of that happening cultural perspectives need to be a part of their programme. On the other hand, “there’s a big push by the state to get Aboriginal perspectives into the schools, but a lot of people think it’s a bandaid”. Maybe there are legitimate reasons why we see this as a bandaid. For instance one of us said, “the only thing with mainstream schools is we don’t have anyone teaching our culture...We need people who can teach culture properly, it’s the only way we can teach Aboriginal and Western knowledge properly”. Saying this in effect raises questions about whether mainstream education can really provide the depth and quality of the cultural education we seek.

“Well you look at it when we went to school we were the ones bullied weren’t we, we were called f.... dirty Abo’s or black Abo’s and that and I don’t want to sit near an Abo”. At its worse our education was corporal. “It was traumatising getting the cane for something I didn’t do. We was all caned for other’s smoking. On the way home from school the gunji’s [police] would pull us up”. I remember copping it for stuff I didn’t do and being watched by gunji’s. “We’re like the blackfulla’s in America; they want us to be good at sport”. “Sports is the easy way out”. “You know in...school when we went to school we didn’t have to go to school all week, but we had to be there at lunch time Friday. We had to go to school by lunch time Friday because they couldn’t win a football game without all the black kids from the mission aay, they used to get flogged, if we didn’t go and play football we used to get caned, they’d send someone to get us on Monday and cane us”, “but that was one of
the reasons I was victimised at high school, at...High, cause I didn’t play union like all the others you know. They only wanted lads to win medals for them”, “yeh”, “they couldn’t give a f...about whether you could read or write or whatever”.

“Oh, I used to get the cane all the time”, “because you wouldn’t play sport?”. Sport seemed to be all that we were good for. “...They thought we got to keep these black kids at school...but not because of their academic [ability], it was because of the sporting [ability]...keep the black kids, their good sportsmen”. One of us said, “we’ve learnt nothing from the school that prepares us for the outside world”. From my experience, and what I’ve been told by other blackfulla’s, that’s what it seemed like. “When we went to high school as soon as we turned 14 we were called into the principal’s office who said what are you planning on doing?, and I said I don’t know, and he said well you may as well leave now, you’re old enough to leave school”, “here’s your piece of paper, your reference see you later, good bye, the day I turned 15, see you later, out the door”. “They encourage you to leave?”, “yeh”, “yeh, they used to call us all in...”, “mate the day I turned 15 here’s your reference see ya later, but I wanted to go onto 4th form and 6th form, nup, you’re out”. “Well I said I wanted to go to 4th form and they said no you’re wasting your time”, “and that still happens today, you know”, “of course it does”, “you hear that from so many”.

I felt compelled to ask about the classroom. “Tell me something, what was it like when you was sitting in a classroom being a blackfulla how did it feel? Did you feel isolated?”. “The teachers spoke to the white kids”, “yeh”. “...I sat at the back of the class I got thrown out. I used to get thrown out of maths class every day, never went to a maths class and yet I topped in 3rd form, I got the highest marks in maths but I never spent one day in maths”. “In the classroom I had to try hard all the time. It’s a pressure to get good marks as a survival mechanism. You had to always make sure things were neat as a means of survival. There’s this thing where you always have to try twice as hard as a whitefulla”. That’s the thing I remember, having to try twice as hard. “In the classroom I always knew an answer and had my hand up first but was always overlooked. So I thought well f...it I won’t bother. The whitefulla’s would get that little stamp on their hand or a star and I thought it should have been me”. “The classroom in the mainstream was isolated. You chose to be at the back of
the room; it enabled me to observe more of what was going on. The school grounds
is were I experienced racism, they called me a dumb nigger”.

As for teachers, “the teachers already determined that I was going nowhere. They
said ‘you’ll amount to nothing’”. “This one geography teacher would always find a
reason to pick on me, the only blackfulla in the class. He called me out of roll call in
front of the whole school and put me on emu duty for one whole month”. “You know
when I was at the primary school there I used to write compositions when I was a
little kid you know, when I got to high school I used to write compositions for English
class and...remember him, he’d come in and give everybody back their assignments
and he just looked at me, I don’t know what he done with it, but I didn’t get it back
and I didn’t get a mark”, “no because”, “he didn’t want you to succeed”, “yep”, “to
be on top cause there would’ve been someone in the class who would have gone
home and told mummy and daddy that little...”. “No but there’s a bigger picture
here, they’re marking you for life, that’s what I’m saying”, “yes”, “yeh”, “if they
want you to be a garbo collector, and there’s nothing wrong with that though, but in
their minds then that’s what they’ll set you up to be”. “Well the policy was always
not to educate Aboriginals, they’d get too smart and wake up to what’s going on...”,
“and of all the teachers I blued with I didn’t blue with him, but he still done it”.

We were repeatedly singled out over one thing or another. For most of us the
teachers we had were either openly oppositional to us or completely ambivalent.
When you continually experience incidents where you are singled out you start to
realise that it has to be a race issue. It certainly feels as though you are not worthy of
education. “I wasn’t given any educational aspirations. We were made to line up
separately to the white kids at assembly. And for excursions or activities the
teachers would always tell us that the government paid for this, but all the other kids
had to get their parents to pay”. You see, “non-Indigenous teachers bring their own
values, attitudes, political views, and racist views into the classroom”. For example,
“Indigenous students are always grouped together. If one mucks up, teachers see
them all mucking up”. For us this is racial stereotyping. Even our hard won support
services incite problems. “Political correctness doesn’t help things either. Positive
discrimination is a problem, people in Australia are just so jealous. People don’t
want to touch us anymore”. We have to deal with objections that suggest non-Indigenous people are being compelled to advantage us at their own expense.

The role of the teacher should not be underestimated. When, “you have someone teaching negatively, the learners will become negative”. If we’re singled out and racially typecast by our teachers what else could our experience be? One of us said, “most of our failure comes from the teacher”. What a poignant reminder of the impact that teachers have. “With the Western society you’ve got to listen to that teacher but have no input have ya because they know”, “well you know when I was at...school they’d throw a text book in front of us and get us to teach ourselves”, “yeh”, “while they read a Women’s Weekly or something cause that was their teaching strategy you know what I mean”, “yeh exactly”. It makes you feel insignificant. “Teachers only want to get you to that next level just to get you through”. Yet, “when they [Indigenous students] know a teacher they do better in the mainstream”. “In a cultural tradition a person might have had a teacher they liked, but now the white system expects the kids to respect a teacher they might not like”. The turn around for us is when our culture and identity is appreciated. “At school when they started to talk about Aboriginal stuff I for once started to feel good”.

The trouble is some teachers take the attitude, “…‘you sink or swim’”. Take teaching literacy for example. “Well I’ll tell you something if these schools are so good at teaching literacy why is it a big problem?”, “yeh”, “exactly”, “because they don’t”. “They fall through the cracks because...they’ve got a certain standard of curriculum they’ve got to keep to, and they race through it, race through it and what they don’t get done on that day, and I can attest to that this year with young...he’s in year six, he’s bringing home...what they don’t finish because obviously she’s on a certain schedule...”. “And that’s the difference, it’s not whether he knows it or doesn’t know it...I’m going you should have learnt this at school and he goes she goes too quick and I said well ask her question. I’m not allowed she screams at me, you know like it’s the same old story year in year out”. “...She’s got obviously a certain curriculum she’s got to finish, you know term 1 we’re doing this, term 2 we’re doing that, and they’re speeding through it, every night he’s got to have 4-5
pages, he’s got to finish”, “but racing through the curriculum, that’s an important observation you know”.

One stakeholder said that, “what teachers overlook, is they say when they were in a learning position, “we learn different”. But when they teach they do the same thing”. This remark flags a concern about teacher practice becoming institutionalised in that teachers don’t necessarily reflect upon their own experiences of learning to appreciate that not all students respond to the same pedagogy. “They don’t turn around and say oh well my teaching strategy was real shithouse or my curriculum was shithouse you know, I didn’t look at this person individually they just say oh he’s a failure”, “yeh”, “they blame the victim”, “right because he didn’t fit the box”, “yep didn’t fit the box”, “right right but you don’t get a round peg in a square hole but the education system puts us all in that one box. The education system is a box where there’s no individuality of being round, square, oblong, triangle...”. Teachers are likewise not necessarily critical of the material they teach. “Teachers try to get students to interpret Shakespeare’s ‘Orthello’. Why don’t they try to get them to interpret culture, our culture that’s thousands of years old?” Why is it that our cultures are not given the same level of importance in mainstream curriculum? Mainstream, “set the curriculum and every student has to go through it...if you don’t pass what’s in that tunnel you don’t succeed at school”, “oh yeh definitely”, “and that’s all it is”. “But the thing is the system then blames the victim”, “exactly”, “for not getting though that tunnel”, “yeh exactly”. “No matter who you are whether you’re Chinese, Koori or whatever”, “you’re supposed to fit into a square box”, “their square box”, “our government’s curriculum”, “yeh”. “...But you get Koori’s, you get Maoris’, you get Indians, you get Muslims and all that, they’re growing up in a different culture and they’re learning a different culture. You know we’re all in a position where we’re in a different culture than the English, the mainstream culture, because we’re learning two sets of laws aren’t we really?” But with, “...English culture you’ve got to learn this or you don’t pass at school...you’ve got to learn this because this is the way the world is...but we come from a different world with our different cultures”. “Yeh what if you don’t assimilate”, “you fail”, “you get blamed”, “yep if you don’t assimilate you don’t pass their curriculum and you fail in their eyes, you’ve not done it right and that’s how they do it”.
So just as teachers impact upon us so too does curriculum. At one session when we got yarning about curriculum I said, “but a curriculum too, you know, a blackfulla should be able to look at a curriculum and see ourselves in it you know, if you look at mainstream curriculum do you see yourself in there? Do you see your core values in there?”. “But you won’t find that because most of our society today and most of our people today are, this is the way the government”, “entrenched them”, “and controlled”, “controlled yeh.”. So in reality we don’t even expect to see ourselves in the curriculum, we’ve been entrenched not to expect that we should. The thing is, “schools and society once upon a time taught through their attitude it wasn’t a good thing to be an Aboriginal”, and the legacy of that remains strong. “The education system is still promoting the historical and the exotic. Kids are still learning about the blackfulla standing next to a spear with his foot on his knee. One non-Aboriginal student said to me “how can you stand like that”, I said, “excuse me do you see me standing like that””. Of course Aboriginal or Indigenous studies were introduced so that we could see ourselves in the curriculum.

We expressed strong feelings about Aboriginal Studies. “What is Aboriginal Studies? I still don’t know what it is. They just slap it in there to shut Aboriginal people up”. “…It’s like Indigenous studies in school, they’re not Indigenous Studies are they...you know that. I mean that’s a thing the government threw into the schools”, “its bullshit”, “its bullshit, I’ve been sitting like in primary, I’ve been sitting outside classrooms where they’ve been teaching, waiting to pick up ...or one of my kids, and I’ve listened to them and it’s unbelievable some of the stuff they say, unbelievable and you just sit there”. “It’s tokenism again is it?”, “yeh”, “total, its total”. More optimistically though it was noted that, “the education system in 1975 introduced the Anti-Discrimination Act. The education system needed to be addressed”, and from this, “Aboriginal studies was introduced for the wider community as well”. Now “Aboriginal studies maybe tokenistic but it does touch on areas that they would not normally be exposed to”, but we all agreed, “Aboriginal studies and NAIDOC celebrations once a year doesn’t make it Aboriginal”. “They just let us celebrate NAIDOC just to shut us up”.

In yarning about Aboriginal studies we thought about the substance of what gets taught. “Yeh, but you’ve got to look at it too, what they teach in Indigenous Studies
in school that’s out of books that white men wrote”, “yeh exactly”, “and I’ll give you an example”, “yeh but that day we went down to Canberra and sat in on them lectures and this guy talked about this woman, she done this and done that and the question was asked well how did she learn that, oh she went and picked grass with the Aboriginal people and learnt it all. Remember him, that night down there, what a load of shit. She went out and helped them pick grass and learned all about them, and wrote a big book about Aboriginal people”. What is being said here is that just because someone produces a book on us doesn’t necessarily mean that the information it contains has cultural credibility in our eyes. We are not only concerned about the veracity of material used in subjects like Aboriginal Studies we are concerned about its interpretation. Interpretation is a major issue for us particularly in terms of the teaching of history. History and politics are for us entwined and inseparable from our educational needs and aspirations.

In terms of our educational needs and aspirations we were unanimous that, “our cultural needs is to be able to teach the truth, and on Aboriginal spirituality and culture”. For many of us, “school only taught us social studies, how Captain Cook came here and the early settlement”, “there was no cultural education when we learnt about history; it was just about how James Cook discovered Australia”. We’re not convinced that the introduction of Aboriginal Studies has addressed this. We need and want our children to be educated about our truth, our history of being as culturally and politically subjugated peoples, our spirituality and our culture. “We need our kids educated politically. They need to know what happened in this country. We need to politicise our kids”. “We need to get our kids when they’re little and help them to learn not to take everything they’re told, like being told we come from somewhere else before Australia. It’s like teachers are saying: we come from somewhere else and so do you. It’s about teaching our kids about caring for country”. We are concerned about what our kids are being taught. “Teachers don’t see we have a national identity”.

It’s important to us that education fosters our Indigenous national identity. A primary concern for us in this regard is how the spiritual expression of our identity is represented, particularly within the mainstream. “Well look...you spoke about spiritualism right, how have these mainstream schools got the right to try and teach
that...?”, “they can’t”, “you know I don’t think they’ve got the right, and like you
said they can’t do it because its too complex”. “But it’s the same as my argument,
and I do it with interpretation...you don’t go to the Jewish priest if you’re going to
have a baptism, you don’t go to the Catholic priest if you want your son to have a
barmitzvah because he can’t do it, so why do people, because its Aboriginality, can
somebody, not an Aboriginal person, teach that, how can they do that? because it’s
the written form, its not the true form right, so you won’t get a Jewish priest
preaching Catholicism, and you won’t get the Catholic priest preaching Judaism, so
why should other people preach Aboriginality and spirituality?”. Our discussion
here is not simply about religion in the Western sense. We are talking about cultural
context and interpretation of our spirituality within an education framework.

We likewise spoke about our collectivism and the mainstream. “There’s a case too
where a lot of Aboriginal people, say they’re in geography class all right and there
are different levels...one of them might get promoted up but deliberately doesn’t do
anything because they want to be dropped back down with the rest of them”, “yeh
with the mob”. “They put me up in geography and I didn’t really excel, I just
mucked around and didn’t take anything serious. I’d rather play up to get back
down with the others”, “yeh, but that’s our collectivism at work there you see”. 
“And that’s a definite, that’s the big thing. I mean you’ve got some areas where you
know there’s a 75% Koori population in the schools but they’re few and far between
aren’t they, like generally it’s that isolation in schools too. The kids don’t try,
they’ve got no backup, there’s no bonding for them and you know that family stuff
that core values...when you’re one [one out] at a high school, you know it doesn’t
work, you know”. We need to stick to our own mob. “All the blackfulla’s went with
the flow, for example when we chose subjects we just went where cousins and
relatives were going. Every class you had there were five to six blackfulla’s in
there”.

We pinpointed too the organisational structure of the classroom as a barrier for
Indigenous learners. “...In mainstream education there’s thirty students to one
teacher, its failing and every one knows it, but in Aboriginal traditional culture one
person would be taught one on one...or be taught in a small group”. Even the
physical layout of the classroom brought into question for us the physical place of
teachers. “With normal classrooms you have a teacher upfront, they do it deliberately for superiority, it affects your attitude, which affects the way you learn”. “By standing up the front it forces Aboriginal learners to go to the rear. We’re talking about marginalisation here”. “I feel that by sending us up the back it felt like hidden racism”. Just as the formal nature of the classroom can lead us to feel marginalised the formal nature of uniforms can represent, through an Indigenous eye, assimilation. “It’s that clothing thing, not everyone wants to you know, not everyone feels comfortable in all the you know, bits and pieces”, “not being dressed formerly aay”, “yeh yeh”, “you know that’s conformity”, “yeh school uniforms are always conformity”.

Behaviour is another issue. “Well the kid has been with us for four years he walks straight from our environment into theirs and straight away they’re judging him, he doesn’t listen, you know what I mean”, “well that’s happened to…my young bloke when he went to school he got into trouble for not listening”. “...I know with my...he’s always been in trouble cause he’s wild, he’s known as the naughty boy at school”. “Yeh my one’s already copped it...”, “yeh I know...got it from kindergarten too”, “...I went up there several times and told them off...because his behaviour is not naughty behaviour I’d call it adventurous”. There may however be a cultural basis to how our kids behave, does the mainstream consider this? “No because that would show their own inadequacies up, and that’s their problem”. Even our kids yarning is an issue, “because we’re an oral society...and that’s what the mainstream curriculum don’t take into account, you find most Koori kids whether its primary, high schools or whatever get into trouble for talking”, “yeh”, “constantly in trouble for talking because we’re an oral society that’s how they express themselves”, “that’s right”.

Inevitably the issue of success came up for us. “What is Aboriginal achievement? Is it about a little black person achieving on white terms and making it look like mainstream education is doing good?”. “But that’s what scares our kids, we’re telling them if you want to succeed in white society you have to succeed at school”, “and that’s an enormous pressure to put on them, tremendous”, “yeh and they know that...that’s why they drop out, they can coast along to you know 5,6,7 and then it just, the battle gets too hard you know”, “the competition”, “yeh the competition”.

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“That’s the difference, we determine success with completely different eyes”. “That white society, unless you have that piece of paper you can’t do that, well to our society that’s wrong”, “but it’s the wrong way to measure blackfulla’s too, to measure their success”, “that’s measuring Aboriginal success of whitefulla’s terms”, “yeh”, “but measuring success on blackfullas terms is completely different, if you’re looking after your little family, and your extended family all right, and you’re reinforcing their identity all the time”, “and if you’re a housemother, that don’t make no difference, then you’re a successful blackfulla”.

“The system’s failing our people. Koori’s should be taught how to use what they learn, to empower our communities instead of training our kids to assimilate and retain them in the mainstream system”. “There’s only been a short period in this Western way of learning, we need to get back to our old way of learning”. Our, “kids need to know about themselves”, we want them to be culturally strong and maintain their, “...sense of Aboriginality and identity”. “Kids need to feel proud of their culture and identity. When these kids have their own kids they’ll be able to share their knowledge with them”. “We can only promote identity ourselves, we can only do that; its our business”. We recognise that, “...because they [our kids] need a white man’s job they need a white man’s education, they need both”. “We want to achieve what whitefulla’s do too, but we want to hold onto our culture too”. As one of us said though, “there’s something I thought about, no matter how hard you might try to teach culture kids might still want to go their own way. They might want to go the material way; it’s the clash of the culture’s”. This is a reality that we now contend with, but for us stakeholders, “our values are more important than ABC basically”.

8.4 Yarning up Research Theme No.3

The translation of Indigenous values into curriculum and pedagogical praxis as a platform for realising our educational autonomy

There are many challenges to translating Indigenous values into curriculum and pedagogical praxis. In a thought provoking statement one stakeholder laid a strong foundation for workshopping this theme. “You need to involve people in their own learning; not making them learn...If Aboriginal people don’t get the opportunity to explore their own learning style then that’s breaking their spirit. There has to be a
whole shift in doing this. It’s not a wise investment as far as community is concerned with the current arrangement (i.e. class size, teacher to student ratio) to allow for different styles of learning. This is where the community can come in and teach the values of the local community. When you establish a curriculum it comes back to what teachers are willing to teach and how. Will you have to define curriculum in an Aboriginal sense? The curriculum needs to be holistic, a rubber band curriculum…but you can make it bigger and it takes different shapes, it’s defined by what it is. The academy likes this compartmentalised form of subject delivery and topic area. Until you can come up with the definition of curriculum in its current form, there can’t be curriculum development around these values”.

Taking the time to explore our core values was a very meaningful and enlightening experience. Through our yarning we were able to look past the localism of our own distinct cultures to see that through socio-cultural constructs like our values we share a unity as the Indigenous peoples of Australia. Drawing on this sense of unity we saw that to advance our cultures through education we need to acknowledge and draw upon the diversity of our knowledges in order to visualise the creation of a culturally nationalised Indigenous curriculum and pedagogy. “We must teach the similarities of Aboriginal cultures not the differences”. “We need to be conscious about other Aboriginal people’s country, we need to teach our own local people about the struggles of other Aboriginal people”. These are important observations because they move us past the business of thinking that we must stick exclusively to learning only our own culture/s. Without doubt there was strong feeling that our, “kids should be taught in their own culture first”, in that, “education should teach the young ones about their culture within their nations”, but we nonetheless saw that it is equally important that our children be given, “lessons about other individual Aboriginal people”, and other Aboriginal nations.

One stakeholder noted that, “if you’re going to invite other Aboriginal nations in, you’re having a cross-cultural journey”, in the sense that you will literally be experiencing an Indigenous multi-cultural education. For this stakeholder an Indigenous multi-cultural education was a positive so long as children were taught first their own culture/s. This came up as an important issue for us. So often it is thought that our cultures are so similar as to be transposable. It’s not the case, and as
much as we share commonality in our core value structures we need to respond to the differences that exist between our cultures. It was seen that, “knowing who we are, such as through our totems”, is a strong aspect of our Indigenous identity. “Totems are for giving other tribal people from other nations knowledge on who we are and where we’re located”. In learning about each other’s cultures we learn unity, but we need to make it clear that there is a difference between learning about each other’s cultures and adopting what is not ours. This stakeholder reminded us that we must remember that, “we can’t tap into other people’s customs. Local stuff should come before anything else”.

The heart of Indigenous curriculum needs to connect with our knowledge ways. “Our knowledge system is oral and natural, our very nature”, “you actually live knowledge”. “According to the old lores the supreme being passed on all this knowledge”. Our cultural knowledge ways are organic and experiential. For us our organic curriculum and pedagogy draws upon the circular relationship between our knowledges, identity, spirituality, education and land. Our values are entwined with this. Therefore we see that, “values need to be put into curriculum so Aboriginal people can learn about their connectedness to land...this is what’s been taught to us for thousands of years”. “The spiritual values should be taught such as [our] connection to the land”. “We need Aboriginal cultural geography as a value”. We see country as grounding curriculum. “Training should instil in our people our lore to give them understanding of country. How country was formed, about men and women sites”. “There needs to be more learning about our natural environment...”. “We need to teach the language, you got to have that environment to do that; out in the bush”. “We need to start using Aboriginal words in our natural environment”.

Some of us felt very strongly that country/environment/land means incorporating into curriculum the obligations of our knowledge ways. “We’ve got to look after our own area”, “it all comes back to respect for land”. Obligation is the cultural responsibility to protect country, it brings to the fore the deeply rooted interplay between our collectivism and spiritualism. In terms of education it means, “we need to teach Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people about sharing and respecting land and its resources. Its acknowledgement and respect about Aboriginal ways of doing things. We have different customs and have a different type of spiritualism, the
land owns us, we don’t own the land, we come from mother earth, but this is a message you got to get across, but it gives some Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people fear.” Its not just about teaching land and environment it’s also about teaching the spiritual reciprocity that obligates us to country in a culturally collective sense. Indigenous curriculum needs to be guided by our spiritualism. For example, “for geography we could teach mythology and navigation”, because, “with astronomy and geography Aboriginal people learnt about the connection between everything”.

Whilst we all felt strongly that our knowledge ways are the priority for an Indigenous curriculum we nonetheless saw a place for non-Indigenous knowledge. For us, creating an Indigenous curriculum isn’t about rejecting all knowledges but our own, its about making sure that our knowledges have a non-tokenistic presence within curriculum. Subjects like, “astronomy and geography should be taught from both an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspective”. “Aboriginal kids must be taught a connection between scientific meanings of something and then to themselves as Aboriginals”. It is important that when Western scientific knowledge is taught it is balanced by our knowledges so that our children can make a personal cultural connection with what they are learning. “If they have a relation to something they will retain it better, it doesn’t become boring”. We are realistic about curriculum we understand that, “even with an independent school you still have to have mainstream curriculum and qualifications to be able to get a job in the mainstream”. For us it’s about creating a more holistic curriculum wherein, “we diversify knowledge by taking what is useful from Western society”.

A major issue to come out of our yarning with regard to the organisation of curriculum was the difference between female and male knowledges. We believe that an Indigenous curriculum and pedagogy must advance this. “In our society there’s a place for both men and women. When our kids get to about 13, 14 or 15, we could look at ways of having male and female learning groups. This way they’re learning about male and female knowledge and values”. I asked, “so do you think male knowledge and female knowledge is different?”, “ooh yeh very much different you just have to look at it in the basics it’s totally different”. “...The boys are actually out with the men and learning the men’s things, and the women are out with
the women and learn it in a different format, could be the same thing right, because the men are also taught plants and things like that and sites and the rest of it, so are the women but they are taught...”, in differing contexts, “…the whole system is set that way”. “That’s where it comes back to learning their respect and the values of their own culture, doing separate things, and respecting each other’s, what their role is in the whole big picture of it”.

A female stakeholder noted, “and that’s all tribes around the world, the women was the nurturing, you know the gatherer, you know she had her place in the role to keep that unity together when the men were out you know whatever the business was”. As she said, “what I’m talking about where it’s separated in our culture, you don’t talk about certain things and that’s how I’m brought up...”. We were brought up to know and respect this. “Well I seen something on TV you know where whitefulla’s are bragging about splitting the boys and girls up in the classroom now and how its working, we’ve been doing that for thousands of years”, “yeh exactly”, “and you tell them, they don’t take notice, but when they try it themselves and it works they want to take the credit”. “Well the split is there’s women’s business and men’s business in our culture”, “yeh that’s what I was going to say and they come back together for certain subjects or certain joint things to do together but they learn differently to begin with...”, “well that’s where they learn their values in life don’t they”. “...When you stop and think about it, it’s boys and girls learned differently right, and the school systems do not...facilitate that learning”.

Just as we are deadly serious about having our curricula grounded by our knowledge ways, that is country/environment/land, and organised to facilitate our female and male knowledges we are also very passionate about our history being a core element of Indigenous curriculum. “It’s important our kids know our history too. Our children need to be aware that when Cook came there was a lot of confusion here about the new arrivals. Colonisation did affect us. They need to learn about colonisation and the expansion process...they are hiding the Aboriginal resistance”. We have a strong and long history of resistance. “There’s not enough being taught about Aboriginal figures, what they was on about, their struggles, otherwise history will forget them. It’s a pride building exercise. The fallacy is we didn’t fight for the country”. “At 13, 14, and 15 years of age is where students need exposure to the
truth of the colonisation of this country and other countries. We’re talking comparative studies; this is where we’re getting our worldviews”. We recognised too the importance of our children learning about other Indigenous cultures outside Australia. Historicising curriculum like this supports our autonomy.

“Media Studies is huge. It’s being used as a political instrument to depict how dysfunctional we are. It’s being used as a divide”. The same thing happens with words. “Words like invasion and settlement are an example...”. “We need to teach our kids the meaning of words; we need to wordsmith. It’s about our people learning the appropriate words. Words are as powerful as a sword if you use them the right way”. “Our kids should be taught about racism and how it will confront them when they go for a job, or in the legal system, or when they go to a real estate agent...They need to be able to know how to break down the policies that are harming us. Teaching about racism arms them for life. Our kids need to know about when to fight or flight with racism. Flight teaches them to know when to remove themselves from extreme situations”. “We need to make our people aware of the different levels of racism out there, and teach them how to fight racism at those levels. I think the only way to foster this thing is at the primary school level, this is when kids are like sponges, and they’re taking everything in. Even in pre-school we could teach some of this stuff”.

The other dominant issue to emerge out of our yarning in terms of our values informing curriculum pertained to literacy and numeracy, which was highlighted as a concern for independent education. With an Indigenous curriculum, “...you put this to someone and you can be dead set certain that they’re going to say well you’ve got to have maths and English, the main things that are part of their curriculum they’ve still got to learn that”, “ok yeh that’s all right”, “yeh I know”, “that’s fine because I believe, I personally and truly believe that if you get the kids and you give them self-esteem, self-worth, importance, identity”, “then they will excel in the other things”, “yeh yeh it’ll all come together”. The thing is, “you’d have to be creative in setting up an independent primary school. The literacy and numeracy component would have to have a certain standard. We could explore how literacy and numeracy could be taught in a Murri way. Literacy and numeracy is important for an independent school but how would an independent school be?, maybe like satellite schools in
some areas”. We know that, “our children need to learn very young literacy and numeracy (how to budget); ‘life skills’ is the word here”.

Having shared our thoughts and ideas about curriculum we moved on to talk about pedagogy. To get us thinking at one session I noted, “…you can teach a person or a group of persons to disempower them alright, but on the other hand you can come up with a teaching orientation that can do the opposite”. Then I asked, “…based on those values we spoke about earlier and based on the kinds of knowledge that comes out of that to support a curriculum what do you think would be the most powerful teaching approach to teaching a values based curriculum, such as the one we’re talking about now?…”. In reply I was told, “…to empower anyone with life skills is the fundamentals, and culture comes into those life skills, if you haven’t got that culture you know, and that’s what communities like the Muslim, the Jewish, the whatever, they’re such strong communities because they’ve got the basics, the basics in there from when they’re born, you know”, “yeh, so we’re talking about identity, their identity is reinforced”. “You put the identity in there, you put the culture in there, you empower them from a young age, who they are, what they are, that respect all of it, then you can go, you can learn the extras down the track”.

Identity is a fundamental for us. Identity for us forges the link between creating a culturally contextualised curriculum and a culturally contextualised pedagogy. In terms of pedagogy first and foremost we emphasised the importance of the physical setting of teaching. “Pedagogy would be to teach on the land”. “We need Dreaming Camps”. This is not leisure for us; it’s the cultural business of setting up the learning environment. There’s a spiritual aspect to teaching in the bush”. “When we’re in our environment its part of our being; it’s our nature. It’s about teaching the things you can’t see which is our spiritualism. You can’t get a better place to teach our kids than the bush, it puts them in their own element”. “There is something awesome about sitting around a fire talking”. “Camps are vital to our survival, our kids need to go to them just to be black kids”. “When they hit the primary school level we need to take them away for 4-5 times a year…”. “When you’re teaching kids about culture you take them out into the bush for a couple of nights. You teach them about culture and respect, you teach them about culture all the time”. “You could take them on a learning journey like a camp in a remote or isolated area”.
Teaching on land gives cultural context to Indigenous pedagogy. “Our universities was us kids sitting around a fire listening to our Elders speak”, “we want to teach our young ones through the eyes of our Elders”. One stakeholder spoke about this from personal experience. “Mate I do it all the time...instead of teaching horticulture and land management in the classroom they’re teaching it on site, more Aboriginal people are on site doing it than there are in the classroom. If they’ve got to go and do it in the classroom they drop out, they drop out because it’s not an inclusive learning style...the natural learning styles of Aboriginal people is not a room”. “All of my...courses that I’m setting up aren’t sitting in a classroom its outside”, “hands on”, “hands on field work too, and its giving that variety and interest to keep changing it daily to get that, and it works, but you sit them in a classroom to get them to study”, “they’re gone”, “they’re gone, they’re out of here, they will not, Aboriginal people will not sit in, a lot of them, will not sit in a...room for six hours a day and look and plan and have to identify, that’s bullshit, where you get them out into the field they can...they’re straight through the whole bloody lot”.

As much as it is vital to the cultural context of Indigenous pedagogy to have direct connectedness with country in a school situation we accept that classrooms are inevitable. For that reason we need to, “design classes so they have that visual effect on your education, that’s why field studies is so effective”. “Flexibility in teaching strategies would be the most powerful pedagogy. Flexibility allows you to get the best out of the learning environment. Factors are: where you teach, and how you teach. It’s the flexibility of the learning environment; it’s that spiritual thing of where you teach. Its all those factors that make up what a good teacher is. It’s the physical and emotional environment of the student”. In terms of the physical environment of the classroom we emphasised that the circle is for us the cultural geometry of our pedagogy. “Teaching should be in the appropriate environment. In today’s environment you could use audiovisual mediums. But the classroom itself, you could have round or square rooms but you should be in the centre, not on the edge, the centre teaching out. Standing in front gives an authority view. In the centre you’re seen as a friend”. That’s why, “classrooms should be casual”.

This is an extremely important issue to us because where a teacher is in relation to their students has an effect on how they communicate with students, what type of
relationship they set up, and that has a persuasive effect on the type of pedagogies they use. In the Western sense, "in a classroom you are expected to sit down and listen to authority but for Aboriginal people you sat down in a circle and was welcomed". “Your mother...when she used to welcome me it was one of the best feelings”. The circle has a powerful affect on the inter-relationship between teacher and learner. “...I was at a school this morning...they’re starting to think of an outside area as a learning circle, and learning classrooms outside...instead of this row bit”, “up the front and down the back”, “yep, it’s now this circle and it’s creating the circle where everybody’s equal and you’re not, I’m not sitting behind you talking... if you start separating that front/back stuff [because] some people just sit there quietly”, “its conquer and divide again, that’s what its about”. “So again the setting of the classroom has to be thought of as well, it’s not just a room, it’s starting to think outside that square where you’re starting to look out at that circle, and again a circle is whole”.

There’s a tangible connection between the circle and our knowledge ways. “So is our knowledge?”, “yeh”, “but it makes everyone inclusive too I think that circle learning. If you think when you go back to kindergarten you know in a small setting like that they do sit around in a circle at age 1,2 and 3, and then all of a sudden they start dividing them, you know if they kept the concept all the whole way through. Because that’s how you keep the attention of the 2 year olds, you put them in a circle, but you know it doesn’t change when they’re in years 5,6 and 7 and it keeps everyone equal then”. To us the student in a circle is not marginalised, hidden or otherwise rendered invisible. “The problem with schools they’re not identifying properly the special needs of our kids, yet the oldfulla’s would identify something and work on that in the person. Schools today seem to identify kids with a problem and go with fixing their problems instead of going on what they’re good at”. “Mainstream education is not doing the right thing by the kids black or white. They’re identifying what they’re not good at instead of what they are good at”. “The oldfulla’s used to work on your strong points and build on that to push you into the future”.

We looked to the pedagogy of our oldfulla’s to guide our thinking about how our values can inform an Indigenous pedagogy. We could see that, “...if a child has a gift, whatever path, you encourage it in an independent school, you know whether
it’s a manual gift or intellectual gift”, “and you can actually pick it early”, “yeh of
course you can, you can see”, “but that’s where to teach our kids properly it’s
actually getting our kids at that early age and teaching them to their abilities and the
direction they need”, “yes”. “…We know what our kids are [what they] can do”. We
need to, “…teach them to their abilities”, “and build their self-esteem, their
values are important that’s the difference”. “Yeh if they’re sport inclined go for it, if
they’re not and…they want to go down the theory side push them to the theory
right...”. In advocating this type of student centred learning we are thinking about
our collectivism. “…The family values and that core values is that each of us was
given roles for the society that we lived in…”, “…and each of us have that separate
role or trait for the collective community, and that’s what we lack, right the
collectiveness again, it goes back to our number one, the core values of our family”.

Storying emerged as a strong pedagogical technique. “When we tell a story that’s
how we teach”. Storying is a foundational approach for us in creating and imparting
cultural knowledge. To illustrate how our oldfulla’s would use story to teach, for
instance discipline and values, one of us spoke about the story of the Banksia man.
“…The big bad Banksia man, well he wasn’t, the Banksia man was actually a good
guy telling the kids about what food there was, how to behave, what not to do was in
the story so telling that story over and over again from an early age reinforces
behaviour”, “yeh”, “it’s their education”. We saw the effectiveness of storying as a
teaching strategy. One of us made an interesting comparison with the value of
storying and the implementation of current discipline policy in schools. “We don’t
need these 10 step rules that all the schools do you know bullying and all this, we
have that, it’s already in the culture”, “because it’s in the story”, “the discipline”,
“the basic values”, “yeh”. Storying though is not just about creating tales for
children. “We use [our stories as a] philosophical introduction”, so that what is
being taught is grounded within the philosophical understandings of our knowledges.

It follows then that, “some of the teaching strategies should reflect on some of the
philosophical interpretations”, that come through in our stories. Culturally when we
teach we start with philosophical introduction so that the learner is better placed to
understand the reasoning behind what they are being asked to learn. Storying is a
strategy that allows teachers to become learners. “When you teach Aboriginal kids
in a cultural environment, let them tell you some of their stories”, so that you can learn from them. Storying can be used to make learning an interchange. This is important to us because through storying we are able to express both our spiritualism and our collectivism. Storying can be a shared experience. “Education is a two-way thing; it’s evolving where the learner becomes the teacher and the teacher the learner”. Our oldfulla’s like my Dad, took this approach, he recognised the value of learning as a two way process, he empowered younger members of our collective, like myself, by being open to listening to and respecting what we had to say. “For a teacher it’s about being able to take on board that students are smart and savvy and will point out stuff you haven’t seen”.

Singing is similarly a strong pedagogy for us. “I can sing my language but I can’t speak it”. “Singing is a teaching strategy”, that facilitates language learning and maintenance, and spiritual expression. “Song, music and rhythm are really important. It’s important because this taps into our spiritual side”. “We need some white stuff but what we need is the culture stuff like song, language, how to do art, craft, and make functional objects”. To teach a cultural curriculum the, “pedagogy needs to be more relaxed, it’s ok to laugh in a classroom. Humour teaches a lot, you can teach through humour and songs. You can draw a detailed diagram or do models of a subject your teaching. Visual representations are a visual way of teaching. Teachers are going to have to be creative”, and that includes assessment. “You know I think like half the teachers should be made to go and look at colleges like...where you can hand in an assignment it can be orally, it can be in a painting, it can be in writing, it can be however you know a play for...you know that flexibility our children should be allowed to do it too”. “There has to be something else that they can get credits for”, like community based achievements.

Being creative and flexible brought up some innovative ideas that relate to pedagogy. In one session we looked at how other independent programmes like the Montessori and Steiner systems of education organise teaching. “...Montessori it’s a stages programme, it doesn’t matter what age you are...”, “that’s how the Montessori system works, it doesn’t go on age, it goes on what you want to learn...”. The attraction with this is that it moves away from the age based lock step method used by mainstream. Mixed age groups can learn together, which for us as collective
peoples is far more appealing. Such methods allow for siblings and cousins and so on to learn together. “...I think they give them a certain project they’ve got to do, design whatever, but I know its not an age thing...there’s certain stages, they don’t put [students] in...year 4,5 like that, they do completely different, and they go on the kids motivation, their independence you know stuff like that. I know Montessori is about instilling independence, self-learning...”. “...To pass in a Steiner school, to get your school certificate or things like that you actually work on a project, that’s your major thing, it’s a project, not the theory of writing bullshit we’re given...”.

Whilst methods like project learning can be individually based such methods are also amenable to collective learning. That’s why, “workshops or focus groups is a strong teaching strategy”, because it’s a pedagogy that allows us to express our collectivism. Workshops and focus groups are participatory forms of learning where students are active not passive learners. One stakeholder saw how important workshopping is, particularly when teaching values like respect. “We need to have workshops in schools to teach kids how to respect people, to teach identity and respect, understanding, relationships, and trust”. Our valuing of collectivism led us to think about practice-based teaching. We favour, “...real life scenario’s instead of what’s in books”. It gives us a more realistic platform from which to learn. “Teaching methods have to change to be more extensive. Small groups and hands on is a good pedagogy”. “Teaching should show people how to do something”. Similarly there is merit in collective or team teaching. “Everything each person [teacher] knows has to be brought together”. Teaching and learning becomes a collective experience for students and teachers alike, “it’s knowledge sharing”.

8.5 Visualising Indigenous Independent Education

At the outset I was aware that there would most likely be wide ranging views amongst us as to the positives and negatives of realising our educational autonomy through independent education. However, what actually came out of dialogic exchange wasn’t so much a range of disparate views, rather we expressed a unified strength of commitment to the survival and revival of our cultures identity. That our cultures are so profoundly important to us spoke volumes. It meant that, in effect, there was no outright opposition to the concept of educational autonomy with any of the participating stakeholders. In speaking of the positives of such a concept one
stakeholder noted that in terms of the, “positives, the kids would be getting the truth of cultural teaching and accurate information. I wouldn’t even think about the negative because I wouldn’t want to tarnish an “original” education”. I felt strongly the emotion of this statement because it highlighted the context of everything we had to say about how our values could inform curriculum and pedagogical praxis as a platform for our educational autonomy. Above all else we saw that education must advance our cultures.

In yarning about education we acknowledged that, “schools and education is political whether people like it or not”. One of us made the point, “...if you think in the schooling world in Western society they have classes [social classes]”. “Yeh, I know, but that’s the governments way of doing that, they’re splitting our society”, “yeh”, “you know what I mean even at the school level”, “yeh”, “you know they start sowing the seeds then so anyone who says that schools are not connected to society, are not connected to economy”, “of course they are”, “that drives society, because that’s what schools do, they teach kids to become economic players in the system ...”. With that in mind at one session I commented that, “you can have NAIDOC week alright, and you might be able to fly the flag but that doesn’t make a system Aboriginal you know what I mean”, “its tokenism like...said, so what do we do, do we keep on persisting with the mainstream or do we think about something alternative like independent Aboriginal education that promotes our values instead of the values that are really dominant in the schools now and the universities and throughout society...cause those values aren’t going to go anywhere...”.

In terms of education one of us observed that, “as an Indigenous nation it’s about equity and educating people who didn’t have the same opportunity, the value that education gives to us”. “Education provides us with all the tools to actually break off from that mentality that education is only Whitefulla stuff; that any education actually provides that power to stand up against your enemy”. “We’re crying out for all these Aboriginal people to get these qualifications, but we got these others [ Aboriginal people] questioning what we’re doing, so we need to educate them as well. We need the qualifications to fight the academy from within”. “Maybe you need to create unity amongst all Aboriginal people. There needs to be a sense of national unity to further our cause and to acknowledge that it will change at points.
The education systems are still promoting the fact that we don’t have unity, and we [Aboriginal people] promote it too”. This is an interesting perspective but those of us who are less optimistic about the mainstream tend towards the idea that independent education provides us with our greatest chance to secure educational equity especially in terms of advancing our cultural educational interests.

Talking about independent Indigenous education always seems to be emotive though. “Yeh but the thing is...sometimes when I speak to somebody about independent schools they say oh apartheid.... Not far from where I live the Greeks have now got a central school, they’ve got a primary and a high school...”, “exactly”. “But why does this notion of apartheid always apply to blackfulla’s when we want to do something? We’re the original people of this country, we signed no treaty, we never signed our sovereignty away”, “we didn’t sign any treaties”, “no”, “we weren’t given a treaty”. When we try to assert our unity through autonomous endeavours like independent education we are seen as segregating ourselves from the mainstream. As one of us succinctly noted, “people are always gonna have that point of view, and I just think in the end you just have to go with it, you’ve got to have some ownership, like at the moment the government is making everything centralised, all services, you know everything’s being wiped because they want us to go mainstream, so you’ve got to pull back a little bit, you know, and we’ve just got to do it...”. It is this type of optimistic attitude that we need to embrace.

There was, however, genuine concern that, “the government might not want an independent school”. Interestingly one of us expressed the opinion that, “...the hardest thing I can see in this going through, if this went through and they were taught Aboriginal culture by Aboriginal people what would it show, the government up for all the years through education leading up to it...the governments and all the institutions would be thinking well we’ve been teaching this for a 100 years and it’s all wrong because the Aboriginal people have come in here and they’re proven us wrong. You know I reckon it’s going to be may be a stumbling block within the political area”. Another of us poignantly drew attention to the reality that, “...our biggest problem is funding right to set anything up right, any programme or anything that we need to set up we’ve got to have the money even if we’ve got the theory and we can prove that it works, again which government or the funding bodies are going
to give it to us to do this? Whose going to fund Aboriginal people for self-determination?”. “Yeh, that’s right”, “that’s a good question who’s going to fund us for self-determination, the government doesn’t want us to be self-determined”.

Funding is thus a major issue in terms of realising our educational autonomy. As things exist at present, “we are not making wise investments in terms of dollars and resources”. But to instigate change, especially through initiatives like independent education, “...you’ve got to have the funding and the backing”. “To set up a private school for Aboriginal people, Aboriginal people haven’t got the funds”. Funding is an issue not only in respect to overall organisation but also right down to family being able to pay expenses like school fees, “...so virtually you’ve got to run it free ...”. “...You would have to have the basic program set up for 12 years, a basic 12 year programme, so [that] a kindergarten kid right [could] come from kindergarten and go right through to year 12, then judge it”. The question is who would fund such a long-term endeavour? It must be remembered that it’s possible that, “you wouldn’t see the dividends...”, in the short term. One of us also recognised that in terms of the cultural content of curriculum, “you’d have to make sure that what goes into the school is correct so five years down the track you don’t come across mistakes”. Mistakes of this ilk can easily have a flow on affect in terms of funding.

Ultimately for us, “to own your own, that’s what the bottom line is, it’s about having our own”. “Other people have their own schools; they learn their own culture and get qualifications and skills. They come out of their schools to survive in the Western World and also learn their culture”. So, at one session, I asked, “what about mainstream can mainstream do this?”, that is facilitate cultural learning. “Do this, no, no mainstream can’t do this...”. This then begs the question, “what does an Aboriginal school look like?”. “Like...[an existing Aboriginal programme] open learning very much open”, “no square rooms, not a square room in the place”, “but open areas, you know lots of trees where they can sit under the tree and yarn...you walk in there and you can feel it can’t you?”, “yeh”, “...that energy when you walk in there”, “because...it’s in the round”, “yeh but it isn’t just that, its just that everyone’s welcome you know...”. Environment is crucial. “An [Indigenous] school would require culturally appropriate means, design, and would also mean location”.

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“We need to be able to design land so young people know their place on land”. We need to, “design [a] complex so it’s culturally appropriate for males and females”.

We saw how important it is that independent Indigenous education not be restricted as a typical school. Most of us expressed the opinion that any such facility should be structured to, “…have adult programs, secondary and primary schools”. “An Aboriginal College represents collectiveness”, “you’ve gotta be able to bring our family members along into the classroom”. We thought about education spanning all the ages. “Why can’t independent school have a bigger role than just teaching the kids, why can’t it have an adult education centre attached to it for the parents?…”, “but it can, it can”. “The curriculum has to start at a pre-school level. Pedagogy has to be consistent at the pre-school to primary school and to the high school level”. “There has to be a start somewhere but if you can come from the beginning, where you were taught as a kid through to being an adult you could still be learning, you never stop learning”. “The integration of students, parents and community would be a positive”, why not do things like, “bring dads in on men’s business and mothers on women’s business”. “We need to have activities in the community that fosters learning and teaching that supports that collective way of life”.

The first diagram on the following page was drawn up during one session of dialogic exchange in order to help us visualise our thoughts about collective lifelong learning. Although the majority of stakeholders saw this type of model as the ideal for an Indigenous independent education initiative a number of compromises were also put forward as well. “With an independent school you could go for the last 3 years of high school”, “…you can go for a compromise and say well what about the last three years of high school or the last two years…” The second diagram was likewise developed to help us visualise these suggested models. The compromise models reflect concern about whether a pre-school to year 12 independent education programme is really achievable. There was also some concern that without mainstream education students may not necessarily gain the appropriate Western academic skills to go onto tertiary studies, to TAFE or to good jobs. With that in mind one of us said, “a negative of an independent school could be that some Aboriginal people don’t understand what you’re teaching and have something to say about it. You have to get the confidence of the parents”.

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The circle is symbolic for us. It represents the holistic nature of our collectivism. We therefore visualise our education as a collective enterprise, embedded within our own cultural reality. We believe strongly that the Indigenous learner should not be separated from family and community. Education as an Indigenous enterprise, for us, has a far greater role than just teaching from pre-school to year 12. We see our education as a model for life long learning.

A compromise was also visualised in the form of an Aboriginal college, which would cater to Indigenous learners at a stage when they are likely to withdraw from mainstream education. Under this model an Aboriginal college would support Aboriginal and Western knowledge in an Aboriginal setting, and would be specifically for learners from either year 9 or year 11 through to year 12.

As it stands there is a high attrition rate with Indigenous learners leaving mainstream education. In this regard, “the pivotal years are 14-15 when they are contemplating staying or leaving school”. This is the age, “…when it’s gonna hit hard, to get them to retain interest in themselves”. We recognised too that, “9-10 years of age is also our biggest concern, this is when they go through cultural identity, it’s a crisis for them”. One of us raised the issue that in some cases, “…Aboriginal kids start wishing they were not Koori because they’re not given anything to make them proud of being an Aboriginal”. For us this is a very serious, heart rendering observation. There is only one way to change this. “If we can promote strong Aboriginality in the kids that will help them cope with a lot of things better”. “With culture stuff in them they’ll become very strong themselves, they’ll get self-esteem and motivation will be a part of their life”. Maybe then when it comes to those vital teenage years they might feel empowered to keep on going with their education. As one of us said, “I want our children to have healthy happy lives, but they’re given no recognition of who they are. We want our children to be contributors not a recipient. They need to contribute to society, it’s a powerful place to be”.
Workshopping independent Indigenous education inevitably involves discussing teachers. Teaching, it must be said, is not an easy thing, “it takes a hell of a lot of patience to teach kids”. Qualities like patience are essential as far as we are concerned. One of us asked, “so how does that show on the marks on a piece of paper?”. You might have a degree but does that degree really substantiate that you have the human qualities we are looking for. Realistically, “there’s a lot you have to do to get teaching to work as a whole. The selection of teachers is critical”. We need to be mindful that, “they [teachers] have to teach culture”, both directly and indirectly. Of course, “there’s no reason why an Aboriginal school can’t have black and white teachers. Koori people could teach the Aboriginal side, the white teachers the non-Aboriginal side”. What we emphasise is that non-Indigenous, “teachers need to learn about Aboriginal ways of life”. One of us noted that, “…they need to learn from within the local Aboriginal communities”. At the very least it is clear that, “we need to be the one’s giving guidance to teachers”. With that in mind, “Aboriginal cultural protocol should be put in a curriculum for teachers…”.

From our perspective Indigenous teachers are a priority, for example, “Aboriginal teachers could give a balanced view of the history of Australia; it empowers our kids. Aboriginal teachers could put Captain Cook in its proper perspective”. The trouble is that whilst we should be the ones to teach our values, our histories and our cultures in many cases we are not necessarily qualified to do so in a Western sense. “…And that’s what’s happening now...our older generation, like the 40 year olds now are back in uni to get that little piece of paper, and this is where we loose because most of us don’t have that piece of paper”, “how many people do you meet like that?”. “…You don’t need the piece of paper to teach as long as its by a standard and you know, some people haven’t got pieces of paper and they are the best teachers...”. “That’s a killer to our community...and that brings [up] that self-determination...”. “…The autonomy must be giving the teacher, or the place, the right to employ the right person even if they haven’t got that political piece of paper to say that they’re qualified to teach, that’s the big difference”, “to an Aboriginal person to teach”, “despite quals...”, “that’s right”, “regardless of aay”.

In thinking about teaching one of us in particular placed great importance in the role of our cultural Elders. In terms of mainstream education this stakeholder noted that,
“they just taught us basic education, but we want to teach our young ones through the eyes of our Elders”. That’s because, “Elders are our role models and leaders”. “The Elders kept everyone in the community together”. “Knowledge has to come through your community”. “People in your community will acknowledge the ones that are going through a learning journey through their culture and spirituality, who will became the next generation of Elders”. “Aboriginal knowledge means learning through the eyes of my Elders and learning from the grassroots level at a very young age”. “When our young ones go through a learning journey, they need to with the guidance of our Elders”. From that perspective this stakeholder concluded that, “a culturally appropriate teacher is someone who’s gone through a learning journey”. “You teach the basics up to a certain level, then get them to go back to people in their family to go on a learning journey with their Elders”, and given that, “it would be good to have parents on board”.

Out of the need for cultural Elders to be active teachers in independent Indigenous education comes recognition of a more collective approach to teaching wherein family and community can come into the business of teaching. When I think back to my own education the only time my education had significant cultural meaning was when my Dad would come in as a guest teacher and talk to us about culture and our Indigenous identity. The same issue came up for us in dialogic exchange in respect to teaching values like autonomy. “So to teach about our autonomy within a curriculum you teach about self-determination”, “but who teaches self-determination? The aunt sitting at home, the grandmother sitting at home is a better teacher than somebody that’s sat in a classroom and learnt the theory behind teaching, she’s raised 50 kids, she knows how to teach the kids respect and the whole thing, but because she hasn’t got a piece of paper”, “but an Aboriginal school would be able to bring someone like that in”, “now that’s the difference”, “now that is the way it has to work for that self-determination but it then also underpins the core value of family, community”.

In thinking about our culture and our autonomy one of us said, “if we’re going to stay strong we need our own circle...”, that is informal community based circles that operate as our think tanks so that we can fully engage issues like independent education. We need to establish amongst ourselves what’s best for us. We need to
work out, “how it can be achieved. So if you [we] find something that works, apply it, don’t change it”. For independent Indigenous education to get off the ground we need to advance our unity. “This is what gives us our strength, our collective energy and collective knowledge. We come together to discuss the issues and to address the issues, not to discuss personalities. Personalities are what need to be removed when discussing business”. “One way to express unity could be through the base. Grassroots people have to build the base and work our way up...A collective promotes unity and has an influence. It’s empowering because we created it ourselves”. With a unified approach we can realise our autonomy, and as one of us said, “confidence comes from autonomy”. Educational autonomy will open the door for our grassroots people to become valued players in teaching and leadership.

That grassroots level of cultural Elders and family brings to mind the matter of leadership. Leadership is important to us in a collective sense. “How do you cause change so it becomes a social benefit, not a social disadvantage? Good leadership is a good start to bring a community back to life again”. In terms of education it was noted that, “it’s not about teaching leadership, it’s about demonstrating leadership and the learning comes from here”. Clearly there is a need for teachers to emulate the leadership skills of our senior peoples so that our children can then learn through example. Leadership though can be taught in more practical ways too. In thinking about how to handle discipline in a culturally sensitive way one of us perceptively reminded us of the operation and success of Indigenous circle sentencing. “...It’s that circle sentencing...where the community decide”, “yeh I mean you’ve got to have certain sort of rules but the same thing could be incorporated into the schools. You get all the senior students in and sit and talk to that person whose done wrong”. It is for us a positive, practical and culturally collective way of teaching leadership, responsibility and respect through praxis.

When we looked at the structure of education a number of isolated issues were raised. For instance one of us observed that, “we need simplicity. We need something simple to understand; kids get agitated”, highlighting the need for down-to-earth curriculum. Another stakeholder said, “when you’re taking them on a learning journey your taking them through steps, you need to take them over it again and again”. “...You go over last weeks program and add more to it”. Room for
revision, with cultural education, means that the pace of curriculum needs to be flexible. Flexibility in class structures was likewise seen as necessary. “...Just say there was an Aboriginal school in existence he’s in preschool, why can’t he go into year 2 and sit there with his cousins”, “that’s what I’m saying, that’s how the Montessori system works...and that’s how we have to work”. Flexibility also came up in respect to the time span for teaching. “I believe that teaching at night is more stronger than teaching at day time. Teaching our kids the theme of cultural awareness at night-time seems more stronger...”. “To do culture stuff you have to do it in an appropriate environment, you’re still teaching at night too; it’s a cycle”.

Choice in curriculum came up as another area of concern. “It’s not until year 10, 11, 12 or college before you get a choice...”. “...The curriculum is not varied enough that’s the problem...to keep their interest, that’s what its all about...”. For us it’s about being flexible so that learning programmes can accommodate a range of needs and interests. “For example, if an Aboriginal student had a strong interest in something they could just focus on that one thing as they go up and up through the high school system”, because, “after school you’re on your own, we need something after school such as employment. We need to realise what we can have in terms of Aboriginal employment in our own culture”. That flexible approach extends to other matters as well. For instance a student, “...might have to go back out to wherever and look after the family circumstances, why can’t they come back a year later and pick up where they left off?”, “yeh”, “they’re still continuing their education”, “where the system at the moment, you miss a year at school” “...the only way out of that is going back to TAFE and doing it at night and then you’re back into a worse system where”, “you’re chasing your tail”.

There are several reasons why values should be taught, its an equity issue in the fact that all people need to be given an education in the broadest sense, and it has to be given in such a way that it connects with people’s identity, there has to be a valid reason why they’re learning it. People learn better when they see a reason/desire for learning. If people have an interest they seek out ways of doing it. Curriculum has to accommodate those interests, it’s the epistemologies and ontologies; why and how we learn, what we learn. It comes back to that national framework and is filtered down to accommodate each community’s learning facility. It also comes back to
how we teach our teachers to teach. It’s really hard to define a cultural teacher. Culture is dynamic, we can’t buy into stereotypes, you have to develop a program that highlights culture as a dynamic and growing creature. You have to define what culture is, it allows for the differences of what’s out there. You always hear about cultural safety, cultural awareness, and cultural respect, but the mainstream is looking at culture under a microscope; not the big picture. Microscope looking at culture has to stop; we need to look at it in a realistic sense, that it’s big. The way it’s done now is tokenistic.

Throughout our dialogic exchange one thing became certain, the positive, “…of an independent school would be to keep the culture alive”. One of us astutely remarked that, “…other culture’s are actually setting up their own schooling systems…and what have we got, we’ve got bugger all, we’ve got to take the mainstream”. “So why can’t we be independent?”. “There is a need for an alternative”. One of the most compelling arguments for independent Indigenous education is that it will function to, “…instil pride in Aboriginal people”. For many of us we also saw that independent education is by far and away our best chance to, “…improve the retention rates of Aboriginal students”. It all comes down to the reality that, “an independent school could revive the culture”, by engendering within our peoples a solid cultural foundation, which in turn will stimulate pride in identity. We must always be aware that, “education can only be a conduit to keeping our culture alive, it’s what connects everything, but it’s not the only thing for keeping it alive”. “Our culture is about survival; it’s about balance. The main part is about surviving in the world, that’s what our cultures’ about”. Ours is after all, “…an evolving culture”.

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CHAPTER 9: ARTICULATING A CASE IN SUPPORT OF INDIGENOUS INDEPENDENT EDUCATION

9.1 An Opening Clarification

I find myself now at a point where the informational content of the grounding narrative, Chapters 1-5, needs to be synthesised with the informational outcomes of the research, Chapters 6-8. This begins the final stage in the development of my thesis. It is the stage at which I must intellectualise to the fullest my thesis as new Indigenous knowledge. In visualising how best to do this I began by unifying the concepts of analysis, discussion and conclusion in my mind’s eye. I didn’t envisage a natural division between analysis and discussion as one chapter, and conclusion as another. Instead I saw a natural divide between articulating a case in support of Indigenous independent education and developing education as an Indigenous enterprise. For that reason, I have extended my analysis, discussion and conclusion over both Chapters 9 and 10.

In this chapter, Chapter 9, I focus on:

i. The Ontological and Epistemological Foundation of our Core Values;
ii. The Subjugation of the Cultural Foundation of our Knowing;
iii. The West-centrism of Mainstream Education; and
iv. The Emotional Background to Indigenous Independent Education.

I then wind up with a closing summation as a bridge into my next and final chapter, Chapter 10, in which I focus on:

i. The Cultural Paradigm of Indigenous Education;
ii. Indigenous Values Informing Curriculum;
iii. Indigenous Values Informing Pedagogical Praxis; and
iv. Indigenous Values Informing Success and Assessment.

I then bring my thesis to an end with a separate Concluding Statement.

9.2 The Ontological and Epistemological Foundation of our Core Values

From the outset I have been forthright about my position with regard to this thesis. I have made it plain that my principle objective is to contribute to the growing field of Indigenous knowledge supportive of Indigenous independent education initiatives. For that reason I structured both the grounding narrative and the themes for dialogic
exchange so as to create a research context within which a case in support of Indigenous independent education would potentially emerge as an outcome. The start point for me in creating this research context was to express the cultural character and cultural depth of our core values. I felt strongly that this was the most appropriate point at which to begin because I wanted to expose at the outset the dichotomy that exists between our cultures and the culture of the dominant West-centric social order. Given this, in Chapter 2, I anatomised the terms ‘culture’ and ‘values’ in order to establish an informational backdrop from which to consider the dynamics of our values, worldview and identity. To tie in with this I determined that the first theme for Indigenous yarning should centre on our values, worldview and identity, but also on our cultural sovereignty. What you will read here is the resultant synthesis between primarily Chapter 2 and Theme 1 of our yarning.

In affirming the existence, strength and informing agency of our core values, in terms of our worldview and identity, I made it patently clear in Chapter 2 that the breadth of our worldview and identity continues because of the endurance of our value systems, despite the impositions and inculcations wrought by colonisation. In this chapter I argued that our core values are expressions of our worldview. Through the tenor of our yarning my argument was strongly supported and, to my mind, confirmed. More significantly what I also sensed as confirmed was the importance of our core values as expressions of our ontology and epistemology. Through our yarning we recognised that there is an appreciable intersection between our ontology, our epistemology, our worldview, our identity and our core values. These five entities, it was confirmed for me, are wholly interlocked. Our core values thus function to inform, direct and shape our cultural thought and cultural emotion. As we move through our lives encountering situations, problems, ideas, phenomena and all other manner of social, economic and political circumstance we invoke the ontological and epistemological meanings and understandings inherent in our core values to rationalise our cultural sense of the world in accordance with our way of knowing.

It was clear from the tenor of our yarning, that in an Indigenous context, the concept of values is broader than the general definitional consensus of values as socially orienting behavioural referents. Values for us are more significantly ontological and epistemological referents, in that they focus the lens of our Indigenous worldview as
the psyche of our cultural identity. It is precisely because of the cognitive depth of
our valuing that we continue to know ourselves as Indigenous cultural beings, even
though so much of what would apparently teach us to be an Indigenous cultural
being appears, in a West-centric sense at least, to have been colonised out of us.
Through the intensity of our dialogue it became quintessentially clear that our values
have never been destroyed. In fact, in thinking about how embedded our values are
within us, and how invested we are in them, I can appreciate all the more why our
values have not been supplanted, even under the weight of Western hegemony.
Certainly, in thinking about this in relation to the theoretical propositions of
Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) I sensed that the work of our primary pedagogy (that
of family and community) would never be easily erased through the work of West-
centric secondary pedagogy (that of institutionalised education).

What I have found particularly interesting though, is that in the abundance of
available literature on Indigenous survival, our core values seem appreciably under-
recognised as significant determinants in our cultural continuance. It does, after all,
pay to remember that every visible aspect of our cultures has, since invasion, been
attacked. Our values have flourished precisely because the coloniser’s couldn’t
attack what they couldn’t readily see, acknowledge, or for that matter comprehend.
It is clear, especially from the energy dynamic of our yarning, that our core values
have been instrumental in fuelling the survival of our cultures. I actually pondered
this very issue in Chapter 3 when I critiqued postulations about our identity, as in the
conceptualisation of a cross-nations or pan-continental Aboriginal or Indigenous
identity. Such postulations, I argued, tend to assert that the primary defining basis
for our mutual identity is determinable on the basis of a ‘pan’ or manufactured socio-
political image; an imagine that fixes wholly on the mutual experience of oppression.
What the tenor of our yarning did was expose this notion as incomplete, in that it
clearly falls short of recognising the mutuality of our core values as underpinning
expressions of the identity we share as Aboriginal or Indigenous Australians.

What was confirmed for me through the business of our yarning is that we, as
Indigenous peoples, have a deep cultural affiliation. The way in which we so easily
found cultural connection within our yarning, regardless of our specific backgrounds,
was for me a practical demonstration of the reality that we, as Indigenous beings,
conceive our mutual identity more meaningfully on deeply embedded cultural terms. “Blackfulla’s have a collective thought, or collective way of thinking” (p.159). This statement not only corroborated the mutuality of our collectivism, it also corroborated succinctly the power of our collectivism in forming, directing and shaping the lens of our thinking. The same predisposition can be seen in the following statement, “our knowledge is different to non-Aboriginal people because it’s spiritual, we’re connected up with land and the spirit of our ancestors” (p.162). This statement not only corroborated the mutuality of our spiritualism, it likewise positioned our spiritualism as forming, directing and shaping the lens of our knowing. I was left in no doubt, through our yarning, that our valuing of collectivism and spiritualism are defining elements of our worldview and identity.

What also came through in our yarning, though perhaps more completely in terms of Indigenising pedagogy as discussed under Theme 3, is that the ontological and epistemological foundation of our core values is embedded in land, or as we express it, in ‘country’. This can be seen in observations like, “when we’re in our environment its part of our being; it’s our nature. It’s about teaching the things you can’t see which is our spiritualism” (p.182). It thus came as no surprise to me that we actively reflected in our yarning the same meaning that can be found in the words of Gularrwuy Yunupingu, who said in terms of spirituality that, “…it is a simple idea to project and it is all tied up with the land” (p.39). “You feel part of the natural environment” (p.162) and “natural environment like your connection to land and sea would come under spiritual values” (p.162). These statements speak of the way in which our core values earth us to our ontological and epistemological knowing of country. It’s as though our core values act to centre our worldview and identity in our ontology and epistemology, and our ontology and epistemology in turn galvanises the meaning of our cultural being to the being of country.

Interestingly, what also came through in our yarning is that respect as a value also has ontological and epistemological derivation. “The strongest knowledge is about respect…”, “respect translates into knowledge through value” (p.165). Respect, I came to understand more comprehensively through our yarning, cements our collectivism, our spiritualism and our autonomy together. “Those three values, one relies on the other a lot. Respect is the thing that keeps those values together”
In essence it is all about how respect as a value operates in tandem with collectivism, spirituality and autonomy to position us, and transcend us, in a self-disciplinary way so that we are humble enough to experience metaphysically the being of our ontology and epistemology. Whilst I touched on this in Chapter 2, I actually explored the concept of metaphysical being more meaningfully in Chapter 3 when I made reference to the Western propensity for ‘proof’ in terms of legitimating knowledge. In doing so I referred to Indigenous author Heather Harris (2005) who made plain the holistic and experiential nature of our knowing. This way of knowing gives epistemic validation to the ontological metaphysics of our being.

Because autonomy was not immediately agreed upon in our yarning as a core value I feel it is important that I elaborate more specifically on autonomy. From the outset I was aware of autonomy as a contemporary political value expressive of a paradigm of resistance, struggle and survival. What I didn’t really consider to its fullest, until after I had reflected on the context of our yarning, is that autonomy is not just a contemporary core value, it is a foundational value embedded in our ontology and epistemology, just as deeply as collectivism and spirituality. I gave some indication of this in Chapter 2 in referring to the words of Mantatjara Wilson, on page 40, who spoke about ‘old government’. In referring to old government Mantatjara Wilson acknowledged cultural lore as the foundational political expression of our ontology and epistemology. Autonomy as our core foundational political value bonds with autonomy as our core contemporary political value in that our continued adherence to cultural lore requires us to resist and struggle for our survival as Indigenous beings against the assimilative forces of colonialism, forces that expect us to act differently in the world. It is this bond between our foundational valuing and our contemporary valuing that shapes for us what it means to be autonomous.

Through our valuing of respect, our valuing of spirituality establishes the holistic and experiential nature of our knowing. Our collectivism is concomitant with this, in that our valuing of collectivism, again through our valuing of respect, positions us within our knowing so that we experience our relational connection to all in country as spiritual kin. Our valuing of autonomy then comes into this equation, in concert with our valuing of respect, as the governance of lore, which defines for us specific behavioural and relational constructs in terms of the dynamics of spiritual kin.
Autonomy, in the contemporary sense of our valuing too, binds us to our ontology and epistemology, because of our ongoing commitment to the advancement of our cultural sovereignty. As was said in our yarning, “our values are to maintain what’s left of our culture and heritage and pass it onto our people, as a race of people” (p.165). In my closing paragraph to Chapter 2 (p.42) I made a correlation between the “cohesive energy of our flag” and the cohesive energy of our core values. One only has to look at the symbolic meaning of our flag: red for earth, yellow for sun, black for people. Our values keep this identity forever strong in us.

9.3 The Subjugation of the Cultural Foundation of our Knowing

Having affirmed in Chapter 2 the social, cultural and political dimensions of our worldview and identity, in relation to our core values, I moved on in my grounding narrative to Chapter 3, in which I examined both the politics of our identity and the hegemony of Western knowledge. It was through the work of this chapter that I established the subjugated status of our worldview and identity, and our knowledge ways, within the mainframe of post-invasion Australian society. It was also through the work of this chapter that I exposed the fictionalised nature of West-centric constructions of us. To a great extent the work of Chapter 3 stood on its own in comparison to the research, in that none of the three research themes for Indigenous yarning, nor the two research themes for non-Indigenous dialogue addressed directly either the politics of our identity or the hegemony of Western knowledge. That said there were nonetheless convincing links to be found between the text of Chapter 3 and the testimony that came out of the research process. The first, most emotional link I found centred on how completely we demonstrated in our yarning that we all understood the position of dominance in which we live our cultural lives.

The reality of our subjugated state resonated in statements like, “whitefullas sit in a place of privilege. They think everyone has to assimilate to them” (p.166), just as it did in non-Indigenous dialogue through statements like, “they try to supplant your culture with their culture” (p.130). We were mostly expressive of this subjugation when we spoke of our experiences within mainstream education. “The education system is indoctrinating our own people” (p.166) and “mainstream education built this nation on lies. They built their myths and desecrated our myths and our values of the land” (p.166). Statements such as these tell precisely of the exact status of our
worldview and identity within the broader framework of society and, to my mind, mirror exactly the tenor of the text of Chapter 3. The mere fact that so many issues were flagged in terms of our presence in mainstream education, in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous dialogue, tells me only too well that we are visibly dominated peoples whose cultures have survived to this point under a perpetual state of hegemony. The overarching feeling I took away from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous dialogue is that our worldview and identity are only conditionally tolerated by the mainstream of Australian society.

This message of subjugation led my thinking back to what I wrote in Chapter 3 about the intractable authoritarianism of West-centric knowing. I discussed, in Chapter 3, the politics of our identity in terms of suffering and ignorance. I argued that we would not have suffered if it weren’t for ignorance, and that ignorance was directly a bi-product of the pseudo-rightness of West-centric ‘knowing’. I claimed that West-centric knowing effectively enveloped our ontological and epistemological meanings and understandings, and by association our core values, in an exoticism, primitivism and unchangeability that effectively de-legitimised the cultural foundation of our knowing. As I emphasised in Chapter 3, West-centric depictions of our cultures and us have resulted in the dismissal of our foundational knowledges as mythological constructions. The same point was made in our yarning with statements like, “we are downgraded through our knowledge when it is taught as mythological; not truth” (p.167). The legacy of such depictions has also seeped into thinking about our contemporary knowledge production. I noted in Chapter 6, for instance, that we are still confronted by challenges that suggest that any new knowledge we produce is ‘unauthentic’ Indigenous knowledge.

The well established and pervading hegemonic dogma of West-centric ‘knowing’ would have us locked within a paradigm of the past, so that ‘true’ Indigenousness can only be conceived of and expressed as a fixed or past representation. “Non-Indigenous people like to see Aboriginal culture as being static” (p.130). Without doubt this non-Indigenous observation parallels with the words of Hollinsworth (1998), as quoted on page 50, as indeed do Indigenous observations like, “the education system is still promoting the historical and the exotic” (p.172). When such representations are maintained we are not only actively diminished as knowledgeable
beings in our own right, we are also actively marginalised from having a legitimate ontological and epistemological present and future. In my conversation with one non-Indigenous participant in particular we spoke about how entrenched West-centric ‘knowing’ is in preoccupations with Indigenous visual symbology that too readily constrict our cultural identity to the past. We spoke for instance about “spears and boomerangs” as representing the visual aspects of our cultures, which many non-Indigenous people perceive as imaging our contemporary identity as authentic Aboriginals.

The images that are projected through this symbology are too naively construed to be representative of the only culturally ‘authentic’ identity that we can have as ‘real’ Aboriginals. Even more menacingly for us, the ideology of primitivism continues to be held, in some quarters, as indicative of Indigenous intellect. Certainly I have argued that West-centric knowledge strictures prescribe that we are either ‘authentically’ Aboriginal, in strict adherence to our pre-invasion foundational life ways, or hybridised Westerners and therefore no longer ‘authentically’ Aboriginal. The hegemony of West-centric ‘knowing’ seems to me to dictate that our identity and intellect cannot be known or accepted outside this polarity. It is reductionism, and it is entirely an artefact of West-centric scientism. In Chapters 3 and 5 I wrote at length about this so-called scientism; a scientism that John Henry and Wendy Brabham (1994) so rightly framed as biological determinism. As was said in non-Indigenous dialogue West-centric ‘knowing’ narrowly centres on the belief that, “…knowledge can be quantified, measured, and owned, and can only be given validity scientifically, or proven scientifically” (p.133).

This belief in the superiority of Western-derived science has been instrumental in maintaining West-centric denial of our ontology and epistemology. “…Aboriginal knowledge, because it can’t be proven, it becomes marginal, invisible or non-existent” (p. 133). This statement captures only too well the reductive effect West-centric scientism has on our knowing. As was tellingly asked in non-Indigenous dialogue, “how can you change this without a change in white intellect?” (p.130). This question brought home to me a clear message of what we’re up against; that is, the sheer magnitude of Western hegemony and the power behind its ideological mindset. It must be acknowledged though that Indigenous academics like Martin
Nakata (1998), Lester-Irabinna Rigney (1999, 2001, 2002) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) have been instrumental in working towards Indigenous rebuttal of this dominating mindset. In our yarning compelling statements like, “culture is a living lore, a living thing” (p.164), and ours is, “an evolving culture” (p.197), emphasised to me that our cultures are neither static, nor embedded in someone else’s conception of our foundational past. In talking about our cultures as living lore we actively affirm the growing life and legitimacy of our ontology and epistemology.

9.4 The West-centrism of Mainstream Education

My next move in articulating a case in support of Indigenous independent education was to consider the position of our worldview and identity specifically in relation to Australia’s mainstream education system. Having established the position of our identity within the broader mainframe of society as one of being under hegemonic duress, I wanted to explore how this state of hegemony plays out within the day-to-day operations of mainstream classrooms. Accordingly, I centred Chapter 4 on the sociological predisposition of mainstream education. In preparing the first research theme and attendant questions for non-Indigenous dialogue I very much had this chapter in mind. I was interested to know how the non-Indigenous participants perceived the role of education, especially in terms of cultural production and reproduction. I wanted to establish whether they saw mainstream education as a neutral entity, since it is often presumed to be so, or whether they saw mainstream education as sociologically conditioned. What I actually heard in the voice of the research was a definite consensus of opinion that mainstream education is indeed profoundly sociological in nature, and furthermore profoundly ideological in nature.

The sociological purpose of mainstream education was most tellingly confirmed in statements like, “mainstream education is a powerful mechanism for producing and reproducing culture” (p.127), and, “the role of education is critical in the production and reproduction of culture” (p.131). I was struck too by comments like, “…schools are like factories…they’re systems that produce and reproduce whatever society requires at the time - employment is the key” (p.127), because statements such as this extrapolate the economic interests of society to the purpose of mainstream education. Interestingly a similar observation was also made during Indigenous yarning, “…that’s what schools do, they teach kids to become economic players in the
system…” (p.188). Such thoughts about education echo those of Youngman (1986), whom I referred to on page 70 of Chapter 4 in evidencing how mainstream education at a basic level represents a training ground for the economic dynamics of the dominant West-centric social order. Observations that recognise the economic imperatives of mainstream education are not just telling of the sociological embedment of mainstream education, they are also telling of ideological embedment.

In Chapter 4 I argued that the sociological imperatives of Australia’s West-centric dominant social order are consistent with the economic interests and priorities of a capitalistic worldview. This capitalistic worldview, I asserted, is inherently enveloped in an ideology that promotes individualism and competitiveness. Having explored the role of education in cultural production and reproduction with the non-Indigenous participants I proceeded to seek their views in respect to the values that inform the sociological ethos of mainstream education. My purpose in doing so was to gain a greater insight into the specific cultural predisposition of education in the mainstream. I felt that by asking about the values structure of mainstream education I would be able to corroborate, or indeed contradict, the link I had made between mainstream education and the ideology of capitalism. Again what I found was a consensus of opinion. Statements like, “I think the driving value that underpins mainstream education is unfettered individualism” (p.132), “politically you learn that you’re in competition with other kids” (p.131), and, “individualism, highly competitive ultimately it gets aggressive” (p.132), all speak of the same value structure.

In Chapter 4 I made mention of meritocracy; about how the rhetoric behind mainstream education purports that the system represents a level playing field for all, regardless of race, class or gender. The arguments enshrined in the idea of meritocracy tend to nullify the idea that the sociological construct of mainstream education could in any way constitute a cultural and therefore a learning deterrent for learners whose cultural arbitrarity is not of a West-centric orientation. What I found interesting in regard to this was the separation one non-Indigenous participant made between official curriculum, which echoes the virtues of meritocracy, and unofficial curriculum, which more realistically messages the actual cultural specificity of the mainstream learning environment. It was recognised in non-Indigenous dialogue that
the mainstream’s individualised, competitive learning environment actually results in a categorisation of learners in terms of success or failure. In talking about this another participant raised the critical question, “what about the ones with communal knowledge?” (p.132). It was a poignant question that for me drew attention to the problematics of culture-clash.

In referring to the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) in Chapter 4 I argued that when the pedagogic work of primary pedagogy (that of family and community) aligns with the pedagogic work of secondary pedagogy (that of institutionalised education) there is no culture-clash. It was this notion of culture-clash that I had in mind when I structured my next question for dialogic exchange, which centred on whether or not the values embedded in mainstream education promote or impede Indigenous identity. I wanted to gain a sense of how the non-Indigenous participants saw us coping in a system not of our cultural arbitrary. In reply one participant drew attention to the blame the victim scenario, a scenario that plays out when a learner who does not cope is recognised as having personal failings, rather than being a victim of a system’s cultural structure. This participant posed the question, “what is it that Aboriginal people are prepared to give up to achieve something?” (p.134). In this question I read a subtext that told me that because the mainstream is intrinsically rooted within the Western worldview we will always be in the position of having to assimilate and therefore compromise the integrity of our identity in order to succeed. It is worth noting that the degree to which an individual is prepared to assimilate uncritically may be related to their level of success within mainstream education.

I was moved by testimony that recognised that our kids, “often see or feel that they’re in another person’s game” (p.135). It sums up rather precisely what I see through my Indigenous lens. I must say, however, that there wasn’t a total feeling of negativity about our experience of mainstream education. Some of the non-Indigenous participants gave me the impression that they felt that the mainstream could work well for us, though, in counter to this, I also sensed that they were readily aware of the cultural problems that impede Indigenous learners. The example that was given about how our kids cope in a test situation (p.135), for instance, illustrates the playing out of a clash of cultures. Here it can be seen clearly that there is a direct tension between our valuing of collectivism and the valuing of individualism by the
mainstream education system. I wasn’t surprised when I heard comments like, “these values generally act in a negative way on the identity of Indigenous students” (p.135), or, “one thing schools can do is to get them [Aboriginal students] to be ashamed of their own culture” (p.127). These statements are very affirming for me because they clearly connect with the tenor of my grounding narrative in developing my case in support of Indigenous independent education.

I have to say that overall I gained a strong sense from the non-Indigenous dialogue that the values of individualism and competitiveness impact more often than not in a negative way upon Indigenous learners. It was with this proposition in mind that I structured my final question for Theme 1 on the issue of whether or not non-tokenistic space can be found within the mainstream for the expression of our worldview. There was a mix of responses regarding this. Again I sensed that some of the non-Indigenous participants felt hopeful. They have after all been working to do just that throughout their professional careers as educators. At a personal level I would like to be able to share in their optimism, but I am more sceptical. As was revealed in the dialogue so much depends upon the commitment of teachers, parents and the rest of the school community. One participant raised the point that it is easy for mainstream schools, “…to walk into the comfortable Aboriginal space, but they don’t always walk into the political Aboriginal space” (pp.137-138). From my perspective it’s hard not to see this as tokenism. It put me in mind of what came up in our yarning about flags and NAIDOC day. The ‘pretty’ stuff of our cultures is all well and good, but that of itself is not enough to advance our worldview and identity.

It was, of course, pointed out that curriculum like Aboriginal Studies exists. To a great extent this curriculum, in tandem with policy, is supposed to ameliorate the cultural divide, so that we do find non-tokenistic space within the mainstream. What was tellingly noted about Aboriginal Studies curriculum however, was that, “…the difficulty is that it’s taught by non-Indigenous teachers. Any teachers who aren’t really immersed in the culture they’re teaching, you just loose so much because you don’t have that worldview…” (p.139). That is precisely what I have argued throughout the grounding narrative of this thesis. There is a certain sense of knowing that is borne of cultural insight, that gives a depth of understanding and meaning that just cannot come through otherwise. I touched on this in Chapter 3 in talking about
the concepts of relativism and subjectivism. My argument is that the teachings of primary pedagogy inculcate a particular line of sight that is not something that can be readily overwritten. The work of secondary pedagogy for instance might make a learner aware of a differing line of sight, but that secondary line of sight never completely replaces or overlays the first, primary line of sight.

In thinking over all that I heard during non-Indigenous dialogue I came away with a distinct impression that there was an acceptance of the fact that no matter what advances are made to accommodate our cultural needs and aspirations, at the end of the day we are nonetheless dealing with an education system that is sociologically and ideologically a construction of the Western worldview. I would have to say that the overarching message I took away, in respect to our cultures finding non-tokenistic space within the mainstream, is that it will always depend upon power dynamics over which we have no real control. Perhaps the best that we can ever strive for is accommodation. It was the concept of accommodation that was on my mind when I structured the non-Indigenous dialogue, through the second research theme, to move onto the issue of policy. This second research theme very much synchronised with the text of Chapter 5. What I was looking to do was explore policy in-depth with the non-Indigenous participants. My perspective on policy, as can be gleaned from Chapter 5, is that policy remains a paradox. I wanted to know whether or not the non-Indigenous participants held similar views.

With that in mind I framed my first question for Theme 2 on the effectiveness of policy in redressing Indigenous educational disparity and culture conflict. I was interested to know if the non-Indigenous participants saw policy as predominantly rhetoric, or as something that can genuinely work to advance our status within the mainstream. I wanted to find out if they sensed a gap between the theory of policy and its implementation and practice. As I pointed out in Chapter 5, education policy receptive to our voice was a long time coming for us. In many respects this policy development was a positive, because it finally gave some formal recognition to the distinctness of our cultures, our worldview and identity. The theoretical premise behind such policy, I don’t doubt, is laudable. What came out of the dialogue though was a wholehearted admittance that policy looks good on paper, but that implementation and practice are all together another matter. Statements like,
“policies are failing miserably” (p.140), and, “it’s a scatter gun approach” (p.140),
give a good indication of the type of answer I received. Certainly it was observed
that, “…policy is only as good as the efforts to implement it” (p.141).

I was, in particular, drawn to a question posed by one non-Indigenous participant
who asked, “how can a particular policy redress and fix up very complicated issues?”
(p.141). I gained a great sense of what very complicated issues are when I moved on
to ask about the realisation of policy at the classroom level. First and foremost what
came out of our dialogue was just how reliant the implementation and practice of
policy is on teachers. The non-Indigenous participants made it very clear that it is a
vexed situation. On the one hand there is the matter of teacher attitude, on the other
there are issues with resources allocation, effective in-service training and the
monitoring of implementation. The reality of policy, at the classroom level, came
home to me in statements like, “…if you’ve got racist teachers to start with you
haven’t got much hope…” (p.144), “…the realistic translation into practice at
classroom levels in part will depend upon the urgency which the teachers regard the
policy” (p.144), and, “some non-Indigenous people say: it’s not for me to do, or not
my problem” (p.143). The message from non-Indigenous dialogue is clear. The
implementation and practice of policy is, to say the least, absolutely haphazard.

One non-Indigenous participant insightfully commented that policy would have a far
greater chance of becoming reality if it were structured at the bottom by the teachers
themselves, rather than remotely through some departmental committee. Interestingly in my extended conversation on this very issue with this particular
participant we looked more deeply into the difficulties that teachers face in terms of
being confronted, and overwhelmed, by the myriad of policies that they are expected
to translate into practice at the classroom level. This reality has to be juxtaposed
against any critique of policy implementation. Teachers, we noted, have to prioritise
so that in effect, “the Indigenous education policy might be at the bottom of the pile”
(p.152). As this participant emphasised so much depends upon the approach of
teachers. “…Policy doesn’t translate into practice for many teachers because they
think they know best” (p.152). Because I doubted the realisation of policy at the
level of practice I framed my next question for Theme 2 on the issue of what learning
context would best advance a genuine Indigenous curriculum and pedagogy.
In posing a question about learning context I was attempting to see if any of the non-Indigenous participants would advance the proposition that an independent approach to education would better suit and advance our cultural aspirations, rather than us having to pin our hopes on the effectiveness of Aboriginal education policy development within mainstream education. Some remarkable statements came out of this stage of the non-Indigenous dialogue. “You’re trying to change a very powerful system” (p.145), “the context is going to have to be negotiated” (p.145), “to make it a systemic thing is going to be very difficult” (p.146), are all statements that deliver home a strong and unequivocal meaning. Mainstream education is at the most basic level so ensconced within the specific worldview of West-centrism that despite policy, meritocracy and the individual efforts of remarkable educators, the feasibility of realising genuine Indigenous curriculum and pedagogy within the mainstream seems more than unlikely, it is utterly remote. This then brings me to the final question I posed in non-Indigenous dialogue. I asked the non-Indigenous participants to elucidate on what they consider to be the main obstacles or matters of concern in terms of Indigenising mainstream programming.

I was moved emotionally by the responses I received. What I was told was so validating. I know how easy it is for me to stand from the position of an oppositional culture and criticise. I know how my position could easily look like ‘sour grapes’ or ‘a chip on the shoulder’. The non-Indigenous educators, through their insightful input, helped me to move past any such notion of shortcomings on my behalf. What was said in terms of my final question was, “…government policy will be the main obstacle by setting Western benchmarks for success rather than Indigenous benchmarks for success” (p.146), “they don’t understand contested knowledges” (p.146), and it, “…boils down to the teacher’s attitude and the teacher’s pedagogy. I don’t think it’s an easy task…” (p.147). Overall the tone of the non-Indigenous dialogue, from start to finish, was one that I personally interpreted as a strong indictment of a system that is fundamentally intractable in nature. On the one hand I felt very moved by how these educators have worked to position our identity within the mainstream in a non-tokenistic way, that brings about true social justice for us. On the other hand I felt equally vindicated that Indigenous independent education is not only urgently required, but justifiable as an alternative educational choice for us.
9.5 The Emotional Background to Indigenous Independent Education

What has been written thus far articulates a rather solid case in support of Indigenous independent education. This case, however, was conclusively clinched for me through our yarning centred around Theme 2. This theme, in particular, was designed to give us the opportunity within dialogic exchange to express our thoughts and feelings at a personal level about our own experiences of mainstream education. The resultant testimony was, to say the least, emotional. I certainly felt deeply a cultural affinity with what my fellow Indigenous stakeholders had to say, and the way they said it. For me the meaning in statements like, “no way in the world mainstream education promoted our identity” (p.166), and, “mainstream education hinders Indigenous identity and growth” (p.166), is unmistakable. Statements of this ilk articulate all to clearly our feeling of cultural marginalisation in mainstream education. It is a feeling that gives some background to the emotion inherent in trying to function in a system not of our cultural arbitrary. Perhaps though the tenor of what we had to say was best captured in the observation, “I really don’t think we gain any cultural worth. It’s a white system. It’s set up to make everyone the same, that sameness is whiteness” (p.166).

To all intents and purposes the ideology behind sameness on West-centric terms underpins and drives the purpose of assimilation. In our yarning we spoke about the scourge of Western assimilation. Assimilation we saw was, and is, the defining ambition of mainstream education. As such it is the root cause of our cultural marginalisation and the source of our emotion. The question was asked, “what if you don’t assimilate” (p.171). The answer was sobering, “you fail”, “you get blamed” (p.171). The connotation of this conversational exchange is revealing. Mainstream schooling can never represent to us a place of innocent cultureless erudition. Certainly there is no other conclusion to reach when you here testimony like, “the classroom in the mainstream was isolated” (p.168), “the teachers already determined that I was going nowhere” (p.169), and, “I wasn’t given any educational aspirations” (p.169). There is nothing innocent or cultureless about being singled out on the basis of our race as worthwhile for sports only, or for being shoved out the door as soon as possible, or being misjudged as behaviourally problematic. It’s hard not to feel emotional when you here statements like, “the system’s failing our people” (p.176).
The cultural negativity of mainstream education for us is all too real and emotive. In counteraction, we justifiably seek a cultural alternative in education. “Other cultures are actually setting up their own schooling systems...and we’ve got bugger all...we’ve got to take the mainstream” (p.197). This statement sums up what it’s actually like for the majority of us. To exercise our human right to cultural sovereignty, to expunge ourselves from the omnipresence of hegemonic duress, all of us mob should have access to an alternate, culturally apposite educational choice. Perhaps one of the strongest and most powerful messages to be expressed in our yarning in terms of why we should have independent education was, “cultural sovereignty isn’t gonna come through the mainstream. We need to have something separate for the kids. It’s not about separating ourselves from society, it’s about maintaining our cultural rights” (p.164). Cultural rights are for us synonymous with cultural sovereignty. We have a fundamental human right to the continuance of our cultural worldview and identity, and we have a fundamental human right to educate our peoples in our knowledge ways and life ways unabated and uninhibited by interference from culturally oppositional hegemonic forces.

It was said in our yarning that our, “kids need to feel proud of their culture and identity” (p.176). It was also said that, “we can only promote identity ourselves, we can only do that; its our business” (p.176). It is our business as a matter of cultural sovereignty and as a matter of pedagogic authority. As was so rightly observed by a non-Indigenous participant, “…separate schools have a variety of functions. One is to teach culture but another is to enable the kids to be comfortable with their own group of relations and so on” (p.149). The need for cultural comfort is not abstract; it is wholly bound in emotional well-being. It is precisely because of our emotional well-being, which I sensed from the tenor of our yarning is synonymous with cultural well-being, that I am convinced of the case in support of Indigenous independent education. I must, however, point out that there was in dialogic exchange extremely thought provoking references that highlight scepticisms about the idea of Indigenous independent education that cannot be ignored. These scepticisms potentially feed arguments that can be mounted against the rationale for Indigenous independent education. These views I feel need to be explored in order to determine whether they sufficiently counter any of the claims I have made in presenting my thesis.
I’ll start by drawing your attention to what one of us said in our yarning. “A negative of independent school could be that some Aboriginal people don’t understand what you’re teaching and have something to say about it. You have to get the confidence of the parents” (p.191). This statement harks at genuine Indigenous concern and emotion about the prospect of independent education. These concerns and emotions I perceive are centred on two matters. The first matter relates to the rather convoluted business of cultural politics. Cultural politics involves a myriad of issues over disputation about such matters as local cultural boundaries, local languages, and the authentication of cultural Elders and knowledge holders. This is very emotional business for us. I will not, and cannot take this business up in any detail here. Not only is it well and truly beyond the scope of my thesis, it is in actuality private cultural business that must be dealt with exclusively by us in our own specific cultural forums. The other matter is fear. In Chapter 6 I recorded that one potential Indigenous stakeholder wasn’t interested in participating in my research because they’d not been able to see how my study would fit into the mainstream. I sensed in this person a real feeling of underlying trepidation. 

This trepidation, which I know through personal experience is shared by other Indigenous peoples, stems from a fear that is part of the emotional fallout of the dynamics of living under a perpetuated state of dominance. This fear is often stimulated by words like segregation and apartheid, which arise all too frequently whenever any idea that campaigns Indigenous autonomy is floated. Interestingly in my additional conversation with one non-Indigenous participant this very issue came up. This non-Indigenous participant, in raising the question of apartheid through his ponderings, flagged a pivotal matter that must be addressed if we are to work through the political complexities that surround the notion of Indigenous independent education. The prospect that Indigenous independent education could constitute a form of apartheid cannot but stir up emotion. This notion of apartheid can easily lead us to feel torn between the social justice and equity gains that secured our access to mainstream education in the first place, and the deep cultural need and aspirations we have for the survival and revival of our cultures. I guess the real question is: if we pursue independence in education are we in actuality really seeking to turn our back on participation in the broader framework of Australian society?
In answer to the above question I would have to say that Indigenous independent education simply represents for us a cultural alternative in education. I think what often compounds the idea of independence is a rather spurious either/or polemic. Independent education is not about wholesale separation. It isn’t about us ‘either’ having only mainstream education ‘or’ only independent education. It is entirely about choice. It is about being able to choose between the educative programs that the mainstream offers, or the educative programs that an Indigenous independent education enterprise can offer. This either/or polemic, I think, encourages the emotion of fear, a fear that has a very real historical background. You see words like segregation and apartheid dredge up in us memories of our enforced removal out of society. As I emphasised in the grounding narrative, segregation and apartheid was absolutely our lived reality from the time of invasion pretty much up until the late 1960’s. In terms of my own experience I have found that words like segregation and apartheid can be used, particularly by neo-conservative ideologues, to feed and promote fear in us about our own educational emancipation.

Terms like segregation and apartheid allege that our ambition with regard to independence is to completely separate ourselves out of and away from mainstream society. This is utterly bizarre to me. Apart from anything else the sheer pervasiveness of the dominant West-centric social order puts paid to any idea that we can successfully do this. In effect, when words like segregation and apartheid are held up as spectres from which to argue against our educational emancipation the assimilationist agenda of the West-centric dominant social order becomes utterly transparent. To me, when we are seduced by the fear inbuilt in asseverations like segregation and apartheid we become victims of the romanced consent inherent in the process of hegemony. My worry is that the sheer unrelingent doggedness of West-centric ideology can end up duping us into accepting that the white way is the way. What is most disturbing for me is that it is on this very issue that equity begins to break down. Certainly we sensed in our yarning that other culture’s independent education endeavours are not subject to the same segregation/apartheid arguments or, for that matter, placed under the same pernicious microscope. For me, there is no getting away from the emotionalism inherent in Indigenous educational independence. We need to work with this emotionalism, not against it.
9.6 A Closing Summation Bridging Critique to Educational Autonomy

The process of articulating a case in support of Indigenous independent education began for me with substantiating the ontological and epistemological foundation of our core values, and the defining nature of our core values in terms of our worldview and identity. Our worldview, it was confirmed, stands as utterly dichotomous to the Western worldview. This dichotomy was evidenced in the deep-seated difference that can be found between our core values and the values orientation of the Western worldview. Our foundational values, it was affirmed, are collectivism, spirituality, autonomy and, additionally, respect. These values sit in direct opposition to the values of individualism and competitiveness; the principal values that buttress the capitalistic ideology that informs the Western worldview. The polarity that exists between the Indigenous worldview and the Western worldview of itself should be relatively inconsequential. It is however entirely consequential because there is a stark disparity between how each worldview is characterised differentially within contemporary Australian society. It is clear that one worldview is granted superior status over and above the other.

It is precisely this inequality of characterisation that defines the ruling relations of our lived reality in that the Western worldview has most definitely come to dominate the social, cultural and political landscape of Australian society. The ruling relations of our lived reality, that is the subjugated status of our life ways and our knowledge ways under West-centric hegemony, was substantiated through the evidencing of the historical insidiousness and continuing legacy of West-centric knowledge dominance. These ruling relations, which define our status within the framework of Australian society, likewise delineate the status of our Indigenous worldview and identity within mainstream education. This is because mainstream education is, as has been argued, an educative structure that is wholly immersed within the worldview of the West-centric dominant social order. It was thus also substantiated that mainstream education can only ever offer us accommodations that in the end do not pressure, or threaten in any way, the ruling relations of our lived reality by fundamentally maintaining the authority of the Western worldview over and above our Indigenous worldview.
In bringing all that has thus been put forward together I find that what it all boils down to is the intractable fact that the values rubric of mainstream education is so entrenched within the Western worldview that it is utterly impossible for us to find true freedom of cultural expression within mainstream education. Freedom of cultural expression for us means being able to pass on to our on-coming generations our foundational knowledges without fear of derision, or the compromising of our cultural meanings and understandings. It means being able to explore, express and generate our new knowledges in celebration of our holistic and experiential ways of knowing. It is moreover the freedom to engage our ontology and epistemology within our own cultural context. This freedom, in an educative circumstance, can only come to us through our own structures; structures that are founded within our own cultural arbitrary and assert our own pedagogic authority by disseminating the work of our own cultural pedagogy. To do this education must be developed for us as an Indigenous enterprise; an Indigenous enterprise that will promote our cultural sovereignty through the advancement of our educational autonomy.
CHAPTER 10: DEVELOPING EDUCATION AS AN INDIGENOUS ENTERPRISE.

10.1 The Cultural Paradigm of Indigenous Education

So I come now to the last chapter of my thesis. This is the chapter in which the voice of Indigenous yarning steps out on its own as an Indigenous project aimed at developing education as an Indigenous enterprise. In storying this final phase of my doctoral project my primary focus will the informational outcomes from Themes 2 and 3 of our yarning, as well as the additional material reported in Chapter 8, under the sub-heading ‘Visualising Indigenous Independent Education’. That said, perhaps the best place to start in developing education as an Indigenous enterprise is to affirm the cultural arbitrary of Indigenous education at the macro level. This, in actuality is very straightforward. From all that was said in our yarning there can be no doubt that Indigenous education, at the macro level, is wholly embedded within country. As I explained in Chapter 9, country is the foundational genesis of our ontology and epistemology. Our core values, collectivism, spirituality and autonomy in tandem with respect, constitute the conduit between our ontological and epistemological knowing of country and our worldview and identity. The indivisible inter-relationship that exists between country, our ontology, our epistemology, our core values, our worldview and our identity, at the deepest sociological, ideological and philosophical level, define the cultural paradigm of Indigenous education.

10.2 Indigenous Values Informing Curriculum

In my Personal Preamble to Chapter 1 I made the observation that, “whatever system of education we have, at the end of the day it can only be as good as the curriculum and pedagogical praxis that supports it” (p.7). In pondering this point I realised, “…that if education is to have an Indigenous identity it needs the informing strength of our values” (p.8). There was for me a cultural role for our core values in informing the cultural business of Indigenising curriculum and pedagogical praxis. This cultural role was also asserted in our yarning when we spoke of developing curriculum and pedagogical praxis as the infrastructure of Indigenous education. In terms of curriculum we started from the position of knowing that curriculum for Indigenous education would inevitably involve both a body of Indigenous knowledge and a body of West-centric knowledge. Accordingly we determined that curriculum
for Indigenous education should be structured to explicitly reinforce our worldview and identity as well as prepare us for survival in the broader framework of the West-centric Australian society. With this in mind we established a clear set of priorities for Indigenous education; a set of priorities that for me, represented a broad structural framework for the development of curriculum for Indigenous education.

First and foremost we saw our life ways and knowledge ways as our first priority. We then saw literacy and numeracy as our second priority, then additional forms of West-centric knowledge as our third priority. In translating these priorities into a broad framework for curriculum it became clear that curriculum for Indigenous education essentially involves the incorporation of three stratified bands of knowledge. The dominant band of knowledge, we affirmed, embodies Indigenous curriculum in its fullest cultural sense, as the body of knowledge that constitutes our primary pedagogy (that of family and community). It was the development of Indigenous curriculum that was for us the focal interest of our yarning. Interestingly in our yarning one Indigenous stakeholder posed the question, “will you have to define curriculum in an Aboriginal sense?” (p.177). The answer in short is yes. As I established in Chapter 4 curriculum in a West-centric sense involves selecting, shaping and packaging knowledge into distinct bordered subjects. When I juxtaposed this notion of curriculum against what was said in our yarning I immediately sensed a departure in how we conceptualise curriculum. For us curriculum is not a conglomerate of discrete subject units. Curriculum for us is an overarching cultural orientation to borderless, interconnected ‘places of knowledge’.

It was said in our yarning that, “curriculum needs to be holistic, a rubber band curriculum” (p.177). These places of knowledge, which we established are land, environment, peoples, lore, language, the dominance of colonialism, resistance and survival, give us a rubber band curriculum because they do not form discrete subject units as would be typical in the West-centric sense. As each of our places of knowledge links into the other, Indigenous curriculum is a cross-disciplinary, holistic entity that is shaped through the informing strength of our valuing of collectivism, spirituality and autonomy. Collectivism opens Indigenous curriculum up by taping into our places of knowledge centred on peoples and language. This then ties into our spirituality which guides Indigenous curriculum into our places of knowledge
centred on land, environment, and again language. In turn Indigenous curriculum, through our valuing of autonomy in our foundational sense, brings us to our place of knowledge centred on lore, and through our valuing of autonomy in our contemporary sense, to our places of knowledge centred on the dominance of colonialism, resistance and survival. Respect is the value that works these three value spheres of Indigenous curriculum into a single entity founded within country.

Collectivism informs Indigenous curriculum almost as a mirror of the tiers of Indigenous identity, that I illustrated on page 54. “We must teach the similarities of Aboriginal cultures not the differences” (p.177), and, “we need to be conscious about other Aboriginal people’s country, we need to teach our own local people about the struggles of other Aboriginal people” (p.177), are statements that stress the importance of shaping curriculum as an articulation of collective Indigenous unity. I see this unity forming through a curriculum that focuses on the first, second and third tiers of our identity, which will concentrate the Indigenous learner on the peoples or language groups of the local and regional first. As was said in our yarning, “local stuff should come before anything else” (p.178), “kids should be taught in their own culture first” (p.177). Collectivism then spirals this sphere of Indigenous curriculum out of the local and regional and into the national so that the Indigenous learner comes to know and respect the full geographical map of our peoples and language groups. This aspect of curriculum is also open to expanding to the international, so that we can find unity with other Indigenous nations across the globe. One of us referred to it as a “cross-cultural journey” (p.177). That is exactly what it is.

Collectivism commences the journey of the Indigenous learner into country. The Indigenous learner needs to know, understand and respect the diversity of our peoples as part of the process of preparing for the learning of land, environment and its language. Our valuing of spiritualism guides this sphere of Indigenous curriculum by orienting our collective knowing to the meanings and understandings of foundational ontology and epistemology. Again this is a holistic curriculum that teaches the Indigenous learner about the narratives of ontology, the sites of epistemology and, inevitably, the languages that speak of ontology and epistemology. As we emphasised in our yarning, “the spiritual values should be taught such as [our] connection to land” (p.178). It all balances how we see our
relationship with country in that, “…the land owns us, we don’t own the land, we come from mother earth” (pp.178-179). This sphere of Indigenous curriculum instils in the Indigenous learner Indigenous knowing of country, again by spiralling through the tiers of Indigenous identity from the local through to the national. This spiritual sphere of curriculum works with the collective sphere of Indigenous curriculum to hone our worldview and identity back into the being of country.

The sphere of Indigenous curriculum that is guided by our valuing of autonomy enmeshes with the spheres guided by collectivism and spirituality. It was important to us that, “training should instil in our people our lore to give them understanding of country” (p.178). Deep collective and spiritual understanding of country, in terms of ontology and epistemology, is achieved through the place of knowledge centred on lore. Lore, as I said in Chapter 9, determines specific behavioural and relational constructs in context to country. For the collective and spiritual spheres of Indigenous curriculum to hold meaning they must be underpinned, through our valuing of autonomy, by the knowing of lore. What needs to be acknowledged about this is that there is a generative philosophical ethos to lore that can be taught in a broad Indigenous context. Lore though is also specific and relational for each Indigenous culture. Lore is thus imbued with knowledges that are private and not transmittable in a public educational forum. Autonomy guides Indigenous curriculum so that both aspects of lore are given presence. In particular, independent cultural spatiality can be made for private lore as part of curriculum.

Our valuing of autonomy in our contemporary sense completes the content of the Indigenous band of knowledge for curriculum as an Indigenous enterprise. This aspect of our valuing guides Indigenous curriculum into teachings about our post-invasion life ways and knowledge ways. The importance of this, in terms of Indigenous curriculum, came through in our yarning, especially in statements like, “we need our kids educated politically. They need to know what happened in this country” (p.173), and, “…students need exposure to the truth of the colonisation of this country and other countries” (pp.180-181). For us it’s about the veracity of history; it’s about embracing our own history as our lived reality. This brings us to a point in the curriculum where we can critically deconstruct and understand the subjugated, and ultimately the hegemonically impacted, framework of our lived
reality. This then cycles us back to collectivism. From the tenor of our yarning it is clear that the first band of curriculum for Indigenous education, that which prioritises our life ways and knowledge ways, involves three broad spheres of Indigenous curriculum that are guided by the values of collectivism, spirituality and autonomy. Again I reiterate respect cements the work of these three spheres together.

Whilst we did not give a great deal of focus to the second and third priorities for an Indigenous curriculum, we nonetheless expressed in our yarning general guiding parameters that have direct relevance in terms of the content and context of both these curriculum priorities as bands of knowledge. The first thing to know is that we didn’t see the three bands of knowledge we identified for Indigenous curriculum as isolated entities. Even though we saw the second and third bands as principally founded on a Western body of knowledge, we very much saw that the knowledge content of these two bands would be re-contextualised by our values and by our ways of knowing. In terms of literacy and numeracy it was said in our yarning that, “we could explore how literacy and numeracy could be taught in a Murri way” (p.181). This statement highlights our requirement that the literacy and numeracy component of curriculum for Indigenous education harmonise with our values and work with our knowledge ways. It was also said that, “we need to teach our kids the meaning of words; we need to wordsmith” (p.181). This again is a direct statement of our need for our valuing, in this case of autonomy, to inform the direction and shape of literacy teaching.

The biggest issue for us in terms of the third band of knowledge is that West-centric knowledge be presented as the knowing of a specific culture, as opposed to the knowledge, as it is in mainstream education. The content for subjects like history, geography and geology would be taught in the first instance through the knowledge band of Indigenous curriculum then given deliberately and consciously a non-Indigenous perspective through the third band of West-centric knowledge. It is for us a matter of structuring curriculum so that, “we diversify knowledge by taking what is useful from Western society” (p.179). Of course how curriculum for Indigenous education manifests in practice, in terms of the practicalities of knowledge boundaries, will ultimately be a matter for negotiation between all stakeholders involved in the educative enterprise concerned. What came through
most strongly in our yarning was that through Indigenous curriculum, the first band of knowledge, Indigenous learners would gain a greater sense of identity. As it was said, “with the culture stuff in them they’ll become very strong themselves, they’ll get self-esteem and motivation will be part of their life” (p.192). I felt in our yarning an adamancy that this sense of Indigenous being will empower Indigenous learners to cope with, and gain from, West-centric knowing.

10.3 Indigenous Values Informing Pedagogical Praxis

Setting guidelines for the knowledge content of curriculum begins the process of Indigenising educational infrastructure for Indigenous education. Curriculum content, however, does not do the work of cultural business alone. What communicates the cultural business of curriculum is the business of pedagogical praxis. As with our discussions on curriculum our first consideration was to advance an Indigenous pedagogy in its fullest sense. In doing so we again looked to the informing strength of our core values. In thinking about our valuing of collectivism in relation to pedagogical praxis the first thing we did was conceptualise Indigenous independent education as a whole community enterprise. Through our valuing of collectivism we spoke of Indigenous pedagogy principally in terms of the identity and role of teachers, and the scope of Indigenous independent education. Whilst it might be considered that these two issues should be considered independently of pedagogical praxis, in our yarning we saw no such separation. For us, we cannot talk of pedagogical praxis without talking about teachers and talking about the dynamics of the learning setting. They are for us entirely interlocked.

As an Indigenous independent education enterprise involves both Indigenous knowledge and Western knowledge we envisaged the involvement of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers. “Koori people could teach the Aboriginal side, the white teachers the non-Aboriginal side” (p.193). That for us was fairly clear-cut, however, it must be remembered that our requirement in terms of West-centric knowledge is that an Indigenous perspective dominates. With this in mind it was said in our yarning that, “we need to be the one’s giving guidance to teachers” (p.193), and, “teachers need to learn about Aboriginal ways of life” (p.193). That was an imperative for us. What also came through in our yarning was an imperative need to challenge the concept of ‘the teacher’ beyond the constraints of West-centric
qualifications. Our views in this regard were founded on our concern for the cultural veracity of Indigenous curriculum and Indigenous pedagogy. It was recognised in our yarning that, “autonomy must be giving the teacher, or the place, the right to employ the right person even if they haven’t got that political piece of paper to say that they’re qualified to teach…” (p.193).

We were staunch in our recognition of our Elders, whom we revere and respect as the pedagogic authority of Indigenous curriculum and Indigenous pedagogy, as the only persons fully qualified to teach cultural business. “Aboriginal knowledge means learning through the eyes of my Elders…” (p.194), and, “a culturally appropriate teacher is someone who’s gone through a learning journey” (p.194), are two among several comments that affirmed our knowledge holders as cultural teachers. Who really has the right to determine who is qualified to teach in an Indigenous context? Indigenous teachers, and that means Indigenous holders of Indigenous knowledge and wisdom, are the only teachers we see as possessing the deep, indeed profound, ontological and epistemological cultural context of meaning and understanding that will guide the Indigenous learner to country. It is for us a matter of collectivism. We cannot learn culturally without the specialist knowing of our knowledge holders. Our valuing of collectivism for us broadens the concept of ‘the teacher’ in an Indigenous independent education enterprise by legitimating our Elders and knowledge holders as cultural teachers of Indigenous curriculum.

One of the fundamental ways our valuing of collectivism works in anchoring us to country is through the pedagogical praxis of collective learning. It was clear from the tenor of our yarning that the circle stands as a strong metaphor for Indigenous learning because the circle for us articulates the collective nature of our thinking. As it was said in our yarning, “…for Aboriginal people you sat down in a circle and was welcomed” (p.184), “…it’s creating the circle where everybody’s equal…” (p.184), “but it makes everyone inclusive to I think that circle learning” (p.184). These are very telling statements about the nature of our collectivism and how it impacts on and directs Indigenous pedagogical praxis. It not only determines the open geography of the Indigenous classroom, it also speaks to the scope of Indigenous independent education, which for us must be open to this form of pedagogical praxis by ensuring that all members of our community are able to be part of the circle of
learning. It was clearly seen that, “you’ve gotta be able to bring our family members along into the classroom” (p.191). Family and community are the collective context of Indigenous pedagogy; they complete the circle of Indigenous learning.

Our valuing of collectivism clearly relates Indigenous pedagogical praxis to the places of knowledge centred on peoples and language. Our valuing of spirituality follows along a similar line by defining Indigenous pedagogical praxis in terms of our places of knowledge centred on land, environment and language. One of the strongest messages articulated in our yarning in reference to pedagogical praxis was the importance of location of learning in country. One of us expressed this succinctly by stating that, “pedagogy would be to teach on the land” (p.182). For us locating teaching in country is deeply spiritual because it situates the Indigenous learner in the correct cultural context for experiential learning. It opens the way for the Indigenous learner to take the learning journey into ontology and epistemology. This was certainly evidenced in statements like, “there’s a spiritual aspect to teaching in the bush” (p.182), and, “you can’t get a better place to teach our kids than the bush, it puts them in their own element” (p.182). It was clear from the tenor of our yarning that an Indigenous independent education enterprise needs to be structured to facilitate this foundational Indigenous pedagogical praxis.

Our valuing of spiritualism too defines very specific forms of pedagogical praxis, which are foundational in relating the meanings and understandings of ontology and epistemology for the location of the Indigenous learner in country. Storying, which I have related in my grounding narrative as the praxis of our communication, was equally recognised in our yarning as a vital aspect of Indigenous pedagogy. It was observed that storying isn’t simply about relating mythological tales. It is a powerful form of narrative that we use not only to impart content from our knowledge ways, but also to underscore the subtext of narrative so that it speaks of our philosophical understandings as well. Storying as Indigenous pedagogical praxis doesn’t confine the teller and the listener. It, for instance, encourages the listener as fellow teller in narrative. It was observed in our yarning that, “when you teach Aboriginal kids in a cultural environment, let them tell you some of their stories” (pp.185-186). Storying is about reciprocative exchange. It was emphasised by one stakeholder that, “education is a two-way thing; it’s evolving where the learner becomes the teacher
and the teacher the learner” (p.186). Storying as spiritual methodology allows that to take place.

On this point I want to digress momentarily to express my considered opinion that a direct correlation can be seen between storying as being central to spiritually founded Indigenous pedagogical praxis and storying as spiritually founded Indigenous ways of knowledge creation; that is, to Indigenous research. I sensed this correlation when I reflected on both the actual testimony of our yarning and the cultural tenor of our yarning. I realise that by centring my Indigenous research methodology within the informing agency of our core values I effectively founded our Indigenous knowledge production within the being of our ontology and epistemology. Storying, as the embodiment of yarning, is the cultural methodology that inspired me to develop terminology to describe my research methods; terminology like dialogic exchange and telling space. Yarning was a powerful socio-cultural educative event for us as a form of collective and reciprocative knowledge exchange. In ruminating about this I have concluded that yarning, as the praxis of storying, is the linchpin between Indigenous knowledge production and Indigenous pedagogical praxis. Yarning brings research as knowledge production and education together. It is the cultural means for spiritualising knowledge production in accord with our holistic and experiential ways of knowing for our ontological and epistemological growth.

The other major forms of spiritual methodology in terms of Indigenous pedagogical praxis to emerge through our yarning were dance, song and visual representations, like painting. These are pedagogies that engage us in expressing our spiritual connectedness to country through ontology and epistemology. It was said for instance that, “song, music and rhythm are really important. It’s important because this taps into our spiritual side” (p.186). These spiritual methodologies carry in them an energy. Take the example of dance. When an Indigenous learner learns dance they gain skills not only in telling about ontology and epistemology, they physically become one with ontology and epistemology. This is where the intersection between collectivism and spirituality meet in pedagogical praxis, because through spiritual methodology like dance the Indigenous learner finds their knowing of themselves as a collective being within country. This then brings me to our valuing of autonomy. Our valuing of autonomy in our foundational sense very much augments spiritual
methodology and collective learning to our place of knowledge centred on lore. Lore very much has a governing role in shaping Indigenous pedagogical praxis.

Indigenous curriculum as the first priority in Indigenous education, we asserted in our yarning, is founded on a tri-part structure that contains general knowledge ways, female knowledge ways and male knowledge ways. In this regard Indigenous epistemology can be said to be sub-divided through the lore of ontology. We expressed our reverence and respect for this in our yarning by advocating strongly that our pedagogical praxis of separating male and female learning, at the appropriate juncture, be a core pedagogical strategy for Indigenous independent education. One of us observed that, “in our society there’s a place for both men and women…we could look at ways of having male and female learning groups. This way they’re learning about male and female knowledge and values” (p.179). As I read it, what this means is that in practice females and males will learn together in certain situations, but must, as a matter of respect, separate in others. Our valuing of respect is crucial in this regard because it teaches us to uphold cultural forms of pedagogical praxis such as this because the cultural sanctity of knowledge depends upon it. It was emphasised in our yarning that, “the whole system is set that way” (p.180), meaning that Indigenous knowledge is organised by this pedagogy.

Our valuing of autonomy too influences Indigenous pedagogical praxis by advancing the Indigenous learner as self-determining. In our yarning we made reference to alternate methods like the Montessori and Steiner forms of education. In doing so we were emphasising the benefit of an educative approach that works with mixed-aged learning by enabling learners of differing levels of knowing to be together in the learning environment. Indigenous pedagogy accepts diversity of knowing within the collective, and works with that, rather than attempting to enforce sameness. One of us said, “the oldfulla’s used to work on your strong points and build on that to push you into the future” (p.184). It was also emphasised that, “…the family values and that core values is that each of us was given roles for the society that we lived in…” (p.185). Indigenous pedagogy, through a learner-centred approach, empowers the individual to find their place within the collective. It is important to understand that this approach in no way advocates the valuing of individualism. As was stressed in our yarning, it is an approach that respects the autonomy of the individual, but
always in context to the collective.

The forms of pedagogical praxis detailed above are culturally germane to the first band of knowledge, that is Indigenous curriculum. That said, it was clear from the tenor of our yarning that these methods should also be incorporated into the teaching of curriculum founded in the second and third bands of knowledge. From the tenor of our yarning it was completely apparent that we don’t see good practice in teaching as the chalk and talk method, typical of traditional forms of West-centric pedagogy. We absolutely see workshop and practice-based pedagogical methods as apposite to our worldview. In talking about the physical structure of classrooms, which we determined must enable circle learning, we were absolutely making a statement about the teacher/learner power relationship. We saw that for our worldview to define the environment of the classroom we need to move the physical position of the teacher into the circle. “Standing in front gives an authority view” (p.183). This statement hones in on our valuing of collectivism and autonomy by advocating a horizontal structure, rather than a vertical structure. At the end of the day though, as I asserted in Chapter 4, what has most influence on the actual dynamics of pedagogical praxis are the parameters set for assessment and measures of success.

10.4 Indigenous Values Informing Success and Assessment

In my closing paragraph for section 9.4 of Chapter 9 I quoted a non-Indigenous participant who had drawn attention to the certainty that the dominant West-centric social order would inevitably impose its benchmarks for success upon any Indigenous independent education enterprise. Such is our lived reality under Western hegemony. It is a reality that we must not only live with, but actively work around to secure for ourselves an education structure founded within our own cultural arbitrary. How do we do that? Well the first thing to do is to look at the issue of success, since conceptualisations of success predictably shape and direct the formulation of measuring tools that become the formalised instruments of assessment. Success was an issue that was certainly raised in our yarning, in the context of mainstream education. The following questions were raised, “what is Aboriginal achievement? Is it about a little black person achieving on white terms and making it look like mainstream education is doing good?” (p.175). These questions are extremely meaningful because they link directly the issue of success to
the dichotomy that exists between our core values and West-centric values.

Our values determine success in a completely different light to West-centric values. Success for us has nothing to do with materialism, nor does it have anything to do with achieving professional status within the framework of the dominant West-centric social order. I expressed the emotion of the difference between how we see success and how the Western worldview asserts success when I said in our yarning, “but that’s what scares the kids, we’re telling them if you want to succeed in white society you have to succeed at school” (p.175). It is emotional because of the imposition of Western hegemony, of having to take on board Western measures of success in order to survive in the broader Australian society, and that then pushes our measures of success to the margins. As was discussed in Chapter 4 West-centric valuing determines that everyone is in individualised competition with one another, that to climb the economic ladder of society is to succeed. I pointed out that such an ideology leads to a stratification process that I find engenders elitism through the imposition of degrees of worth in terms of the individual’s positioning within society. Such measures are utterly alien to our worldview.

In our yarning it was said, “that’s the difference, we determine success with completely different eyes” (p.176), “…measuring success on blackfullas terms is completely different, if you’re looking after your little family, and your extended family all right, and you’re reinforcing their identity all the time…then you’re a successful blackfulla” (p.176). These statements are unequivocal asseverations of how we measure success. To us it is about fulfilling our role within our collective extended family kinship networks. Our valuing of collectivism alone determines Indigenous measures of success, but our valuing of spirituality and autonomy too add a powerful dimension to what cultural success is. The overarching feeling of our yarning was that to walk as an Indigenous being is to walk as a spiritual being. One of us reminded us that, “we have to walk as spiritual beings again” (p.162). That is Indigenous success. To be our full spiritual self in terms of our collective spiritual being within country is to be successful. Being a full spiritual being of the collective of kin and country is to communicate a valuing of autonomy. One of us poignantly noted that, “…spiritualism and collectivism is a part of our autonomy” (p.164). The living of these values is for us our cultural measure of success.
The conundrum for us, particularly in terms of education, is that our measures for cultural success stand in chasmic opposition to Western measures of success. This is so disabling and soul destroying for us. Whenever we do not fit Western measures of success, even though we are completely successful on Indigenous terms, we are put in an emotionally wrenching situation because we are arbitrarily tagged unsuccessful. I am acutely aware of this, not just because of the tenor of our yarning; I experienced the fall out of narrow-minded measures of Western success every day in my teaching, and within my own family. Indigenous independent education is about taking our terms of success and applying these in a way that empowers the Indigenous learner to deal with the contradictory manifestation of Western measures of success, by working to secure the strength of the Indigenous learner’s cultural identity. As was pointed out earlier, and which I feel needs re-emphasising, we felt strongly in our yarning that to lead an Indigenous learner to a greater sense of their own identity will enable them to cope more broadly with the hegemonic challenges that define the reality of our every-day life.

Having established what we determine success to be I need to now look at how Indigenous success shapes and directs the formulation of Indigenous instruments of assessment. In this regard the message of our yarning is that Indigenous curriculum, driven through Indigenous pedagogical praxis, must be underscored by Indigenous measures of success through Indigenous instruments of assessment. In terms of our yarning Indigenous pedagogical praxis was seen as mirroring Indigenous assessment. “You know I think like half the teachers should be made to go and look at colleges like…where you can hand in an assignment it can be orally, it can be in a painting, it can be in writing, it can be however you know a play…” (p.186). This statement highlights so succinctly how we see assessment as flexible, fluid and learner-centred. The informing strength of our core values is to me obvious. Our valuing of collectivism opens assessment to alternative activities that are amenable to the group as much as the individual. Interestingly these activities also express our valuing of spiritualism. Dancing, singing and acting are all methods that give the cultural assessor accurate information about degrees of cultural knowledge.

Our valuing of spiritualism invites methods of assessment like painting, which is for us a foundational means of recording and producing cultural knowledge, just as
orality is. My perpetual use of the word yarning exemplifies this very point. Indigenous assessment opens the way for the Indigenous learner to yarn their knowledge. “…We’re an oral society…and that’s what the mainstream curriculum don’t take into account” (p.175), is a statement that makes it plain that our orality needs to be given full expression in an Indigenous independent education enterprise.

To yarn knowledge is a pivotal form of Indigenous assessment. For me I see this as extrapolated to our concept of walking country. When we walk country our cultural teachers test our cultural knowledge. They hear through our yarning what we know and what we don’t know, and how we connect ourselves to country. Yarning while walking country allows our cultural teacher’s to see spiritually our development. This method, to me, is suggestive of the type of practice that can happen in a classroom setting. There is to me no reason why we cannot talk country when we are unable to walk country. This then becomes an Indigenous learning and assessment act of being spiritually transported to places of knowledge and being able to show appropriate knowing at different levels through imaginative and respectful yarning.

Our valuing of autonomy opens up assessment in the same vein as pedagogical praxis. Autonomy speaks to Indigenous assessment by allowing the Indigenous learner to find for themselves their means and ways of expressing cultural knowledge. Of course all of this does not mean that writing goes out the window. It simply means that in an Indigenous independent education enterprise multiple forms of assessment can operate in concert. These forms of assessment can be applied to the second and third bands of knowledge. It is clear to me from the tenor of our yarning that we accept that the written assignment would be a fundamental part of assessment as well. We are also aware of the West-centric need to rank and order. What I have concluded, on the basis of our yarning, is that assessment for us would provide indicators of cultural competency rather than stress pass or fail. It is perfectly possible through Indigenous instruments of assessment, in tandem with the written form of assessment, to gauge the knowledge skills of an Indigenous learner, in terms of both an Indigenous body of knowledge and a Western body of knowledge, and to evidence educational success on our measures of success.

Indigenising education through Indigenous values informing curriculum and pedagogical praxis together with assessment is for us libertarian education.
I feel as though I have guided you through an intense personal story of Indigenous identity. When I reflect upon all that I have learnt through this journey I feel culturally emotional because this is a story about our sheer strength of will to hold onto our cultural being. This thesis bears witness to the hegemonic state of dominance that has characterised our existence since the 1788 invasion of our lands. This thesis bears witness to the malevolent endeavours of the coloniser to eradicate out of us our cultural identity. Moreover this thesis evidences the historically punitive nature of West-centric education and confirms mainstream education as unremittingly hegemonic. At the outset of my thesis I hypothesised that, “mainstream education marginalises us because of its entrenchment in the Western worldview” (p.10). Furthermore I contended that, “because of its fixity in the Western worldview Australia’s mainstream education system is not structured to advance learning programmes that expressly affirm our culture and promote our Indigenous identity” (p. 10) and “Australia’s mainstream education system can really only offer programmes that are assimilationist in nature because their programmes are anchored within the Western worldview” (p.10). These theoretical claims stand as confirmed.

In counteraction to the above theoretical claims I further contended that, “the dichotomy that exists between Indigenous values systems and the Western value system substantiates a need for alternative Indigenous education initiatives that offer a genuine cultural choice for Australia’s Indigenous peoples” (p.10). I also contended that, “genuine cultural choice in education means access to an educational structure founded within our own worldview and informed by our own values” (p.10). These theoretical claims were likewise confirmed. Through the research we affirmed that our core values orient our worldview and identity, through the meanings and understandings of our ontology and epistemology, to the life force of country. We established that our worldview and identity stand in total opposition to the individualistic and competitive nature of the capitalistic worldview of the West-centric dominant social order. This dichotomy not only stood as primary evidence of our right to cultural choice in education, this dichotomy corroborated as correct my proposition underpinning this research: “we Indigenous Australians are more likely
to feel de-marginalised within education when we have access to education programmes that are entrenched within our own worldview” (p.10).

The last word, for me, comes from the United Nations Draft Declaration on Indigenous Rights, as previously quoted on page 93 of the grounding narrative. We have, “…the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations [our] histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures…”, and we have, “…the right to establish and control [our] own educational systems and institutions …”. This thesis, from start to finish, has been an articulation of these rights. Through the research it was proven that our Indigenous cultures are vibrant and strong. It was proven that we have our own curriculum, that we have our own pedagogical praxis, and that we have our own measures of success and means of assessment. Our research asserted our right to implement these culturally founded educative structures for the benefit of our cultural survival and revival. This thesis was underscored by the concept of cultural sovereignty. It is a concept that advocates the advancement of our educational freedom and celebrates our right to determine for ourselves what education should be for us. This is a thesis that articulates a collective Indigenous voice in contribution to new Indigenous knowing.
Research Theme No.1:-

**Our values, our worldview, our national identity and our cultural sovereignty.**

The aim of this theme is to focus our discussion on:

- what our values are
- how our values underpin our worldview
- how our worldview informs our national identity
- how our national identity grounds our right to cultural sovereignty.

Through our discussion we will be:

- expressing what our core values are; that is those values which we all hold in common as Indigenous Australians
- defining the essence of our worldview; that is our social, cultural and political outlook as an Indigenous nation
- affirming our cultural strength and unity in terms of our national identity
- recognising our right to our cultural sovereignty; that is our right to live according to our own worldview.

My viewpoint: - I believe that it is important for us to give focus to our values because our values mould our worldview. It is our worldview that makes us culturally different to non-Indigenous Australia. As much as we are distinct from one another in terms of our individual cultures and countries, we, as Indigenous Australians, do share a unity beyond any non-Indigenous interpretation of who we are. In my view our unity stems from our core values; those values that we hold in common as an Indigenous nation. Based on my life experience and reading I feel that our core values centre on:-
  - collectivism [our core social value]
  - spiritualism [our core cultural value]
  - autonomy [our core political value]

In my view our worldview informs our sense of national identity, and our national identity determines our right to cultural sovereignty.

I would like to discuss with you what you believe our social, cultural and political values are. I would then like to discuss with you our worldview, our identity and our right to cultural sovereignty as an Indigenous nation. This is what three other Indigenous Australians have said about our values, worldview and identity.

“Yolngu have to demonstrate that we have continued to hold onto our values, otherwise we lose ourselves in this ever-changing world and are accused of being a Balanda.”

[Raymattja Marika - Yolngu Indigenous Australian]
“Although our worlds are now historically, socially and politically imbued with features of western worldviews and constructs, we never relinquished, nor lost the essence of our Ways of Knowing and Ways of Being, and this is reflected in our Ways of Doing.”

[Karen Martin - Noonuccal Indigenous Australian]

“Culture is the basis of reality itself for the individual. It enables people to see themselves in relation to others and to the society in which we live. For the Aborigine, it means the world is looked at from an Aboriginal viewpoint.”

“Aborigines are now expressing opinions about how we, as a people, see ourselves and are decolonising the imposed identity which has been used as a means of oppression. The non-Aboriginal ‘experts’, however, still believe they have the right, because of their academic background, to ‘correct’ our representations of Aboriginal identity.”

“… people identify as Aboriginal today because they feel that there is a common philosophical and historical bond which makes us one people. We know we have a common heritage which links us back to all our ancestors. There is a sacred sense of country that provides all Aboriginal people with a feeling of belonging to the land. Individual identity is spiritually interdependent with our history, our world view and the intergenerational relationships with our families.”

[Colin Burke - Indigenous Australian]

Research Theme No.2:-

The cultural quality of mainstream education especially from the perspective of our own educational experiences and our educational aspirations.

The aim of this theme is to focus our discussion on:

- whether or not mainstream education supports and sustains our values and therefore our worldview
- whether or not we as individuals personally gained any cultural worth, in terms of our Indigenous identity, from mainstream education
- what our educational needs, expectations and visions are as an Indigenous nation.

Through our discussion we will be:

- questioning whether mainstream education sustains or obstructs the expression of our worldview and our national identity
- determining the real cultural worth of mainstream education from an Indigenous perspective
- defining and expressing what our educational needs, expectations and visions are in terms of our cultural interests.

My viewpoint: I believe that we need to reflect upon mainstream education in terms of our Indigenous identity, as an Indigenous nation, so that we gain a realistic view of just how possible it really is for the mainstream education system to promote and enrich our cultures.

I would like to discuss with you your views about education. This is what some others have said about mainstream education.
“The imperative to achieve reconciliation requires us to look at the counter values that underlie our education and training system and that constitute a major impediment to the achievement of educational equality for Australia’s first inhabitants.”

[Peter Buckskin - Indigenous Australian]

“In the midst of writing this paper our elder daughter demanded my immediate attention. Dressed in her uniform and with a beautiful smile, it was to be her first day at a white controlled school. As a family we have equipped her with a Narungga education since birth. This education develops qualities and values such as respect for Elders, care for country, love and compassion for others and all things, and a strong sense of pride and respect for Narungga community, culture and family. This education involves marinating the child in her ancient Narungga language, customs and culture, which brings cultural responsibility and obligation. It is equally important for her to develop the skills of dominant education to understand the technical complexities of a globalised world in which we as Narungga now live. However, the tendency in dominant white schooling is to educate Narungga children out of a Narungga education.”

[Lester-Irabinna Rigney - Narungga Indigenous Australian]

“The way in which a school is organised is the projection of an entire culture. While paying lip service to the equal validity of all cultures, and respect for diverse life-styles, many schools still reflect the dominant Anglo-Australian culture.”

“... the school will reflect the value system of the prevailing society, rather than oppose it”

[Anthony Welch - Non-Indigenous Australian]

Research Theme No.3:-

The translation of Indigenous values into curriculum and pedagogical praxis as a platform for realising our educational autonomy.

Curriculum - the content of what we are taught
Pedagogical praxis - the strategies used by teachers to teach us

The aim of this theme is to focus our discussion on:

- why our values should inform curriculum and pedagogical praxis
- how our values can inform curriculum and pedagogical praxis
- our educational autonomy from the viewpoint of educational choice.

Through our discussion we will be:

- establishing why our values should constitute the start point for the development of educational programmes that involve our participation
- working on establishing some practical ideas about the content of curriculum and teaching strategies (pedagogical praxis) that can be applied in our education
- critically reflecting upon the positives and negatives of an alternative Indigenous education process in terms of our cultural sovereignty.
My viewpoint: I believe that there are positive social, cultural and political aspects to an alternative education process. To me independent Indigenous education has the potential to provide a genuine avenue for the expression of our sense of cultural independence. In my view independent education initiatives can work for us if the infrastructure of education programming, that is the curricula and pedagogy, are underpinned by our values and our worldview.

I would like to discuss with you your ideas about how our value can guide the development of curriculum and pedagogical praxis. I would then like to discuss with you your views about independent education. Listed below are some quotes to get us thinking about the question of education provision.

“Aboriginal people now understand that if schools are to serve the political, social and economic purposes of their own people, the school as an institution needs to be accommodated within Aboriginal society itself. Only when the cultural orientation of the school becomes Yolngu will schools become integral to the movement of Aborigines towards self-determination. The decolonisation of schools in Aboriginal communities is the challenge for Aborigines now.”
[Wesley Lanhupuy - Yolngu Indigenous Australian]

“We have tried over the years and put some black faces into white classrooms. However, I think the answer - the real answer - is Indigenous community schools. Every black fella will not send his kids to them, but it gives us a choice. Non-Indigenous fellas can choose to send their children to a state school, private school, Catholic school - whatever school they like, or that their bank account can handle. We can’t. We don’t have a choice. If we have independent schools, then we have a choice. We can go to either a black fellas school or a white fellas school.”
[Tiga Bayles - Murri Indigenous Australian]

“An important challenge for teachers is to examine their own deeply held values and beliefs in order to ensure their practice is developmentally, individually, and culturally appropriate.”
“Schooling, as an agency of the dominant culture in society, is strongly assimilationist and, unless conscious efforts are made to incorporate the knowledge of other groups into curricula, there is a danger students will be forced to trade their heritage for educational success.”
“For Indigenous students, the school is the principal border along which their culture and the dominant culture meet, and it is marked by rejection and oppression. It should be possible for Indigenous students to participate and succeed in school and at the same time retain their own cultures and languages, rather than having to adopt the values and pursuits characteristic of the dominant society. By ignoring Indigenous cultures, schools marginalise the students who express them in their daily lives outside the classroom.”
[Gary Partington - Non-Indigenous Australian]
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